

The Gospel in an Age of Trespass

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This is a small exercise in contextual theology, bringing scripture and tradition, how we have read the bible over the centuries, into dialogue with our times of climate and ecological crisis. We will touch briefly issues of eco-spirituality but the bulk of this session will be looking at scriptural and theological understandings that might underpin that. Today we are thinking about trespass. Rowan Williams talks about the problem of our age as a refusal to live within the limits of creation,¹ that we have a culture of denial concerning the finite and interdependent nature of life and resources on our planet; in religious terms we refuse to acknowledge our creaturely status in relationship with an infinite creator. The very nature of the climate and ecological crisis is one concerning the limits and boundaries of our relationship to nature, a question that is particularly acute for an age that's *raison d'être* is overcoming limits. Modernity is the project that says we as the human race can do anything we set our minds to. The Enlightenment was all about throwing off everything (like religion) that might limit us. Nothing is off limits. The idea of limits and boundaries is an *anathema* (a word used by the church to excommunicate a person or doctrine considered heretical) to our age.

The 'gospel' of our age is the gospel of progress and prosperity. It's a deep faith and optimism that human innovation in science and technology can overcome all the ways in which human life is limited and at risk of harm, and this includes our response to the climate crisis. The economic system of global market capitalism is the other arm of this gospel, understood as bringing prosperity and increasing standards of living to many.² We shouldn't underestimate the power of this 'gospel' of progress and prosperity, it is the unspoken assumption that underlies most of our political and economic discourse. I don't think the church has really wrestled with how it sits with this 'gospel', it has largely gone along with it and seen it as a good thing, indeed bringing Western progress to 'less developed' parts of the globe has been an important part of the church's mission. We are all beneficiaries of increases in life expectancy, levels of material comfort, access to information, ability to travel, communication technology etc.

The climate and ecological crisis is the biggest question mark that has been raised to this 'gospel' of progress and prosperity. Mass species extinction, ecological destruction and global warming indicate we are trespassing and have already trespassed across a boundary that we should not cross. The words 'forgive us our trespasses' ring with a new meaning. Today we will look at two instances where the word trespass (now often translated as

¹ One example is a recent YouTube video for LSE Faith centre 'What does Christianity have to say about the environment' 23 Jan 2020, 1 min 48 seconds in: ' Humility... is really knowing your limits, knowing that you have a place within a system, you're not the whole system, and to talk about an ecology at all is to talk about a balance of interlocking, mutually dependent and mutually serving, nurturing activities, we belong in that network, we don't live outside it, we don't live above it, and so that kind of recognition of who we are that says we are not everything, we have a distinctive role, but we are not everything, that I think is the key to humility'. [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=POf0rT5qlmI>].

² In the West we would also add democracy and human rights to this progress

transgression) has occurred in the English Bible: Matthew's Gospel and Paul's letter to the Romans.

First, we will look at the two Greek words for sin which have been translated as trespass in relationship to the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:12, 14-15.

v.12 'And forgive us our **debts (sins)**, as we also have forgiven our debtors'.

Debts - Greek *opheilemata* from verb *opheilo*: to owe - originally belong to the legal/economic sphere - it expressed ones legal and economic obligations and then later one's moral duties and responsibilities to the gods and men, it expresses human and ethical responsibility. (Note the social implications of sin that the word 'debt' carries, a failure to fulfil the obligations that come with all relationships).

In Matthew 6: 14-15. Jesus highlights the importance of forgiveness immediately after the Lord's Prayer, where another Greek word is used for sins.

14 For if you forgive others for their **trespasses** (transgressions) your heavenly father will also forgive you, 15 but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your **trespasses**

Trespasses/transgression - Greek *paraptoma*: falling away after walking close beside, lapse, slip, false step

In 1526 William Tyndale translated both of the Greek words given above for sin as trespass in the first translation of the bible into modern English. The Book of Common Prayer, 1549 and 1552, also took trespass as its word for sin in the Lord's prayer, so that 'forgive us our trespasses' has become part of the English language and our common religious heritage of the past five hundred years. The word 'trespasses' can feel slightly anachronistic because the modern meaning of trespass is all about physical property. We have all the seen the sign 'Trespassers will be Prosecuted' to warn against entering onto someone else's property or private land without being invited to do so. This language of trespass connects us to the problematic history of our land and how people came to own it, enclose it, and keep others out. The older meaning of trespass that Tyndale and BCP had in mind had more of the sense of moral trespass or transgression, the breaking of a moral boundary or code. So, in summary, what we have in the English word of trespass for sin is a sense of stepping over a limit or boundary concerning right behaviour towards others. In the Greek words for sin translated as trespass we have the sense of not living in a way that is ethically responsible and fulfils our obligations to others and of taking a false step that takes us away from walking closely alongside someone else.³

³ *Paraptoma* occurs in Matthew 6:14-15, 18:35, Romans 4:25, 5:15,16,17,18, 5:20, Galatians 6:1,Ephesians 1:7, 2:1; Colossians 2:13. *Ophelio* occurs 35 times in the New Testament in verses relating to being indebted and expressing obligation in terms of 'ought' or 'should'. There are many Greek words for sin in the New Testament, the most common being '*hamartia*' which carries the meaning of 'missing the mark', in the sense that an arrow might miss its target.

Another instance of *paraptoma* is **Romans 5:17-18**. Paul is explaining the gospel in terms of two possible locations for our humanity, Adam or Christ, and what it means to be taken out of Adam and placed into Christ.

¹⁷ For if, because of one man's **trespass**, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the **abundance** of grace and the **gift** of righteousness reign (exercise dominion⁴ or rule) in life through the one man Jesus Christ.

¹⁸ Therefore, as one **trespass** (or the trespass of one) led to condemnation for all (men), so one act of righteousness (or the act of righteousness of one) leads to justification (being righteous-ed) and life for all (men). ¹⁹ For as by the one man's **disobedience** the many were made sinners, so by the one man's **obedience** the many will be made righteous.

(One way of understanding being 'made righteous' is being restored to 'right relationship', a 'right way of relating', a dynamic and ongoing process.)

Romans 5 refers back to the story of Adam and Eve, which can be read as an account of trespass. The story of the first chapters of Genesis is one of humanity going beyond the limit set by God's command, they eat the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the one tree they are told not to eat from. The snake says they will become *like God*, significant words which point to the essence of humanity's trespass as a refusal to live as creatures. Instead humanity seeks to be *like God* in a fatal grasp at independence.⁵ A whole host of things come with that, but in essence it means that instead of living in the relationship of creature to creator, a relationship of gift, gratitude and praise, we now relate everything to ourselves rather than to God. Humanity displaces God, we put ourselves at the centre. In the modern age we no longer see ourselves as part of the community of creation orientated to the glory of God, now creation is something we orientate to ourselves, to our own ends, creation becomes 'nature', something for us to use without reference to God. With that orientation comes a whole load of problems.

If we think of it in terms of trespass, our relationship to creation has become one of trespass, instead of a gift gratefully received and valued the relationship becomes one of domination, violation and abuse, I take what has not been given. In human terms trespass means I am not relating within agreed boundaries, I no longer respect your particular and unique identity, I de-humanise you so I can take, I can abuse. We see this dynamic expressed most starkly in sexual abuse and slavery, it is present in all forms of racism, sexism and oppression, and it is also present in our relationship to the natural world, when we take in a way that justifies the term abuse. Humanity has moved from gift to trespass.

⁴ Another potential area of study would be to explore what 'dominion' in Christ means, and how that might inform how we understand 'dominion' in Genesis 1.

⁵ In *Creation and Fall* Dietrich Bonhoeffer relates the fall of humanity as that from *imago dei* to *sicut deus*: '*Imago dei* - Godlike man in his existence for God and neighbour, in his primitive creatureliness and limitation; *sicut deus* - Godlike man in his out-of-himself knowledge of good and evil, in his limitlessness and his acting out-of-himself, in his underived existence, in his loneliness. *Imago dei* - that is, man bound to the Word of the Creator and living from him; *sicut deus* - that is, man bound to the depths of his own knowledge about God, in good and evil.' (New York: SCM Press, 1959) p. 71

We relate to humans, animals and other forms of life as 'objects' which we as 'subjects' experience and use with impunity. The fundamental problem with science and technology is its application in a paradigm that only acknowledges what Martin Buber (1878-1965), the Jewish philosopher, called I-It rather than I-Thou relationship.⁶

To return to Romans 5:19, we get more insight into the shift in relationship that Paul claims has occurred in Christ from Adam, the reversal of Adam's disobedience through Christ's obedience.

¹⁹ For as by the one man's **disobedience** the many were made sinners, so by the one man's **obedience** the many will be made righteous.

Disobedience: *parakouo*: to hear aside/overhear casually, carelessly, amiss. To be unwilling to hear, on hearing to neglect, pay no heed.

Obedience: *hupakouo*: to listen, to attend, to heed/obey what is heard. Intensification of simple verb to listen, deep listening and attention.

In both the old and new testament, Hebrew⁷ and Greek, the word for obedience is the word for deep and attentive listening, the kind of listening which then informs action. It is relationship language that we see lived out in Christ, who deeply listens and attends to God as *Abba*. This kind of obedience is synonymous with a deep trust. In an age which is very suspicious of authority we can struggle with words like obedience, of following what can feel like arbitrary rules and regulations, because they frequently seem to be applied outside of the context of trusting relationship. Obedience brings an image of a sergeant major barking commands at us from a distance, threatening punishment at the merest hint of insubordination. If we replace this image with one of a close and loving relationship that attends and listens in a context of trust and respect, it changes how we understand obedience. Christ opens up within us a desire to listen and attend to God as *Abba*, as the one who uniquely has our best interests at heart, who, as a loving creator, already understands and knows the deep longing of our heart, 'for your father knows what you need before you ask him.' Matt.6:8

We know that relationships don't work if we don't have the capacity to listen. Black Lives Matter and the climate crisis are both examples of a failure to listen and pay heed, both to those who are suffering from systemic racism and to the earth which is being exploited. As a culture we need to re-imagine our relationship to the natural world, to learn to listen to nature in the same way we might pay attention to a person. Listening, giving attention, is a vital part of loving. When we are in a healthy relationship with the natural world we will pay close attention to the impact of our actions. Eco-spirituality seeks to develop and grow our capacity for this deeper listening in the understanding we are part of an incredible, relating, living web of relationships.

⁶ 'But in times of sickness it comes about that the world of It, no longer penetrated and fructified by the inflowing world of Thou as by living streams but separated and stagnant, a gigantic ghost of the fens, overpowers man.' Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, transl. Ronald Gregor Smith (London, NY: Bloomsbury, 2013) P. 38

⁷ The Hebrew word *Shema* carries both meanings of hearing and obeying.

The Christian gospel addresses the crisis of our relationship to the earth because it addresses the crisis of our ways of relating in 'Adam'. The move to independence and autonomy brings with it a mindset of fear and scarcity, the mindset of death. (Romans 8:6) Grace unlocks for-giving and opens the door into a relationship of *abundance* and *gift*, a way of relating that does not grasp or trespass, a dance of giving and receiving, listening and speaking, initiating and responding, the mystery of relationship at the heart of God that we call the Trinity. The gospel is a call to live in God's *abundance* of 'being-in-communion', an 'ecology of relationship' spilling over into the 'fullness of joy' (Psalm 16:11). To quote Alistair McFadyen: 'Joy in God is a way of living out and finding ever richer ways of being in communion with others, within the demands of concrete and changing situations and ecologies of relationship...It is the mode of participation in delight in the abundance of God for the world'.⁸ The Gospel restores an understanding that creation was always intended as a place of the abundance that flows out of relationship, where I no longer see myself as separate, over and against others, but rather in a constant dynamic of relating and mutual inter-dependence.⁹ Salvation is the reconciling of all things in Christ, all things coming back into right relationship and balance. To witness to this gospel is to witness to a way of mutual relating within the ecology of joy that is the incredible diversity and abundance of creation.

All relationships are to be re-situated in the abundance of God. Instead of the primacy of negative restrictions, 'you can't do this, you can't do that', the emphasis is now on a positive delight in another's well-being and joy. It is not so much about *accepting limits that I chaff against* as seeing that I am part of something greater, a network of relationships where others well-being and joy is part of my well-being and joy. It's the kind of relationships of generosity, love and putting others interests before your own that Paul writes about in his letters to the early churches, the kind of relating that we can extend to all creatures. 'Preach the gospel to all creation'. (Mark 16:15) This, I think, is what the bible means when it says God's laws are no longer external but are written on our hearts, (Ezekiel 11:19; 36:26; Jeremiah 31:33;) because when we live in a deeper ecology of relationship, we become much more sensitive and attuned, we know when we do damage or hurt and want to put it right. Our hearts are no longer stone, but responsive. In a deeply desensitised world the call of the gospel is to live in the way of deep listening and paying attention, in a way of having our 'ears opened' (Psalm 40:6, Isaiah 50:5), of Christ bringing us into the trinity's sensitive and responsive ecology of relationship. This gospel is urgently needed in a culture suffering from a chronic attention deficit disorder, not listening and seemingly incapable of paying attention.

The gospel is radically and deeply relational, taking us beyond external rules and laws to limit our behaviour, into something overwhelmingly living, dynamic and responsive, something that cannot be contained in rules and regulations. However, we know that human beings don't often live in that kind of attentive, joyful and loving relationship to each other or to creation. Societies need laws in order to live together, in order to co-operate and limit harm. We have to have limits and boundaries to protect ourselves from ourselves.

⁸ Alistair McFadyen, *Bound to Sin: Abuse, Holocaust and the Christian Doctrine of Sin*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) p. 216

⁹ How trinitarian theology resources a response to the climate crisis is an area that deserves more attention than can be given here.

Part of the call for climate justice has to be about laws and regulation. It is unavoidable. But it is not the ultimate goal, as I would also say is the case with Black Lives Matter. Laws can only take us so far. As Christians we understand a fuller and richer reality that we are being called to - that of a deeper relationship of listening, loving, abundance and gift. The ecology of joy.