

Living in this world

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Thomas Hardy, the distinguished English novelist and poet of the nineteenth century, wrote a little piece called 'Comet at Yell'ham'.

It bends far over Yell'ham Plain,
And we, from Yell'ham
Height,
Stand and regard its fiery train,
So soon to swim from sight.

It will return long years hence,
when
As now its strange swift shine
Will fall on Yell'ham; but not
then
On that sweet form of thine.

Hardy contemplated the comet over Yell'ham, and the fact it would return years later. Hardy's thought was not so much about the comet, which comes and goes and comes again, but that between its coming now and its return, someone will have died. It will shine, in

the future, but not on "that sweet form of thine". Time passes, and people pass with time.

Hardy came back to the theme, this time with a much more cynical note, in a small poem called 'God's education'.

I saw him steal the light away
That haunted in her eye:
It went so gently none could say
More than that it was there one day
And missing by-and-by.
I watched her longer, and he stole
Her lily tincts and rose;
All her young sprightliness of soul
Next fell beneath his cold control,
And disappeared like those.
I asked: 'Why do you serve her so?
Do you, for some glad day,
Hoard these her sweets—?' He said,
'O no,
They charm not me; I bid Time
throw
Them carelessly away.'
Said I: 'We call that cruelty—

We, your poor mortal kind.'
 He mused. 'The thought is new
 to me.
 Forsooth, though I men's master be.
 Theirs is the teaching mind!'

You may have caught the very cynical tone. Hardy was disturbed by the fact that in this world, we pass away, gradually, perceptibly. We deteriorate. It grieved him; he cries out in complaint. He says it's cruel. And God replies, that's strange. I never thought of it that way. It's amazing what you learn from those whom you make.

Hardy left behind even more cynical reflections than those. He was reacting and responding with considerable strength to the world in which we live.

God's world

Living in this world is a reasonably pleasant experience when you are out in the country, away from the tenseness of the city and all the pressures that go with sub-urban life. You hear the quietness of the countryside, and look out on a lovely day, with the dew still resting on the lawn, and you wonder, how could you possibly

have a harsh or savage thought about the world in which we live? It is a thought very easy to accommodate in the beautiful parts of the world. In such places it

is easy to say, this is God's world.

I once met a young woman who had in her earlier days been a very strong denier of God. She did not believe that there was a god, nor that this world had been created by a god. On one particular occasion she was travelling in New Zealand. She boarded a train in Auckland, firm in her belief. By the time she got off the train in Wellington her belief had taken such a battering that she now was no longer sure that there was no god. I have never met anyone before or since whose experience of moving from atheism or theism came about in such a way. It was simply through looking out the windows of the train. Looking at the countryside, the overwhelming, sustained impact of such massive order and beauty bore down upon her for mile after mile. She felt at the end of the journey that her desire to raised a clenched fist against God, crying 'No!', became futile. Ultimately, she surrendered and retreated from that position. Quietly, in her own mind, as she stepped onto the platform at Wellington, she was saying 'I believe'.

This woman was convinced that this was God's world. Psalm 33:6 summarizes this truth:

By the word of the Lord the heavens were made,
 And by the breath of his mouth all their host.

These two lines of poetry, so starkly simple, are immortal. It seems to me an astonishing miracle that as I speak, the

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words on my mouth reflect the thoughts of my mind. It is extraordinary, this gift of speech that we have: that I am able to take the normal, unthinking, spontaneous process of breathing, and by subtle manoeuvres of air articulate my thoughts and project something from inside my mind to be taken possession of in yours. My breath is essential: not only does it keep me going, it is also the vehicle by which I relate to you.

In the opening verses of Genesis we are told of a great dark and deep silence. Darkness is over everything; nothing is to be seen. There is total, impenetrable blackness. But the breath—the spirit—of God, is moving. The breathing of God, the life of God, is suddenly articulated, and those words ring out in the midst of darkness: Let there be light!

And immediately, in response to that word, light bursts onto creation.

More than this, he who made this world is he who maintains and sustains this world. It is an incredible thought. We are such a tiny part of the vast, massive, seething humanity that occupies this globe of ours. And yet our creator God sustains this creation in all its vastness, down to every level of molecular, atomic and subatomic activity. Not one infinitesimal part of the created order is not fully, consciously known to him.

Psalms 104 delights to speak about creation being renewed by God.

You cause the grass to grow for the livestock and plants for man to cultivate,

That he may bring forth food from the earth and wine to gladden the heart of man,

Oil to make his face shine and bread to strengthen man's heart (vv. 14-15).

They all look to you,

To give them their food in due season.

When you give it to them, they gather it up;

When you open your hand, they are filled with good things.

When you hide your face, they are dismayed;

When you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust.

When you send forth your spirit they are created,

And you renew the face of the ground (vv. 27-30).

It is a wonderful psalm, describing God's oversight of the whole created order. This is God's world, from beginning to end. Our particular galaxy, the galaxies beyond, and the entire universe—all of these things are his handiwork.

G. K. Chesterton once wrote a little essay called 'The ethics of elfland'.¹ In it, he talks about his experiences as a young child and how he was trained in his nursery to believe in elves, gnomes, dwarves, witches, fairies and spells. His whole infant nursery world was filled with the marvellous and magical. He went from that world into the world of schooling, where all the magic was taken away—all the witches and fairies and

godmothers were deliberately extracted. He was introduced to the cold, hard facts of mundane existence, in which things happen in the way they do and sequence follows upon sequence with regular and repetitious cycles.

Chesterton said it took him years to understand the great deceit that had been played on him—in school, not in the nursery. For he eventually realized that nothing happens with an explanation for itself within itself. The molecules do their dance,

It is God who calls upon the molecules to do their dance, who calls upon the earth to rotate upon its axis, who brings about the recurrence of the seasons, who says to Spring 'bloom again', and who says to Autumn 'come again'.

because they do their dance, because they do their dance. It is not ultimately an explanation. It is God who calls upon the molecules to do their dance, who calls upon the earth to rotate upon its axis, who brings about the recurrence of the seasons, who says to Spring 'bloom again', and who says to Autumn 'come

again'. Always, the hand of God is in the midst of creation.

Chesterton writes that God takes delight in the repeated things, and says to our creation, 'do it again', with child-like, constant delight in the things that he has done. We ourselves, seeing it all so frequently, have ceased to be excited by what God has done again, and again. We so easily forget that it is God's world, from its furthest extent to those parts with which we are most familiar.

For mankind

Psalm 8 gives us a contemplation of the grandeur of creation.

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,

The moon and the stars, which you have set in place,

What is man that you are mindful of him,

And the son of man that you care for him?

Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honour.

You have given him dominion over the works of your hands;

You have put all things under his feet,

All sheep and oxen,

And also the beasts of the field,

The birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea,

Whatever passes along the paths of the seas (vv. 3-8).

The same idea—that this world of God's is for mankind—is found in Genesis 1. Man himself is the final great work, the climactic moment in the creation story. It comes on the sixth day, in the second part of the creation.

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth

and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth". So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them (vv. 26-27).

These verses allow us to understand the creation described in Genesis 1. It is only when the account reaches its finale that you understand the significance of all the preceding events. You do not understand the significance of the initial call for light, of the formation of the heavens and the earth and the division of the seas and the land, the creation of the birds and the fish and everything else, until you come to the final event. For all of creation is set up as the sphere within which man exercises his dominion over the works of God's hands. It is the sphere within which the man in God's image stands, and discharges that which God has laid upon him.

That same perspective controls the eighth psalm. The psalmist is not expressing the existentialist despair of many people. He is not wondering how, when we are so infinitesimally small, so obviously unimportant and trivial in comparison with the vastness of everything else, we can bear to take ourselves seriously. He is, of course, aware of the contrast, that we are extraordinarily small by comparison with the vastness of things, but the truth is that God is mindful of us and cares for us. He has crowned us with glory and honour. That

is the extraordinary thing.

Recently I observed a group of people trying to spot a comet through a telescope. People were crouching down, concentrating, having a good long hard look at whatever it was they were looking at. The thing that interested me as I watched them was that they were genuinely and truthfully reacting to the marvel of what it was they saw. And yet the greater marvel was the 'thing' that was seeing. The more amazing thing was the person who was looking. A comet is indeed a marvellous work of God, but the person doing the looking is more so.

A similar emotion was expressed when the German philosopher Immanuel Kant stood at the base of a cliff and looked at the towering levels of rock that rose up over his head. He realized that if even the smallest section of those rocks were to become dislodged and to fall upon him, they would destroy him utterly. There would be no trace of him. Yet he said to the rocks, "If you fall on me and destroy me, yet I am greater than you. For it is Kant that comprehends the cliff, not the cliff that comprehends Kant".

The man that is the object of God's mindfulness is the thing that finally astonishes the psalmist. We have seen that there are easily two reactions when one contemplates man. One is to despair that we are of no consequence, no significance in a world that is as vast and complex as

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our own. This reaction leads us to trivialize and debase the value of human existence. On the other hand, we might adopt Kant's view and marvel at our own greatness, taking pride in the wonder of our own complexity and sophistication, and feel ourselves to be sufficient for all things. Neither of these two perspectives is allowed to show itself in Psalm 8. Once the psalmist has taken note of the unique status of mankind, crowned with glory and honour, he immediately falls to prayer.

Oh Lord, our Lord,
How majestic is your name in all
the earth! (v. 9)

**We are lower than God,
but we are also the most
god-like part of creation,
and creation is for us.**

It is his recognition of God as the giver of these things, the author of all things, and the one who arranges the hierarchies of life, that keeps his perspective accurate. He neither minimizes nor

denies the significance of mankind, nor inflates our self-importance so we ourselves become gods. We are lower than God, but we are also the most god-like part of creation, and creation is for us.

Under judgement

So far my description of the world has been a little too unqualified. While we may feel blessed in beautiful country settings, if we were to look around in parts of Ethiopia, for instance, we may

feel very differently about the world. We would be burdened with the bleakness of things—the evidences of impoverishment, and the degree to which living in this world multiplies distress for people.

The Bible does not steer away from this; in fact it tells the whole story at the beginning. It does tell us in Genesis 1 that this is God's creation, placed under the jurisdiction of mankind, and it does give that same truth again in the second chapter. There, the story focuses more closely, and more discerningly, upon Adam and his wife standing in the garden. They have their own sphere of jurisdiction, free to eat of every tree that is in the garden—but they are prohibited from eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, knowing that in the day they eat of that they will die.

It is out of this intimate picture in the second chapter that arises the great violation of the third chapter. There we see the extraordinary and tragic moment of human defection, when men and women went their own way and turned their backs upon the living God. The story is so extraordinarily simple that the profundity of it may slip past us. But it is profound. The tree which was good to the eye—aesthetically attractive—which had the promise of satisfying the appetite, and was to be desired to make one wise, becomes the occasion through which the woman and her husband did that which God forbade them to do.

By the time we have reached the end of Genesis 3, everything is different. Relationship with God is not what it

was, the relationship between Adam and Eve is not what it was, and the relationship between Adam and Eve and their natural world is not what it was. The three levels of relationship for which we are made have all been profoundly disfigured and deeply disturbed. When God comes into the garden in the cool of the afternoon in Genesis 3, Adam and his wife hide themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. This is a response which is quite new. The natural, spontaneous movement of love which would have characterized a relationship which was undisturbed and uncontaminated, is gone. Now there is fear—theophobia, the fear of God.

This fear is the basic malaise from which the human race suffers. It is the deepest existential anxiety that we can diagnose. It is the spontaneous retreat in the depths of the human heart from the presence of the living God. The God who made us, the God to whom we are obligated, the God apart from whom we cannot exist, the God whom ultimately we cannot avoid—this is the God whom we fear. Not with the fear of honour and respect, although that is crouching in the background, but the genuine, naked fear. It haunts every human heart, without exception. You can diagnose it in your own heart and life. You see the constant, small evidences, as you try to sidestep obedience to God, to sidestep doing that which God asks you to do. It is always there; and Genesis tells us that it was there at the start.

Adam and Eve may have anticipated that their relationship with God could not sustain the act that they perpetrated. What they may not have expected is the degree to which their own relationship would change. The man and the women were no longer the same to each other. We are told rather simply that the eyes of both were opened, and they knew they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves clothes. We smile to ourselves as we think of such a simple response to nakedness, the obvious inadequacy of their clothing. But however elementary and naïve their response may have been, the situation was terribly serious. They no longer felt the same about themselves, and they both felt nervous in the presence of the other. A new element had entered their experience together—fear. They had now become vulnerable to each other. They were now self-consciously fragile in the presence of the other. Each had spontaneously stepped back into privacy, within which there is the promise of greater security.

We know that reaction well. That is characteristic of the human race to the present hour. We know that we are vulnerable. We are vulnerable to each other, and we are capable of damaging each other. We are terribly careful about how much of ourselves is showing—and not just physi-

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cally. We have misgivings about ourselves, and we fear the presence of the other. We construct our relationships so they are protected to varying degrees. There are people to whom we give great access to ourselves, others who are more distant. And we are terribly, grievously betrayed when someone betrays a confidence.

It's all in the third chapter of Genesis. Each person has stepped back from the other, now fearful, to some extent, of the other. And terribly, as it is with God,

the one of whom we are afraid is the one we cannot be without. The relationship of human to human which we manage so badly is also the relationship without which we cannot manage. We are not made for Robinson Crusoe existences. People who retreat into isolation and solitude generally do so at great cost to themselves, and bring about disfigurements in their

own lives, distortions that arise from over-much isolation. Yet in relationships with each other we run risks and experience damage.

There is a third level of relationship, that with our environment. We relate to the world in which we live, which often looks so obliging. And yet we are told in Genesis 3:

Cursed is the ground because of you;

In pain 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,

Till you return to the ground,

For out of it you were taken;

For you are dust,

And to dust you shall return

(vv. 17-19).

Living in this world is living outside the garden. It is living now in the world whose conditions are particularly suitable to distorted people such as ourselves. The world is not entirely against us, making it impossible to live. In fact, we are populating the world in an extraordinary way; it is sustaining a huge number of people. Nevertheless it is a costly business to live in this world. It is with the sweat of our face that we get our bread. The world is constantly frustrating and damaging us; not just with thorns and thistles, but with cyclones and earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and diseases. It requires great skill, and a good deal of plain luck, to survive the vicissitudes of life. This is the kind of world in which we are placed, because we are the kind of people that we are. Cruel, damaged people.

It all ends in the dust. It's the earth that has the last say. This is a grim future: the word of frustration hangs over everything. That is of course the thing

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that so hurt Thomas Hardy. The comet that comes over Yell'ham will yet shine, he wrote, but it will not shine on that form of thine. I have seen the colour go from her cheeks, he laments, and I have seen as moment by moment, step by step, you take away from her all the things that were beautiful. Do you horde these, God, for some future moment? And God replies, that's a novel thought. No, I just—dispose of them. And Hardy says, I find that cruel. And God says, well I'll be darned. Who would have guessed.

That is an entirely understandable reaction to living in a world where we suffer so grossly from theophobia, fear of God, and xenophobia, fear of our neighbour, fear of one another. It is summed up in the words of Jean-Paul Sartre, with the terrible thought, 'Hell is other people'. To round off the description of our three-fold condition, we suffer from geophobia; fear of the earth, fear of the world. Fear of the environment. Three levels of relationship for

which we are made are all the occasion of great distress, and the source of great pain. Deepest and darkest over all, hangs the prospect that we may have to face God. Aye, there's the rub, Shakespeare says. Death makes cowards of us all, and makes us rather bear those ills we have than fly to others we know not of.

Fear of God, fear of one another. We cope with that in various ways, but we are vulnerable, and sometimes grossly hurt. And fear of our world, which we love—for we do love it. As Robert Frost, the poet, had written on his tombstone: I had a lover's quarrel with the world. We do love our world, but it hurts us, and it will finally beat us.

That is what life is like, living in God's world. **K**

ENDNOTES

- 1 G. K. Chesterton, 'The ethics of elfland', in *Orthodoxy*, Fontana Books, Glasgow, 1909, pp. 45-64.