

CREATION MATTERS

By Fr. Michael Harper

Some years ago a visitor to Mount Athos spotted notices on the trees, placed there by one of the monks with the inscription: 'Love the trees.' Trees are part of God's Creation, some would say one of the most beautiful and expressive, and they are revered on the Holy Mountain. Perhaps this is a good reason why the Prince of Wales has visited Mount Athos twice in recent times - and made trees a significant part of his thoughts on Britain's architecture.

From Kyoto to Nicea

Because we love God or try to, we are bound to love what He has made: His Creation is now near the top of the political agenda. For example the German Green Party is part of the government in a coalition with the Socialists. Also, the question of chemical emissions and their effect on global warming was the subject of the Kyoto Agreement, from which the Bush administration in the United States withdrew. Animal rights activists sometimes resort to force in order to impress their views on the public. Fox hunting is another live Creation issue. Then there is the matter of animal and human cloning. Thus issues involving the Creation are frequent headline news.

Creation is a part of the Nicene Creed alongside the Incarnation and the Resurrection. God is declared to be the 'Maker of heaven and earth' and the Father is said to be the One 'by whom all things were made'. When recently the Chief Rabbi, Dr. Jonathan Sacks claimed the Creation as a Jewish doctrine, he was only partially correct. It is also Christian teaching. In Genesis we read of the creation not only of heaven and earth, but of the animal kingdom and of man and woman. Here we see the equality of the sexes and the differences. Men and women were created equal, although the nature of their creation was different and their roles are different.

MEN AND WOMEN ARE EQUAL AS WELL AS DIFFERENT

Equal and Different

These differences are rooted in the Creation, and respect for it is part of our worship and life. It is important that we do not look at the Creation as if God created the earth and imposed some laws which He gave to man in order to preserve it. It is in the Creation itself that we see the divine order. We can break God's laws although we then have to take the consequences. But the Creation is not just about a rule book. It is in and of itself the expression of the Creator and you can no more change that than you can change the

nature of God. If you do attempt to change or adjust what God has created, then you will impair the whole thing. If you deny the equality of men and women then you will face fearsome consequences. And if you deny the gender differences which God has created, you will see gradually the collapse of the social fabric of society, especially that of the family.

In my book 'Equal and Different' the debate was deliberately placed substantially in the context of the family. Today, the word 'family' is used by politicians of all parties in an ambiguous and undefined way, in order to avoid issues like homosexuality and to defend single parenthood in whatever circumstances. But by 'family' I mean a man and a woman (not two men or two women) who are married, that is, committed to a life-long relationship and the children born of that relationship, or legally adopted into it.

The tragedy of the family

In the years since my book was published, the family has continued to decline. We now have in this country the most disordered family life in Europe. We have more divorces (double the European average), more single parent families, and more illegitimate children than our European partners. The day is approaching when there will be more children growing up without fathers than with them. The dire warnings of Norman Dennis and George Erdos in their book 'Families without Fatherhood' published in 1998 have not been heeded. In the same year Patricia Morgan's book was published: 'Farewell to the family'. In it, she accuses Britain, led by successive governments, of jettisoning the traditional family for the mother/child state, especially by its tax system which penalises the married.

Whatever sociologists and politicians may say, our understanding should be rooted in our understanding of Creation, and our faith in the fact that the Creation was not a scientific accident but the carefully planned act of God the Creator. We believe that man was created in the image and likeness of God and this means that men and women reflect God's nature.

Trinitarian patterns

I want to look at one aspect of the relationship between men and women. I want to begin with the doctrine of the Trinity, where I believe we see both equality and difference as the Persons relate to each other. The Persons are co-equal and consubstantial. All three are 'true God'. It is important also not to separate the Persons in their work. They act together as we see in the Gospels, the Acts and the Epistles. At Christ's Baptism there was the voice of the Father from heaven and the coming of the Holy Spirit as a dove upon Christ. All three are involved together. Although there is no explicit mention of the word 'Trinity' in the New Testament, there are innumerable mentions of the Persons acting together.

WHATEVER SOCIOLOGISTS AND POLITICIANS MAY SAY, OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE FAMILY SHOULD BE ROOTED IN OUR UNDERSTANDING OF CREATION

Having said this, it is equally important to see the ‘hierarchy’ of the Godhead. It is the Father who sends the Son and it is from the Father that the Holy Spirit proceeds (as the Orthodox insist, not from the Father **and** the Son.) It is clear also in the New Testament that the Son is in a relationship of obedience to the Father.

This comes out in some of the Johannine discourses, but even more plainly in the teaching of Paul. In his letter to the Philippians 5 v 27,28 where Paul writes that God has put all things in subjection under Him. When all things are subjected to Him then the Son Himself will be subjected to the One who put all things in subjection under Him, so that God may be all in all’. Please note that the submission of the Son to the Father is eternal, not merely temporal.

Submission not subordination

There is always a danger if one uses the word ‘subordination’ of falling into the error of the heretics like the Arians, who had a subordinationist Christology, thus denying the equal nature of the Father and the Son: when Paul and others refer to the submission of the Son to the Father they meant the way the Trinity functions not the nature of the Persons. Thus we can dare to say that the Trinity is ‘equal and different.’

In the New Testament the word ‘submit’ is a translation of the Greek verb ‘hupotasso’. Hupo means ‘under’ and tasso means to arrange or set or appoint. It does not convey any sense of inferiority. But as Paul uses this Greek verb to describe the relationship between the Father and the Son, so in Ephesians 5. v 22 and Titus 2. v 5, he uses it to describe the relationship between a husband and wife.

The important point is that submission is not only part of the mystery of the Trinity but is also part of God’s Creation, and so of normal human relationships. Since man is created in the image of God, this should not surprise us. It is important not to fall into the trap that many seem to, to blame the Fall for the submission of the woman to the man. It had already been established as part of the original Creation (see Genesis 2), being part of the image of the Trinity in mankind. This is clear when we see how Paul interprets Genesis 2 in 1 Timothy 2:13 and 1 Corinthians 11:8.

Equality and the Church

Finally it is important to see the link between all this and the Church. The Church is the Body of Christ, the fullest corporate expression of the Glories of the Trinity on earth. The Church is to imitate Christ, not the world. The world, especially in the West has developed strange, sometimes bizarre ideas about human relations in general and the family in particular. These the Church should repudiate. Our vision is to be God-like, and to reflect the glories and wonders of the Divine Trinity not the vagaries of the world.

THE IMPORTANT POINT IS THAT SUBMISSION IS NOT ONLY PART OF THE MYSTERY OF THE TRINITY, BUT IS ALSO PART OF GOD’S CREATION, AND SO OF NORMAL HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

Equality has been a major source of difficulty in Western society for over two centuries. It was the quest for it that lay at the base of both the French and the Russian Revolutions. Tragically millions have bled to death in the pursuit of social and economic equality. Alexander Schmemmann has written 'the idea that all people are equal is erroneous, there is deep falsehood in the principle of comparison which is the basis of the quest for equality. Equality is based on the denial of any distinctions, but since they exist, the wish for equality calls for a fight against them, - to force equalisation on people, and what is even worse to refuse these distinctions. He goes on to say that the essence of love is the total absence of comparison. To quote him: 'to the demonic principle of comparison, Christianity opposes love.'

Alexander Schmemmann is exaggerating the error of equality and the quest for it, for men and women are equal as well as different. However, our society has gone so overboard on equality, there is a need to emphasise the 'different' factor. But in the final sentence he hits the nail on the head. For he describes 'comparison' as demonic when he states that Christianity opposes it with 'love'. Without love, the true life which emanates from the Holy Trinity which is expressed in the holy alliance of the three Persons, nothing works properly. With it, men and women can rejoice in their equality and in their differences.