

## Poor Hopes for a New Creation?

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### INTRODUCTION

This paper takes a look at how the concept of a New Creation is perceived within the Caribbean region, particularly among people in the island of Jamaica. Although limited in its geographical scope, the material to be dealt with will undoubtedly reflect some of the thinking that obtains for persons in other parts of the so-called Third or Two-Thirds World. The questions that we will naturally be led to ask are as follows: "Can the Caribbean Church, including Methodism, preach meaningfully about the New Creation? Will the Gospel that is proclaimed be relevant to the needs of men and women who are held in the grips of poverty?"

It would be wise to treat this document as one designed to promote discussion rather than as the last, final or definitive word on the subject.

### CREATION

To deal with the concerns as outlined, we must firstly ask what thoughts occupy the minds of Caribbean folk when they think about Creation. For them, it is difficult to think about creation apart from God. There is the affirmation of God's presence at creation. However it was that the world of nature, with its vegetation, birds, fishes, beasts and human beings, came into being, God was very much involved in the process, and actively so. What happened at creation was very appropriate, fitting as it did quite neatly into the divine plan. This is the impact of the repetitive clause as contained in the Creation account in the first chapter of Genesis:

"And God saw that it was good."

It was appropriate because what was on offer involved food for all, so that none would go hungry. There did not seem to be any suggestion that at the very beginning there were discrepancies with what God had provided for the inhabitants of the world. Wealth and poverty were non-existent in the sense that there was not the scenario of some persons having plenty while others barely existed, having next to nothing. The initial creation therefore meant that there was provision for all persons to have enough, to be satisfied and to dwell in peace and harmony.

Creation was a God initiated process, but the opportunity was given to human beings to be involved in the continuation of creation. The directive that God gave to men and women, created as they were in the divine image and likeness, was that they must "be fruitful and multiply". They were to make use of the skills or abilities that had been passed on to them and become co-creators with God. Creation is not a once and for all event, but an ongoing process in which human beings are in partnership with God. When we understand this to be the case, we appreciate that there is an element of evolution that relates to creation. Human action has, for example, led to the emergence of new species of plants. It has also been responsible for the evolution of modern day cultures with the ubiquitous computer partnering humankind in their own efforts at creating new entities. Of course, with the continuation of creation, there are problems that do crop up along the way. It is noticeable today, for example, that geneticists are seriously discussing with moralists and ethicists the rightness or wrongness of cloning. Are there

any existing boundaries in so far as human beings function as co-creators with God? What we now have as a matter of concern is whether God can be recognized as being present in the continuing creative process.

We all need to acknowledge that there are failures within creation. These come about largely because of human action rather than on account of God's miscalculations. The fact is that as individuals or as communities, we are often dissatisfied with what we have. The grass is always greener on the other side. We get annoyed with God because of something that we feel is being kept from us. This is what led Adam and Eve into trouble. They must have felt: "God is trying to impose limits upon our freedom. Why is God holding out on us? We would be much better off doing our own thing rather than obeying God." The Genesis accounts of creation therefore speak about the fall, the sinfulness, the corruption and evil of humanity.

In spite of the failures within ongoing creative activity, men and women ought still to be credited with the capacity to do well. This is one of the legitimate inferences that can be drawn from the clause already referred to:

"And God saw that it was good."

Those who bear the divine image want to enjoy the life that has been created and given to us as gifts. Thankfully most human beings are filled with the desire to improve the lot of the world and to make it better for all. It is not everyone who wants to inflict harm and danger upon their fellow men and women, to wage war or to annihilate those whom they perceive to be their enemies.

Having made these observations about Creation, we turn now to what might be entertained as thoughts about the New Creation.

## NEW CREATION

Creation, because it is continuous, means that there are new slants or twists to it at almost every moment. Something new is always happening, attesting to the dynamic nature of the concept "forever beginning". We ought therefore to think of the New Creation, not necessarily as a completely new phenomenon that will emerge and that has absolutely no links with what has gone on before. It need not be thought of as the destruction of everything and the start of a fresh new world. Somehow the statement that comes to mind is:

"The new is created not out of the old, but of the death of the old."

Herein is a suggestion that the entity that dies is somehow interrelated to what emerges as a new creation. The New Creation is not therefore to be preceded by an all destroying flood or a fire. It can emerge quietly, unobtrusively and barely noticed by anyone.

There are two dominant pictures that might be projected when we contemplate the Biblical teaching on the New Creation. One is of the individual, a Nicodemus perhaps, (John 3: 1 - 16) who experiences a change in lifestyle. It is as though this person has undergone a completely new birth. He or she has not reentered the womb; hence there is no suggestion of a fleshly or physical operation having taken place. Instead, there has been what might aptly be described as "a

spiritual transformation." The apostle Paul speaks of this phenomenon of a New Creation taking place whenever a person enters into an intimate relationship with Christ. Everything old has passed away. See, everything has become new. (2 Corinthians 5: 17) It must here be remembered that Paul was talking from experience, having been changed from an antagonist to a protagonist for Christ.

The other prominent biblical image of the New Creation is the one we find in the Book of Revelation, about the appearance of a "new heaven and a new earth" (ch. 21: 1). This is hardly about an individual. It is about the individual writ large, about the city, about the entire community undergoing a transformation. When we examine it carefully, we notice that this New Creation involves the presence of God. Indeed, God is recognized as dwelling among the peoples of the world. The New Creation is therefore about the Reign of God, about the Creator exercising sovereign rule over all the created order. There will be an end to those things that cause pain, hardship, suffering, as God ensures that the tears are wiped from all eyes. It is inconceivable that this new phenomenon refers to just a geographical entity called Jerusalem. On the contrary, the New Creation envisioned by God has to be a reality, not just for Jerusalem, but also for Kingston, Port-au-Prince, Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, Miami, New York, London, Paris, Calcutta, Taipei, Auckland, Brisbane, Johannesburg and Nairobi. The New Creation is to be thought of as the dawning of a new era when crime, violence, exploitation and injustices of all sorts are passed away and replaced by peace, harmony, love and justice especially in social, political and economic affairs.

#### CAN THE NEW CREATION BE MEANINGFULLY PROCLAIMED?

One of the concerns that people in the Caribbean do have is whether the New Creation as described in Revelation will ever become a reality. There is little or no fear about the New Creation on an individual level, since on a daily basis people who come under the influence of the Gospel are changing their way of life. The churches in the region have been doing an appreciably excellent job evangelizing and bringing persons to the Christ, who "makes all things new". It can truly be said that the churches serve as a watchdog for God, ensuring that men and women are told whenever they commit sinful actions. Preachers are very much interested in following the examples of the prophets of old who reminded the people to reject sinfulness, licentiousness, idolatry and other despicable practices that alienated them from God. Caribbean preachers, like Amos and Hosea, deliver messages that call for love and justice in human affairs. They warn that too much preoccupation with wealth, on the part of the rich, means selfishness, greed and exploitation, just as it had been in colonial days when European invaders had ventured overseas, conquered territories and despoiled the indigenous peoples across the world.

The people of Jamaica are anxious that the New Creation will not remain as a topic to be preached about, but that it will be concretized in their midst. The reason might be summed up in one word, "poverty", which seems to be the barrier between the dream and the reality.

Between October 1999 and August 2000, a Consultation on Poverty took place and involved

seven different groups in Jamaica - congregations of the poor; congregations of the wealthy; leaders of the churches; NGOs; academics; government officials; the private sector. The Report was submitted to the World Council of Churches as part of a study being carried out in at least 21 countries on "Christianity, Poverty and Wealth in the Twenty-First Century" (The Jamaican Report, by Sister Theresa Lowe Ching, RSM)

According to the Report, poverty among the urban folk in Jamaica has to do with "Material deprivation, destitution, and insufficiency that are degrading and accompanied by hunger, malnutrition, injustice, abjection and even death. Psychologically, poverty engenders stress, hopelessness, sadness, and loneliness and causes pain and suffering accompanied by feelings of rejection. Personal development is thwarted. The environment in which the poor must live is crime-ridden and they become the victims of discrimination and marginalization created by forces outside their control."

The Report suggests that the urban poor see the main causes of poverty as first of all an inheritance of "just not having enough resources." In their eyes, the economy both nationally and internationally is not structured to benefit them. Internationally, they are "exploited by the world economy" and locally, they are "condemned to destitution" through the misappropriation of funds.

"On both the international and national levels, they perceive the economy as empowering the wealthy, increasing their profits and wealth, maintaining the status quo to their advantage and providing opportunities for travel and even the migration of qualified individuals. Likewise, politics on both levels gives the wealthy power and the ability to influence decisions, encourages their extravagant life style and offers them protection."

The Report describes how the rural poor perceive of their condition somewhat differently from the urban poor:

"However, poverty is not perceived as personal degradation but rather as a lack of basic infrastructure, viz. water, housing, and especially a proper access road to the nearby town to obtain goods and health, educational and other services not available in the local area. Psychological pressure comes mainly from the level of unemployment and worry about where the 'next meal/ shoes would come from."

"Poverty is thus linked with lack of education, including skills training, and above all with the absence of job opportunities. It is significant that 'lack of communication' among themselves and with others beyond the community was also stressed as an important cause of poverty."

"It is significant to note that the focus of the poor of this rural community was very much on the community itself and the resources needed for improvement in the living conditions of all. Their desire was for more community involvement in making the decisions that affected them and in adequate monitoring of community projects and funds. No mention was made of the world

economic structure and the national debt as being responsible for the poverty they were experiencing. As a community, they felt neglected in terms of not being provided with the necessary infrastructure and resources but there was no evidence of a victim mentality."

The people of Jamaica and the rest of the Caribbean often feel trapped in their poverty. They feel that they have had too much of the negative effects of creation, and this mainly at the hands of other human beings rather than as a punishment from God. The republic of Haiti is reputed to be one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere. Yet, Haiti was at one time one of the wealthiest of the French overseas colonies.

Those who live in poverty feel hopeless, frustrated, especially when they are not able to enjoy some of the new things in life, as their counterparts, on the home front, as well as those in the wealthier nations are able to. They wish to have, at their beck and call, the benefits of the new technology. There is the feeling that if you have not got what your wealthier neighbours have, you are living as second-class individuals. As the world evolves, "luxury" items are fast becoming "basic" items. The feeling also is that you are obsolete, backward, in the dark ages, if you are unable to equip yourselves with the fruits of modern technology. Poor folk try to ensure that they are "with it" in so far as new inventions are concerned - computers, cellular phones, what have you - they are just as present among the poor as among the wealthy.

There is a sense in which today the new technology is mistaken for the new creation. This is the age in which having material possessions determines so much. One cannot excuse from blame those televangelists from countries in the North who often offer a brand of "good news" that says to everyone: "When you become a new person in Christ, you become wealthy." Their message is about increase in wealth, it is about success. There is no suggestion of pain or suffering. Hardly is it mentioned that Christ called His followers to a life of self-denial and taking up of the cross. It is true that Christianity is about newness. The question is how do we avoid the mistake of making it seem that the new technology and whatever comforts might accompany it will constitute all there is to life. Churches that witness in a context of poverty have to try and be sensitively relevant or relevantly sensitive in the proclamation of the Gospel.

For the Caribbean, the New Creation will best be realized when the region sees an end to many of its problems, chief of which is poverty. It is interesting to note how the Church lays this emphasis on the New Creation being more a community event rather than just an individual one. Granted, there is the understanding that if the New Creation were to be realized, it would involve the individual experiencing a New Birth. The individual who experiences the New Birth experiences "a new creation". However, newness on the individual level is not the ultimate goal. The Reign of God, with its peace, love, justice and integrity of creation is what one cherishes as a dream to be realized among the nations and peoples of the world.

According to the Jamaican Report on Poverty:

"Combating poverty and bringing the good news to the poor should therefore constitute the core

of apostolic goals of the Church's reflection and action. Justice is constitutive of the Gospel of Christ."

"Crucial to empowering the poor is the need to re-establish and develop human dignity. To accomplish this development of human dignity we need to study again God's plan of creation and discover who we are as Christians and how we should use our gifts. .... The Church should at all times be engaged in activities that empower the poor; moving them to an understanding of their dignity, given by God, and inviting them to love self and neighbour (Rom. 13: 8 - 10).

"The Church should be a model in redressing the inequities within the walls of the Church herself - do good to all especially those in the household of the faith (Gal.: 8). "

#### NEW CREATION: HOPELESSNESS OR HOPEFULNESS

The New Creation ought to be proclaimed as a hopeful event, certainly as one that continues to be developed out of what is already in existence. As at the first Creation, so too in the New Creation, God's presence must be recognized. There should be provision for all persons to have enough, to be satisfied and to dwell in peace and harmony. It must be recognized that there will be failures that come about because of human frailty. However, one must never lose sight of the fact that human beings have the potential to do the good.

The claim that is made about the Gospel is that it is "good news" for "all people" and that the responsibility of Christ's followers is that as they go into all the world, they must proclaim "good news" to the whole creation. John Wesley was, it would seem, the ideal disciple, since he considered the world to be his parish. This may seem glamorous, but it presents a real challenge, given the nature of the world in which we live. It is a world in which some enjoy wealth while others exist in abject poverty. In this scheme of things, a message of hope, not of despair, is required. Can the followers of Wesley who feel called to serve the global parish respond meaningfully and effectively in the given situations?

The Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas has tried to make the Gospel become "good news". Mission in Haiti is a case in point. For long the Methodist Church there has emphasized and acted upon providing education, health care and rural development projects. By its action of service among the poor, it has helped persons to have rich hopes for a new creation rather than poor ones. Indeed, its focus has been upon people rather than simply upon things. When anyone visits that country, he or she notices the tap taps, which are the public transport vehicles. They are brightly coloured, indeed pleasing to the eye. But of greater significance is the fact that each one of these tap taps carries a religious slogan: "Merci Seigneur" (Thank you, Lord); "Le Divin Maitre" (The Divine Master); "Dieu, Seul Espoir" (God, the Only Hope). . There is a spirit of positive hope in these messages, communicating an essential truth about the New Creation. It may not be evident at this particular moment in time, but it will come. Do not be discouraged. You need only to trust God.

Poor countries like those in the Caribbean may find that they are unable to provide basic standards of living for their populations. The list of unfortunate realities is long: substandard housing conditions; insufficient educational opportunities; inadequate medical facilities. To think of newness will often seem a far-fetched dream, given such hopeless conditions. However, one must not give up hope, but be determined, against all odds, to engender a spirit of hopefulness among the people of God.

Finally, let us ensure that we do not offer the new technology as the new creation. We may admit that it can facilitate making the new creation a reality, depending, for example upon how use is made of the Internet and other offerings of Information Technology to proclaim the Gospel message. The New Creation is about inculcating attitudes of change, beginning no doubt with individuals, but moving towards the broader human level, so that societies and nations might change for the better. The goal is the acknowledgment of God's Reign among all people. The New Creation demands that we discover new ways for the Church to be the Body of Christ and to project the image of an entity that is alive, meaningful and relevant to the twenty-first century.