



Come Holy Spirit – Renew the Whole Creation

1990

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A lecture given by Bishop Lesslie Newbigin on July 12th, 1990, to the Ecumenical Summer School at St Andrew's Hall, Selly Oak Colleges. Consecrated Bishop in the United Church of South India at its inauguration in 1947, Bishop Newbigin has been closely involved in the leadership of the International Missionary Council and the World Council of Churches over many years. In a remarkably active and productive 'retirement' he has continued his writing, exploring the challenges of a new missionary encounter with the dominant culture of the Western world. His most recent books are Foolishness to the Greeks and The Gospel in a Pluralist Society (both SPCK).

We are meeting under this title because it is the theme chosen for the Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Canberra next year. I think it is fair to say that Assembly themes, although they are chosen with immense care, do not usually have much to do with what happens when the Assembly actually meets, because the people who come there are people with minds of their own and they decide to discuss what they want to discuss. But the choice of a theme which is always a matter of great care and thought, and in which churches all round the world are involved, does put down a sort of marker as to where we think we are in the total mission of the Church. The theme that is now before us for the Seventh Assembly is different from all the previous ones in three respects.

First of all, the central word in the theme is not 'Christ' but 'the Holy Spirit'. The First Assembly in 1948 had as its theme 'Man's Disorder and God's Design', and the Fourth Assembly had the theme 'Behold, I make all things new', but all the other Assemblies have had 'Christ' as the central word in their theme.

The second thing that is new is of course the emphasis on creation. And the third is that the theme is not in the form of a declaration, or an announcement, but in the form of a prayer. Perhaps that is the most significant of these three distinctive elements.

It is obviously easy to see why the word 'creation' has become part of the theme. As we all know, we have become, perhaps too late, but very suddenly, aware of the enormous urgency and imminence of the ecological crisis we face. So the question of the creation is obviously more and more central in the thinking of Christian people everywhere.

Spirit or Spirituality?

What lies behind the decision to place the Holy Spirit at the centre of the

theme? I think there is a variety of factors; some about which I would feel positive, and some about which I would feel negative.

I think it is fair to say that, at least in the affluent parts of the world, which tend to have an overwhelming voice in the choice of these matters, there is a widespread concern about what is called spirituality. Spirituality has become a good word. And here I am not speaking, although this is surely also a factor, of the immense vigour and even dominance of the Pentecostal movement within the whole spectrum of Christianity. (The Pentecostal churches, as we all know, are the most rapidly growing churches in the world. The charismatic movement within the mainline churches is one of the distinctive features of our time.) That alone would perhaps provide justification for bringing the name of the Holy Spirit into the centre.

But there is also another sense in which spirituality has become a central concern. There is a reaction – and again I am thinking primarily of the part of the world which has been dominant over the last few centuries – against a kind of rationalism which is the child of a mechanical way of seeing the universe – something which has been characteristic of what we call 'modernisation' during the past couple of hundred years, a sense that we have become alienated from the creation and that a wrong kind of rationalism, springing out of a mechanistic way of understanding the world, is at the bottom of it.

There is also, I think, and here I am perhaps open to challenge, an element of narcissism, namely of excessive concern about the self, which is a product of the individualism and relativism which are such marked features of our society. There is a loss of the conviction that there is a real world with which we have to deal: a loss which appears in many different forms in the subjectivism that underlies so much of contemporary literature, the idea that words have no reference except to other words, that even our scientific theories are primarily subjective creations, and that the world as we understand it is the creation of our imagination, of our own way of grasping it. And therefore there is a consequent loss of a sense of identity.

How does it come about that people ask the question who am I? I remember being told quite a number of years ago, by the then President of the Union Theological Seminary in New York, that 20 years ago people had come to that Seminary to train for the ministry, 10 years ago they had come to find out what they believed, and now, he said, they come to find out who they are. I never heard any of my friends in India asking the question: Who am I? I do not think it had ever occurred to them, because they know who they are.

Why has the question about personal identity become such a haunting question for people in the affluent parts of the world? And why, therefore, is it that there is this sense of the need to affirm the self, which has also disastrous consequences in the sphere of economics because advertisers play upon this narcissistic image, this necessity to affirm oneself vis-à-vis the rest of the world? And, of course, I think that related to that is the tremendous amount of concern about exploring the self, about the inner journey. All these factors help to explain the current popularity of the word 'spirituality'.

A more Trinitarian view?

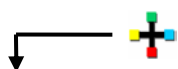
There is also a quite different set of reasons which have perhaps played a part in putting the Holy Spirit into the theme. For a long time, the World Council of Churches were criticised by some people as being too christo-monist or christo-centric. The most formidable theological proponent of that criticism was H. Richard Niebuhr who continually accused the WCC during its early years, when its theology was very much dominated by Karl Barth, of being too christo-centric; that cry has been taken up in many different ways.

I think there can be good and bad reasons behind this criticism of a so-called christo-centric or christo-monist stance. The good reason, of course, is that we must never think of Jesus apart from the whole Trinitarian doctrine of God, and if I found Richard Niebuhr more clearly committed to a Trinitarian view of God I would feel more sympathetic to his criticism. But obviously to isolate Jesus, and to speak of Jesus apart from a full Trinitarian doctrine of God, can lead to very serious consequences. It can lead to a situation in which we practically identify the purpose of God for the whole of human life with the progress of the Church.

To make the point in a very brief and simple way, on the one hand the whole ministry of Jesus was clearly directed in love and obedience to his Father. You cannot interpret the ministry of Jesus apart from his commitment in love and obedience to the Father, to the one ruler of all things. His message was not of his kingdom but of the Father's kingdom, and Jesus manifested and served the Father's kingdom, not by himself exercising rule but, on the contrary, by a total submission in love and obedience to his Father's rule. So to think of Jesus apart from the Father is to distort completely the whole conception of Jesus and his ministry as we know it.

Secondly, on the other side, the essential witness to Jesus, according to the New Testament, is not our witness, nor the witness of the Church, it is the witness of the Holy Spirit – the Spirit of the Father, the Spirit of Jesus. The words and the actions of the Church are secondary to this primary witness which is the witness of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit goes ahead of the Church; the Spirit is not the property of the Church; the Spirit is not domesticated within the Church. And therefore it is the sense in which the Spirit is promised to the Church, not to be domesticated within the Church, but to lead the Church, which is so vital for our understanding of Jesus.

So there can be a legitimate protest against a kind of christo-centricism of which the World Council was, I think wrongly, accused during the early years. But there can also be, in my judgment, illegitimate grounds for making that criticism - namely that the name of the Holy Spirit can be invoked, and has been invoked, to enable us, as it were, to bypass Jesus and to look for other spirits which do not confess the name of Jesus. Now of course the world is full of spirits; there are many spirits in the world as we know, and as the New Testament reminds us, but over and over again the New Testament warns us about the need to discern the Spirit; and that the criterion for discernment is the confession of Jesus as Lord, in the language of Paul; or, in the language of



John, the confession of Jesus come in the flesh. Beware of pure spirituality. According to the tradition, the Devil is a pure spirit while God took flesh.

Creation, nature and the ecological crisis

I have been speculating so far about the factors which have led the WCC to place these two words 'Holy Spirit' and 'Creation' in the title of the next Assembly. But now I would like to suggest that there is indeed a very strong link between the two words in the Assembly theme: the Holy Spirit and the whole creation.

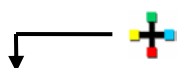
Is not the ecological crisis of which we are increasingly aware rooted in an a-spiritual or unspiritual rationalism which has seen nature as simply raw material for our knowledge, our

mastery and our manipulation? The main thrust, I will not say of science but of scientism (and I think you will accept the distinction), up till very recently has been to see the whole of nature as something of which the human mind is not a part. The mind has been seen as it were standing outside of nature, observing nature, experimenting with nature, manipulating nature, as though the human mind was not part of nature but stood outside it, over against it and above it. And so we have alienated nature, forcing nature, as we do in the experimental techniques of modern science, to answer the questions that we put to it – in its crudest form in the experiments we carry out on helpless animals, but also in a much wider sense that the whole experimental method of modern science is forcing nature to answer the questions we put to it. We have imagined that we were absolute lords and masters of the world, that nature had no other master except ourselves, and so we have become alienated from nature.

This alienation hurts us. We feel the sense of a lost mother, a lost home, and this becomes very acute for us when we see those communities which have remained largely untouched by what we call modernity – the Aboriginal peoples of North America and Australia for example. And that nostalgia for a lost mother is compounded by our sense of guilt for what we have done to nature.

And so it is understandable that we have what are called New Age movements, which summon us to return and become again part of nature, seeking to unite ourselves again with the cosmic forces of nature in ways that bypass our arrogant rationality. From astrology to transcendental meditation, and over a broad spectrum between them, there are a host of ways on offer whereby we are invited to restore our lost unity with the cosmic order. Within the time available this evening it is not possible to say all that could be said about that but let me make simply two comments.

In the first place, it is of course a very ancient programme – the New Age is a return to the most ancient ages, and its fruits are available for inspection. Nature knows no ethical laws. There is no right and wrong in nature. The controlling realities in nature are power and fertility. To make nature our ultimate is to join the company of those who have worshipped power and fertility all through history, from the Baal worshippers of Old Testament days to the devotees of blood and soil in our time in this continent. When nature becomes our ultimate, when nature becomes the final reality, her smile can be charming, but



her teeth are pitiless.

And secondly, there is one law of nature which no scientist would ever dream of questioning. It is the so-called second law of thermo-dynamics which tells us that every closed system must necessarily degenerate into increasing randomness. The very simple fact that if you put a cup of coffee down in a cold room, the coffee will get colder and there is no way in which it will get hotter, is an illustration of the second law. It is an irreversible law. The sun pours out its heat for millions of years, but the heat lost will never be restored. In fact, if I understand what the cosmologists are saying, our universe is already in an advanced state of decay and by far the greatest proportion of the whole mass of matter and energy in the universe is now contained in the cosmic radiation. The stars, and sun, and planets are just the bits of debris that have not yet disintegrated into randomness.

The cosmos, nature, if it is a closed system and if it is to be understood strictly in terms of itself, in terms of what we call natural laws, must inevitably and irreversibly descend into randomness. Listen to these words from the biochemist P.W. Atkins in his book *The Second Law* (Scientific American Library, 1984):

'We are the children of chaos and the deep structure of change is decay. At root there is only corruption and the irreversible tide of chaos. Gone is

purpose, all that is left is direction. This is the bleakness which we have to accept as we peer deeply and dispassionately into the heart of the universe.'

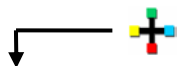
If nature has the last word, that is it. But that brings us to the crucial question. Is nature a closed system? Is the cosmos a closed system? If that is all there is to it, then that word of Atkins is the last word as we talk about the future of creation. The fact that the Assembly theme is in the form of a prayer implies that nature is not a closed system, but open to the renewing power of the Spirit, of its creator and Lord. Come, Holy Spirit and renew the whole creation.

Just what are we asking for?

What are we asking for when we pray that prayer? It is not exactly a biblical phrase. In the draft which was presented to the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches by the body responsible for Assembly planning, it was proposed to use the words of Psalm 104 which says 'When thou sendest forth thy Spirit, thou renewest the face of the ground'. But the Central Committee preferred the phrase 'Renew the whole Creation'.

What are we asking for when we pray that prayer? There is one chapter in the New Testament which is both the most complete account of the work of the Holy Spirit and also the place where God's purposeful creation is discussed; it is the eighth chapter of Romans. Let me read just a few verses from it. Paul says:

"I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope,



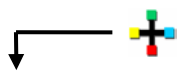
because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now, and not only the creation but we ourselves who have received the first fruit, the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as children of God, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope; For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience." (Romans 8:18-25, RSV)

How are these two things related – the Spirit and the Creation? The liberation of creation and human liberation, which are a common theme together of this passage, are not to be understood apart from each other. For we are indeed part of the creation. The idea that the human mind stands apart from creation, over against it, is false. We are part of the creation and the creation will not fulfil its purpose apart from us.

That is affirmed of course, as we all know, at the very beginning of the Bible. In the story of creation, in both its versions, God apparently does not intend the creation to be complete without us. The creation is not to be an untamed and unhusbanded wilderness. And God's purpose has not been wholly disobeyed. I have often thought of the experience that one used to have when planes did not fly so high as they do now, but passed low enough so that you could see the country that you were flying over; if you were on a long inter- continental flight you could often notice the difference between parts of the earth which had been husbanded and parts of the earth which had been raped. Thank God there are places, and there have been places for centuries and millenia, where men and women have husbanded the earth, have lovingly cherished it, not leaving it as a wilderness and not raping it, but bringing out its fruits both in beauty and in the provision for human needs in the form of food and so on.

Priests of and for nature

We are part of nature, but the totality of nature including ourselves is not a closed system; it exists in dependence on its Creator and Lord. The creative word of God brings creation into existence out of nothing and sustains creation in its existence. The created world is not a closed system, otherwise it has no future except the ultimate chaos which the second law of thermo-dynamics requires. In relation to the creation we human beings are part of creation, not masters standing over creation and not simply part of a closed system called nature, but standing within the created world as part of this created world, with the unique capacity to look up in love and obedience to the Creator and to be the agents of His purpose for the whole of creation. In other words, our calling, if you like to put it so, is to be the priests of nature, priests in the double sense of priesthood – to represent God to the creation and to represent the creation to God. We are to be the agency through which God fulfils his purpose for creation (which let us again say is not to be an untamed wilderness), the agents through whom God is to fulfil His purpose for creation, but also the agents through whom the creation is to offer up its glory to the Creator in its



beauty and richness.

We must reject a kind of dualism which is, regrettably, common among theologians, and which regards the natural world as a closed system and believes that while God can be asked to change our thoughts, he cannot be asked to intervene in the world of nature. This is of course absurd, since we have no thoughts apart from things which happen in our brains which are part of the natural world. The Assembly theme is an invitation to recover a biblical perspective in which we see the whole of nature as an open system, open to God, within which we are set as the priests of nature for God and the priests of God for nature.

The second point in this passage from Romans is something we all know: Paul says 'the whole creation groans and travails together and we also groan'. That is hardly news – we all know that. What is new is Paul's affirmation that this groaning and suffering is not meaningless, dark and senseless, but that it is full of hope because it is the groaning of travail, of a new birth. The meaning of this suffering and this travail is that a new creation is struggling to be born. The new creation is not just something yet to be revealed – although in its fullness it is – but there is already present the foretaste – the first fruit is the word he uses – of the new creation. How does he know this? In two ways:

Firstly, the passage that I have read affirms that the ground of our assurance that this groaning and suffering is not meaningless is that in the gift of the Holy Spirit we have already the first fruit – a foretaste, if you like, only a foretaste, but a real foretaste, a real liberation, although not the final liberation, but a liberation which is real enough to make us sure that the fullness is to come.

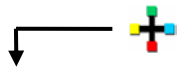
The primary basis of hope

And secondly, earlier in that same chapter, and earlier logically in his argument, there is the fact which is the primary basis of hope, namely that God raised the crucified Jesus from the dead and that therefore He will give life also to your mortal bodies, those mortal bodies which are subject to the second law of thermo-dynamics. Let me spell this out in four statements.

First of all that our bodies are mortal, our bodies are subject to the law of decay, irreversible decay. Ultimately they will go up in smoke in the crematorium, or be food for the worms in the cemetery. And yet we try to postpone that, we try to cherish, to care for our bodies. Our own bodies are decaying, they are part of a decaying world. They are subject to the second law. But we seek to sustain them in life in order that they may glorify God.

Secondly, that God in Jesus Christ, the word through whom all things were made and by whom all things are sustained, went down into the depths of our struggle in the old creation, and

died and was buried. Then God did something which signalled the beginning of the new creation, something which is as inexplicable as the creation itself. We cannot fit the story of the resurrection of Jesus into any world-view, except one which takes that as its starting point. No one can explain the creation. The cosmologists will tell us that they can go back to within a fraction of a second of the Big Bang, but there is a point beyond which cosmology cannot go, a point beyond which you cannot say how the creation



could have begun out of nothing, a point beyond which the laws of physics have no further relevance. You have to take the fact that there is a world as a starting point for understanding the world. That is the only analogy for the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. It is the starting point of a new creation, the pledge of what Paul calls in this passage 'the redemption of our bodies', the total liberation of creation and of our bodies, which are part of creation.

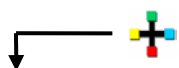
Thirdly, that the risen Jesus shared with his disciples his own Spirit, the Spirit of the Father, and that they could therefore share in this first fruit, this foretaste, this (to use the Greek word) arrabon, the pledge of the new creation.

And fourthly, that therefore in the middle of suffering they are full of hope. What is it they hope for? Paul says the redemption of our bodies. Our bodies, as I said, are part of nature – they decay. But we look after them, we cherish them lovingly, because we want them to be serviceable to God for as long as he wants us to be in his service. We do it in hope because of the promise of a new creation when everything will be filled with the glory of God. But if our bodies are part of nature the same must apply to the rest of nature. We are to cherish, to husband, to care for nature, not because it will last forever – it will not – but because we want it to be glorious for God.

The 104th psalm, from which the original wording of our title was taken, speaks of the delight that God has in everything He has created, even in those parts that human beings never see, like the life of the wild creatures in the depths of the jungle where no human being goes. So to love and to cherish the natural world is part of our debt of gratitude to God whose it all is.

But then somebody may say: "Why do you need to bring in all this theology, all this eschatology, to defend the duty of caring for nature? Isn't it obvious that we ought to care for the environment?" To which I would answer: "Obvious to whom?" If you drive in a bus in Nepal through the foothills of the Himalayas, you will see people cutting and burning down the trees and you cannot help reflecting that that means (i) that Nepal is steadily exporting its soil and nothing else, and (ii) that Bangladesh will be more and more subject to floods because of the silting up of the river. But if you were to say to the peasants cutting down the trees – "Look! for the sake of your children and your grandchildren, you ought not be doing this" – would they not answer, "If we don't do this, we will die and then there won't be any grandchildren anyway."?

Obvious to whom? I'm not being frivolous. For most of our society there is no sense of the reality of God, no belief that there is an objective moral order. As far as the public doctrine of our society is concerned God is irrelevant. One does not speak about God when one is discussing serious issues in university, parliament, or on the Stock Exchange. God is not a reality with whom we have to deal. And so we endeavour to buttress our moral values (as they are called) on a prudential basis. We do what we want as long as we can do it without interfering, or being interfered with by other people who are doing what they want. And that is what we call freedom – doing what we want to do as far as we possibly can, without being interfered with by those who also are doing



what they want.

So the sanction available for our morality is the sanction at the disposal of other people who can come back at us with their demands and their needs. But that purely secular morality obviously doesn't work as far as the ecological problems are concerned. For it is our grandchildren who will suffer and they cannot come back at us; we shall be gone before they inherit the results of our folly. So they cannot get back at us, and a purely secular morality breaks down.

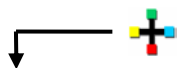
When it comes to the crunch questions we are going to have to face very, very soon, such as: "Are we ready to abandon the use of private motor cars? Are we ready to abandon the practice of central heating in our houses and go back to wearing warm underwear as we did just a few years ago?" (I have just come back from going round the Black Country museum where the kind of way that people lived at the time when I was a boy was being demonstrated to young children as though it were something from Papua New Guinea! But we got on somehow!) What is to stop my saying; "Well the ozone layer will last as long as I will?"

A cry from the heart

The Assembly theme is really an eschatological theme. It is a cry for the new creation, the new creation for which we long. The old creation is subject to decay, and we also are subject to decay; so are our children and our grandchildren. The theme is a prayer, a cry which is also a confession. We do not believe in a closed universe. The prayer implies that this universe is not a closed system. And therefore we believe not in the mighty power of nature, but in the mighty power of the one by whom all things exist and from whom they have their being from moment to moment. And we call upon the Holy Spirit who is given to us as the first fruit, the foretaste, the first instalment, the pledge of the new covenant, of the creation for which we long, to renew us so that we become witnesses and agents of the new creation within the womb of the old, sharing in the suffering, the travail of birth, but full of hope because we know we have already received the pledge of the new creation.

For God has not willed that his creation should be brought to its true goal without us human beings who have been put in the position of priests for nature. And Paul says that we are often groaning and suffering for the task seems hopeless and the prospect seems grim. One cannot live in the world of the Bible and listen to the words of prophets like Amos and Jeremiah without recognising that God's present word to this society of ours – this affluent, wasteful, self-indulgent society of ours, this society which has so devastated the world which God gave us – might have to be as bleak, as apparently devastating as was the word of God to Israel through Amos and Jeremiah. I find it impossible to exclude that possibility. But with the worst warnings and threats of the Old Testament there was always the promise of renewal. Behind, beyond disaster there was always the hope of a new creation. Our hope is fixed on God's promise of a new creation, of which the resurrection of Jesus is our pledge and the gift of the Holy Spirit is our foretaste.

When we cry from our hearts, as we shall in this Assembly, and as the



churches identifying themselves with this Assembly will cry, when the whole church cries 'Come, Holy Spirit – renew thy whole creation', we can be sure that we are facing in the right way and that we are not lost.

* * *

During the discussion period after this lecture, two questions were asked to which my response may be worth recording here.

The first was about the world of nature as a closed or an open system. I responded by drawing a contrast between the idea, present in Indian thinking, of the world as an emanation

from the ultimate Spirit and the biblical view of the world as the creation of a personal God. In the latter view the natural world has a certain independence given to it by the Creator. Human beings therefore have the freedom to investigate the world as it is in itself and without immediate reference to the Creator. It is this which modern science has done with such brilliance. This investigation can trace the cause effect relation between happenings, and the origins of things. It can show how things work. But it cannot disclose the purpose for which the world exists. A purpose, until it is fully realised, is in the mind of the person whose purpose it is. Since we cannot wait to observe the conclusion of cosmic history we cannot know its purpose unless the Creator has revealed it. The natural sciences can explore the origins of things. They cannot disclose their purpose.

The second questioner raised the idea of continuous creation. I replied that I did not think that modern cosmology supported the idea of any kind of continuous repetition of the original event from which all their investigations begin – the so-called Big Bang. On the contrary, the Second Law indicates that the direction of movement is always towards decay, towards increased entropy. This also contrasts with the view, very general in Indian thought, that the movement of the natural world is cyclical. But what I find very challenging is the fact that the biologists speak of an arrow pointing in the other direction, towards the evolution of ever more complex forms of order. How can these two contradictory ways of understanding the 'time-arrow' be reconciled? Only, it seems to me, if we accept the biblical understanding that there is a living word of God which not only created the universe, but is also continually at work to renew it by bringing new forms of order out of disintegration and decay. So we speak not of 'continuous creation' but of 'new creation'. It is in that context that we can affirm the Assembly's theme.

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