

**A theological reflection on human dominion over the earth prepared for the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change exchanges with Parliamentarians in March 2014** by the Right Rev'd Professor Stephen Pickard, Executive Director of the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, Charles Sturt University

The early chapters of Genesis emphasize God's goodness and creative power – 'the Spirit (or wind) of God swept over the face of the waters'. From 'let there be light' through to 'God saw everything that God had made... and it was very good,' the creation is the work of God.

But it unfolds in a remarkable way so that everything is connected and interdependent – vegetation and plants, sea creatures, birds and then land animals to human beings. There is a single elaborate network of interdependency and at every level it is expected that all will be fruitful and multiply. Human beings come last in this network of life and are made in the image of God. Evidently being in the image of God involves being inter-related with all that has come before. The Genesis account points to the fact that all of creation is expected to participate in the unfolding work of God, being fruitful and multiplying. This interdependence is reflected clearly in Genesis 2, where the human, *adam*, is created from the ground (or to echo the Hebrew, the humus), *adamah*. The most accurate rendering for humans in Genesis is 'groundling' or 'earthling'.

This is the context for the injunction to 'fill the earth and subdue it'; to 'have dominion over..... every living thing'. The English translation of the Hebrew into 'subdue' and 'have dominion' is easily misunderstood as an invitation to dominate and empty the earth rather than to actively participate in the development and flourishing of the earth. The Hebrew words can be understood instead as to highlight the importance not of lording it over the earth but actively working with and participating in the ebb and flow and fruitfulness of creation, more along the lines of 'tame' and 'have oversight'.

When we humans stand over against creation and treat the creation as an object separate from human life we forget our interdependence with the earth and its life. We no longer function as gardeners and stewards in the garden of creation, the image of creation presented in Genesis 2. Instead we become more extractors and plunderers of the earth and less responsible servants of God.

In early society there were no multinational mining companies driven by the shareholder profits with little regard for the whole of creation. But today human exploitation of the earth is on a scale never before seen. The consequences are and will be serious. With a population of approximately 7 billion, human life fills the planet. We are in the age of the *anthropocene* in which human life is no longer a passive agent in the way the earth's systems behave. Rather humans, because of our sheer numbers and power, actually influence the environment and capabilities of the earth to sustain life.

Our appeal to notions of dominion and subjection runs the risk of becoming self-serving and detached from the goodness of creation and the notions of benevolent rulership derived from God's benevolent rulership of the created world. Our interpretation of Scripture might end up simply confirming our abuse of the planet. Truly it has been said: what the heart loves, the will chooses and the mind justifies. For those who own and control much of the wealth of the earth the thing loved most of all is the possibility of greater wealth and power. To this end, those same people choose the path of continued domination and subjection of the earth and, in doing so, spend considerable energy and money attempting to justify and promote their behaviour.

Collectively, we have travelled a long way from Genesis and the love of God for the earth. We have made our home in the garden of greed and winner-take-all – or as much as possible for as long as possible. At this time in our history what we need to subdue more than anything else is our own deep desires to have and take as much as possible to maximize personal well-being. That will require a new heart, new will and a transformed mind that is more in keeping with that of the Creator. If we love the creation as God the Lord loves creation then we ought to be able to echo the voice of God when we have regard for all we do upon the earth and with the earth – behold it is very good! Having regard and care for the earth, according to this injunction, is a sign that the resurrection of Jesus is transforming our own hearts, wills and minds.