



Fri 4 March 2016

With his glass half-full of hope after the Paris Climate conference, in his latest book Bishop George Browning has unwrapped the Sabbath as 'the foundational source of moral discernment humanity as together we face the environmental crisis for all humanity'.

Speaking for Christians for an Ethical Society last week, and at the launch of *Sabbath and the Common Good*, he described the Sabbath as 'essentially about the relationality of the whole created order', and called on people of faith to be in the vanguard of prosecution and action.



'The glass half-full version, to which I subscribe, is that the Parish conference and final communique have significantly changed the psychology of the climate debate,' he told a packed Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture in Canberra. 'The majority of the world is now, hopefully, on the same page; the only question is how passionately, and by whom, will change be prosecuted?'

Bishop George said he had been fascinated by the primeval narratives of Genesis 1-11, since he became a lecturer in Old Testament in 1973. Today, his work in relation to the environmental challenge has been focussed on the first verses of Genesis 2 about Sabbath.

'Sabbath is essentially about the relationality of the whole created order, how that blessing is to be experienced, how sacredness is to be understood. Sabbath is the fundamental biblical ethic: it is about how everything is called to relate to everything else and to find its blessing in relationship with everything else. If you like, Sabbath is about how life is to be celebrated.

'Sabbath presents a counter position to the ubiquitous, exploitative, working of the market, the dominant feature of 21st century economics. The market has appeared to replace 'values' or morals with monetary value as the standard by which life and wellbeing is to be judged.

'Sabbath therefore presents a lie to the sometimes assumed truth that Christianity is primarily about corralling souls to heaven. Christianity is about a life fully immersed in this world. It is about living appropriately in relation to God others and the world around us,' he said.

'I am arguing that the Sabbath ethic can and should be the foundational source of moral discernment for all humanity as together we face the environmental crisis, for set within the primeval narrative it does not simply address people of faith but humanity as a whole.'

'In the New Testament, Jesus' ministry is set in the context of Sabbath roots. Luke achieves this by having Jesus read Isaiah 61, the Jubilee passage, in the synagogue. Jubilee is the heart of the Sabbath ethic; it is about release from debt. Debt of any kind is seen as the ultimate evil because it holds the one in debt and the one to whom the debt is owed in a position of unequal power that potentially destroys both. Debt and how it is dealt with is perhaps the dominant feature of the New Testament indeed of the cross itself.

'Fast forward to the 21st century and debt continues to plague relationships everywhere, not least because inequity is growing exponentially. Ten percent of the human population now control 90 percent of global assets – a position of gross inequality of political power which gives them disproportionate lobbying capacity. It is as a result of the lobbying of the wealthy and self-interested that the most serious debt of all, environmental debt, is not being properly addressed. It is not in the interest of the wealthy to do so.

'In many respects progress is no longer as dependent upon passive politicians, subservient to big business. The market knows that the game is up for fossil fuels and already disinvestment has begun on a grand scale. New fossil projects will be increasingly hard to finance because investors will not risk being stuck with stranded assets. As more and more people switch to renewable energy, dirty energy will become more expensive to deliver.

Bishop George said humanity must accept limits, first, on the growth of the human population, and second, on human consumption habits. An important ethical supposition of the bible is that each generation must live with the next generation in mind, but currently each generation consumes quantitatively more than the generation preceding it. By way of contrast a core descriptor of the New Testament community was that they shared all things in common. The 21st century human population has to grasp something of this ethic in order that there might be space for other species and for climatic stability. That we can do this without any loss of wellbeing or happiness makes the task quite doable, he said.

The psychology of a new world order

'First, we live in a single house. A single house is an underlying biblical theme. Ecumenics, ecology and economy all have their roots in the Greek word *oikos*. Ecumenics has to do with the relationship between the occupants of the house. Ecology has to do with the wisdom of the house, while economy has to do with rules or housekeeping. It is a very strange, if not an idiotic matter, that human culture has not only allowed but encouraged housekeeping to be at the apex of the triangle. The economy must function to serve the kind of house we want to have; we must move past our obsession with the economy and GDP as the only or even the most important indicator of national or individual health.

'The Genesis creation narrative says that humans (male and female) are 'adam' from the 'adamah' the earth. If we belong first to the creator we belong secondly to the creation. We do not live apart from the world. The world is not a resource put at the disposal of humanity; we are part of the world and indeed of one another.

'Africans have a word for this - Ubuntu. Our destiny is entwined with the destiny of everything else. Human vocation is not to seek an advantage over others it is to find a way in which being a blessing to others and particularly to the created order might become a source of deep fulfilment and blessedness; Common Life emanating in Common Good,' Bishop George said.

Bishop George's talk and book launch were a Christians for an Ethical Society event. *Sabbath and the Common Good: Prospects for a New Humanity* is based on Bishop George's doctoral thesis.

The evening was hosted by the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture. The Executive Director of the ANU Climate Change Institute, Dr Will Steffens, and the Executive Director of ACC&C, the Right Rev'd Dr Stephen Pickard, also spoke at the book launch. Paul Bongiorno, a former Canberra Parliamentary Press Gallery journalist, chaired the evening.