

THE LIBERATION AND NOVELTY OF 'EVOLUTIONARY' LIFE...

Two readings today which stand in sharp contrast to each other.
One from the biblical world of the 1st century AD so to speak,
shaped by thinking hundreds of years old.
One from the natural science world of the 19th century AD.

Both have had an impact on the way many religious people think today.
So let's explore just some of that impact, now.

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Leprosy, in the time of Jesus, was sometimes regarded as divine punishment for sin.
It embraced a wide range of disorders, including
rashes,
acne,
eczema
and other forms of dermatitis.

It made people 'unclean'. Dirty.
And when you were dirty you offended God's standards.
Indeed, there was an explicit connection between
being clean and being holy.

And when you were 'unclean' your weren't 'holy'!
This was the culture into which Jesus was born.
This was the culture that was learned and cultivated.

In a string of stories commenced a week or two back,
Mark's Jesus is confronted with a series of 'unclean' people
usually captured by 'unclean' spirits.

As a modern 21st century person, who both accepts and relies on
modern medical science, I find it very difficult to believe in the existence
of unclean spirits or demons, even though I agree there are
some moderns as there were ancient folk, who do.

So what are we to make of this and other stories?
Following the thoughts of some scholars whom I trust,
whether Jesus was or was not a genuine shaman
"or whether he simply embraced the company of the unclean, the
meaning of his memory is the same: in Jesus we have come to know a
God who renders impotent the power of dirt to keep the unclean outside
the human community" (*Patterson 2002:210*).

And I come to this conclusion as a result of modern critical biblical study,
established some 300 years ago, and given exposure
in the late 20th century through the pioneering work
of the Westar Institute and its founder, Robert W. Funk.

That's the first things I want to say today.

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The second is... today is Evolution Sunday and once again I have decided to be a signatory to The Clergy Letter, now in three variations, which supports the validity and merit of evolutionary science as
“a foundational scientific truth, one that has stood up to rigorous scrutiny and upon which much of human knowledge and achievement rests. To reject this truth or to treat it as ‘one theory among others’ is to deliberately embrace scientific ignorance and transmit such ignorance to our children”
(UUA Clergy Letter. www.evolutionweekend.org).

And while the term ‘evolution’ was in use dating from 1647, and there were certainly others with similar views, it is English-born Charles Darwin who is now recognised as the ‘founder’ of the theory of evolution, leading the way to the modern study of genetics and molecular biology.

Charles Darwin,
whose father once said of him:
“You care for nothing but shooting, dogs, and rat-catching, and you will be a disgrace to yourself and all your family” (Wilson 1998:16).

Charles Darwin,
who first studied medicine at Edinburgh University, but left after only 18 months
“partly because of the barbarity of 19th century surgery long before the days of anaesthetics” (Wilson 1998:18)
and went to Christ’s College, Cambridge, because his father determined that he should ‘become a clergyman’.

Charles Darwin,
who graduated in 1831 from Cambridge - in natural history and geology!

Charles Darwin, who, as resident naturalist, sailed to the Galapagos Islands on the HMS *Beagle*, where he encountered evidence
“of great diversity between animals of the distant past and those of the present” (www.progressivetheology.org).

It was following this trip and as a result of him unable to reconcile his fundamentalist beliefs with his speculations about the origin of species, that
“...in the months following his return... his new scientific theory was born and his faith in religion was dead” (Birch 2008:116).

Charles Darwin, born 200 hundred years ago,
who gave us his most famous major work called ‘*On the origin of species*’,
“a treatise providing extensive evidence for the evolution of organisms and proposing natural selection as the key process determining its course” (Ayala 2007: 61)
which Darwin published nearly 150 years ago - on 24 November 1859.

In that book Darwin suggested that the world or universe was:

- (i) unfinished and continuing;
- (ii) involved chance events and struggle, and
- (iii) natural selection took the place of

“design according to a preordained [divine] blueprint” (*Birch 1965:29*).

The whole universe is alive and changing, continually co-creating new possibilities of life.

Change is!

Or as evolutionary theist, Prof. Howard van Till, a member of Christ Community Church in MI, USA, said to his pastor,

Ian Lawton, this week about genetic variation and natural selection:

“Spontaneous genetic variation is the way that Earth's ecosystem explores new possibilities for life forms. No exploration = nothing new to look forward to. Thank ‘God’ for genetic exploration.

“Natural selection = go with whatever happens to work best at this time and place. That implies that the future will be interesting but admits that the details are yet to be worked out. This approach preserves the possibility of surprise. Thank ‘God’ for surprise” (*Aussie heretic blog site*).

Or put another way, change is the core of:

cosmic evolution, biological evolution, cultural/symbolic evolution

(*Peters 2002, Kaufman 2004*).

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In every age the worlds of theology and religion interact with the cultural and scientific worldviews of that day.

Such interaction between the two, in the words of feminist Catholic theologian Elizabeth Johnson,

“is essential to make religious faith both credible and relevant within a particular generation’s view of the world and how it works” (*Johnson 2007:286*).

But Johnson goes on:

“In sum, theological reflection today should endeavor to speak about God’s relation not to an ancient nor medieval nor Newtonian world, but to the dynamic, emergent, self-organizing universe that contemporary natural and biological sciences describe” (*Johnson 2007:287*).

Scientists tell us the ‘Great Story’ as we understand it today, begins with the ultimate mystery of the Big Bang, some 12 – 20 billion years ago.

Life on Earth originated some four billion years ago.

Homo habilis (our ancestors) begin using tools 2.5 million years ago.

Symbolic language emerges between 50,000 and 500,000 years ago.

Classical religions emerge around 3,000 years ago.

I emerged nearly 65 years ago.

Billions of years of cosmic evolution have produced us.

The ancestral stars are a part of our genealogy.

“Out of the stars in their flight,

out of the dust of eternity,

here have we come,

Stardust and sunlight, mingling

through time and through space”

writes American poet Robert L Weston (*Weston 1993*).

“Everything in the universe is related. Can you feel that umbilical cord to the Cosmos? Can you feel the strands of connectedness – the interdependent web – of all existence, even with all human beings?”

also writes Mary Louise DeWolf in her 2008 Evolution Sunday sermon (*DeWolf 2008*).

The traditional model of life with God as king and ruler, described as omnipotent, sustaining the world’s development through pre-programmed attributes, and intervening miraculously from the outside when and wherever, is
“less and less seriously imaginable” (*Johnson 2007:291*).

On the other hand Alfred North Whitehead, the Anglo-American process philosopher and mathematician, describes life as an adventure.

He felt that:

“novelty and surprise made life interesting. The open-endedness of life provides opportunities for the exercise of creative freedom, which gives life meaning” (*Christ 2003:171*).

I agree. And this is why on this day for the past three years, we have celebrated Evolution Sunday here in this place.

And this is why I continue to:

- think of God as the creative process or ‘creativity’, rather than a being who creates, and
- continue to search for non-personal metaphors for God rather than personal, anthropological ones.

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As contemporary progressive theology reminds us time and time again, God or the Sacred or Spirit does not reside in some other place called ‘heaven’.

Nor is heaven our goal. The world is our true home.

Indeed, our only home.

“This life is meant to be enjoyed,” writes Carol Christ. “To enjoy life is to cherish the beauty of each living thing, to be interested in diversity and difference in the web of life...” (*Christ 2003:116*).

May the story of the one who renders impotent the power of dirt to keep the ‘unclean’ outside the human community...

And the story of the ones who discovered the whole universe is alive and changing, continually, and
that novelty and surprise makes life interesting...

Always awaken within us new possibilities for the now.

Notes:

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