

THE POST-COVID THEOLOGY PROJECT

Being Human
(Theological Anthropology)



Thinking through our fragile, graced creaturehood

Ben Fulford

What sense might we make of ourselves out of our many and varied experiences of the pandemic, the griefs and the consolations, the exhaustion, the isolation and strange forms of contact and solidarity? The inequalities? What meanings about being human can we make out from the shadows we cast and the light we scatter, as the climate crisis looms ever larger and more urgent? How might we read Scripture and Christian tradition afresh to help us here?

- If you've already begun to think about questions like these, what in your experience prompts these questions? What problems or insights are you turning over?
- What ways of thinking about being human you had before the pandemic have helped you in some way? What has been shaken?
- What has stuck in your mind from sermons you've heard or watched, things you've read, or the reflections of friends, family or people you work or volunteer with? What's been helpful and what's been unhelpful so far?

There are deeply grooved patterns of talking and thinking about illness, mortality and vulnerability in western Christianity. Disease and death are often seen principally through the prism of fall and sin, as the phenomena of a pervasive corruption of an original perfection. Sometimes this picture is overlaid with a way of understanding humans as immaterial souls bound up with heavy material bodies. Illness, exhaustion and vulnerability become marks of an unnatural but innate imperfection, tainted with their sinful origin. This is a vision which easily slips into hatred of the body, and what is close to it, and fear of its processes, powers and perceived deformations, which have historically been directed toward women's bodies, disabled bodies and black bodies, especially. Everything is measured against a loss of some interpretation of an original perfection that is often centred on some privileged group. The spiritual life under the sway of this way of thinking, is

something inward and higher, preparatory for the post-mortem state more than an eventual resurrection. Earthly sorrows are to be borne with the consolation of our leaving them behind very soon, or with the hope that suffering may help perfect the soul. There can be powerful consolation in these pictures, but they work to minimise the significance of what we have experienced, both positive and negative.

- Do any aspects of this picture seem familiar to you? Do they inform your own spiritual perspectives and practices to any extent?
- If so, what is your experience of understanding and trying to live your life before God through the prism of this sort of teaching?

If we are to embrace the whole of our experiences in the pandemic without the downsides of this vision, it may help to disentangle creaturely fragility and its goods from the destructive effects of sin, and both of these from the content of our eschatological hope. Christian theology has tended to prioritise the opening chapters of Genesis, in conjunction with the Pauline theme of the first and second Adam, as a frame into which to fit all biblical observations about the human condition, and all our experience. One helpful insight from the theologian David Kelsey is that we have in Scripture more than one story about our condition, and it helps to observe the differences between their ways of thinking. It helps us see the differences, he suggests, if we recover the stories told about us as creatures in the Wisdom books of the Bible and other wisdom passages, and, I would add, doing so helps us also identify certain insights from interpretations of Scripture in Christian tradition.

To generalise broadly, a basic insight about our humanity in the Wisdom books is that we are embodied, social and responsible beings, who are created and sustained in our particular social and local settings by God in and through all the processes which generate and sustain our lives together. Just as such creatures, we are naturally limited in powers and lifespan, vulnerable and mortal, because God gives us life through all the structures of our biological and social life in place (Job 10: 8-12, Ps 39:13-15). We live, as Kelsey puts it, on 'borrowed breath' that is God's gift to give and withdraw. In this way we are part of a much larger world of living creatures to whom God gives life and food in their times and places (Ps 104, Job 39-41). Those conditions of our life can be degraded or subverted, through processes of decay, through the agency of other creaturely forms of life, like viruses and bacteria, and through the abuse of the fabric of our shared social life in deceitful speech and exploitative economic relations (a theme in Proverbs), which are sins against both neighbour and God. These produce sufferings which are to be lamented (as in so many of the Psalms). Yet such lives can also afford short or long-term pleasures and joys which may be enjoyed with thankfulness as part of a mysterious creaturely existence (Ecclesiastes 9-12). This frailty and its fragile goods, with all the emotions that go with them, with all its mysterious ambiguity, is creaturely, not imperfect, nor fallen as such, nor is their suffering always (often even) a measure of their fault (Job).

Identifying this thread in the biblical witnesses suggests that the early chapters of Genesis need not be read as casting our fragile mortal lives as intrinsically fallen from a perfect beginning. The writers of Genesis recognise that humans, like other animals, are made from clay, live local, social lives, and depend on divine breath, but they add additional dimensions to our creatureliness, our mortality, and our outlook. Human creatures, bearing God's image, are also meant for close fellowship with the Creator, sustained for that encounter by the gift of an extraordinary power of life. Our interdependence with other lives, our mortality and our social forms and fragmentations are overshadowed by our exile from the possibilities of that fellowship, and the violence of trying to seize security and divine legitimation in that alienated condition. And God has not forsaken us, but comes to us in covenants with promises of blessing.

THE POST-COVID THEOLOGY PROJECT

It also helps us interpret scriptural stories of eschatological renewal and of the salvation of humans, which culminate in the stories of Jesus and beginning of new creation amidst the ongoing divisive and destructive effects of that rupture. Eschatological blessing, eternal life, is the transformation, not negation, of earthly, mortal, embodied life; salvation is in defence of God's material creation. God works both now through the embodied, social creatureliness with its ordinary joys, pleasures, vulnerabilities and griefs. It may transform our orientations and attachments to them, and to their loss, but not by negating them. Its direction should drive us deeper into solidarity with other humans across differences, and with other animals and forms of life on the face of this earth.

- How far does this picture of our human condition help you think about life after the advent of Covid-19?
- What questions does it raise for you?

FURTHER READING:

Augustine, *The City of God against the pagan*. London, Penguin, 2003. Books 13 and 22.

Kristine A. Culp, *Vulnerability and Glory: A Theological Account*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

Ben Fulford, 'Practices of compassion and resistance', unfinishedtheology.home.blog/2020/04/07/practices-of-compassion-and-resistance

David H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology (2 vols)*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

Ruether, R.R. (1983). *Sexism and God-talk: towards a feminist theology*. London: SCM Press.

Thomas Sharp, 'Empowerment in a time of pandemic: reflections on Rahner's theology of sickness', www.ccstp.org.uk/articles/2020/10/16/empowerment-in-a-time-of-pandemic-reflections-on-rahners-theology-of-sickness-covid-19-blog-no-34

Ben Fulford, University of Chester