

THE GROANING OF CREATION (Continuation)

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pain until now. (Rom 8:22)

Rom 8: 18-22

“I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now.”

To better appreciate the message conveyed by these five verses, we need to see how they fit into their broader context, that is, the first eight chapters of the Letter to the Romans.

THE LARGER CONTEXT: ROMANS 1-8

New Testament scholar Edward Adams suggests reading the first eight chapters of the Letter to the Romans as “The Story of how God brings to fulfilment his original purposes in creating humanity and the universe as a whole.”

In this story, the passage that speaks of the groaning of creation (Rom 8:22) is situated at the concluding part. As in all stories, the ending can only be understood in the light of the events that preceded it. This, it is necessary for us to look into the entire story embedded in Romans 1-8 in order to grasp the full implication of Paul’s statement about the groaning of creation.

Since Paul is a letter-writer and not a story-teller, the story that E. Adams suggests is not told in black and white, but can only be discovered as a narrative structure underneath the letter. To get to the story, we have to pay attention to how the letter echoes and alludes to the creation stories in the opening chapters of Genesis. We can discern from the allusions and echoes references to God’s original plan for humanity and how that plan was frustrated by sin.

The Original Plan and Its Frustration

The fact that human beings have been created “in the image and likeness of God” implies an intimate relationship between the Creator and the human creature. Human beings are supposed to imagine the Creator before the rest of creation.

They are viceroys, as it were, exercising dominion in the Creator’s name. More properly, the task is to be understood in terms of stewardship. The dominion is not one of selfish exploitation, but is rather aimed to further the goodness, order and development of the world, to bring it to full achievement of its goal through respect for the sovereignty of God.

The way human beings relate to the world and accept responsibility for it, it is essentially within the scope of their relationship with God. Therefore when human beings, through disobedience, cut off their relationship with God, all other relationships suffer a break.

In the story told in Genesis 3, God confirms the break of the relationship between human beings and the rest of creation and spells out the aftermath of human disobedience through this declaration:

“... cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust and to dust you shall return” (Gen 3:17-19).

Representational and Corporate View of Adam

Paul’s use of the figure of Adam is representational and not historical. Paul’s view is not –as some interpreters believe–that Adam was a historical ancestor “in whom” all of us somehow sinned

before we were born, and whose guilt we all inherit. Rather, Paul uses Adam as the symbolical representation of humankind's corporate solidarity in sin.

In Hebrew 'adam' is a generic word which has both an individual and collective meaning, and can thus be rendered as a "human being" or "humankind."

Therefore we are the Adamic humanity-individually and collectively, sinners. No person sins entirely alone and no person sins without increasing the collective burden of the human race and adding intensity to the plight of the world.

"In Adam," one can read the story of human beings severing their relationship with God, becoming alienated, and dragging the rest of creation in the path of destruction and death.

The Groaning of Creation

Paul says that, "Creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it" (Rom 8:20). Behind this pronouncement is the Jewish tradition that considers human and non-human creation as locked in a "common destiny" for better or for worse.

Non-human creation either develops or declines in conjunction with the progress or degeneration of the human race: it suffers a fall when human beings fall. The tradition points back to the sense of co-responsibility for the world given to human beings in Gen 1:26-28. It alludes more specifically to the story in Gen 3:17-19 about the ground being cursed and becoming more difficult to till on account of Adam's sin.

Interestingly the same tradition holds that the repair of human relations with God would be accompanied by a similar regeneration of nature. In Isaiah, among others, we read of the desert turning into a paradise for the exiles returning to Jerusalem (Is 41:17-20; 48:9-11; cf. Also Ezek 34:25-31; 47:1-2). With this tradition as background, we can understand why Paul can portray creation as awaiting the "revelation of God's children" with "eager longing." Since its own fate is inseparably linked to that of human beings, its ardent desire is to see human beings reach the perfection originally intended for them by God, and that is, to be conferred with the status of God's very own "sons and daughters."

Within this overall scheme, Paul portrays creation as straining forward in ardent longing, with a peculiar intensity and restlessness at the present time.

The "restlessness" of creation is due to the fact that it is presently condemned to "futility" (v.20a) – blocked and frustrated from achieving its real purpose. This impossible condition is precisely the opposite of the "goodness" God saw in creation according to Genesis 1. Daily we are confronted by ever-growing symptoms of human misuse and abuse of creation: vast expanses of natural landscapes destroyed and transformed into modern residential or commercial sites, inhabited lands and agricultural fields ravaged by war, fertile areas reduced to desert by over-grazing, cities rendered hazardous to health by atmospheric pollution, irreplaceable forests cut down. All these symptoms precisely correspond to Paul's notion of "futility."

(To be continued)

From the book by Bernardita Dianzon, FSP: Glimpses of Paul and His Message