

CHAPTER XIV

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON ROMANS 8:19-21

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IN ROMANS 8 (THE FOURTH SECTION OF THE MAIN DIVISION OF THE EPISTLE in which the life promised for the man who is righteous by faith is described) Paul is concerned with the fact that the life promised for the man who is righteous by faith is a life characterized by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. In vv. 1-11 the basic statement of the section is made. Paul then goes on in vv. 12-16 to affirm that to be indwelt by God's Spirit is to be a child of God, having the freedom to call God "Father". The implication of v. 15 understood in its context would seem to be that it is in the believer's calling God "Father" that God's holy law is established and its righteous requirement (v. 4) fulfilled. (To tell him that he has been given the freedom to call God "Father" and to bid him exercise his freedom is to say *in principle* all that there is to be said in the way of Christian ethics; for nothing more is required of him than that he should do just this - should do it with full understanding of what it means, with full seriousness and with full sincerity. For to address the true God by the name of Father intelligently, seriously, sincerely, will, of course, involve seeking wholeheartedly to be and think and say and do what is pleasing to him and to avoid being or thinking or saying or doing what displeases him.) Verse 17 makes the transition from the subject of obedience (calling God "Father") to that of Christian hope (that to be indwelt by the Holy Spirit is to be possessed of the gift of hope is the theme of vv. 17-30) by way of the connexion between sonship and heirship. The words *εἴπερ κ.τ.λ.* (RV: "if so be that", etc.) are added in confirmation of what has already been said in the earlier part of the verse, the sense being that the fact that believers are now suffering as a result of their loyalty to Christ, so far from calling the reality of their heirship in question, is in truth a pledge of their being glorified with him hereafter. Verse 18 explains (hence the "for") how the sufferings and the glory, to which v. 17 has referred, stand in relation to each other: in the light of his understanding of the gospel Paul can see that the sufferings of the present are but a very little thing compared with the transcendent greatness and splendour of that glory which is the object of the Christian hope.

Such is the context of the verses with which we are specially concerned. The first of them is introduced as support ("for") for what has been said in v. 18, and is then itself clarified by vv. 20 and 21.

About the meaning of *ἡ κτίσις* (RV: "the creation") there has been much controversy. It has been variously interpreted down the centuries as signifying the whole creation including mankind both believing and unbelieving and also the angels; all mankind; unbelieving mankind only; believers only; the angels only; sub-human nature together with the angels; sub-human nature together with unbelieving mankind; sub-human nature only.¹ But believers must almost certainly be excluded, since in v. 23 they are contrasted with *ἡ κτίσις*. Moreover, *οὐχ ἑκοῦσα* (RV: "not of its own will") in v. 20, if it is understood in the sense in which the context it seems natural to understand it, namely, as indicating that it was not as a result of its own choice that the *κτίσις* was subjected to vanity, would seem to exclude mankind generally; for, if Paul intended to include mankind, he could scarcely have meant to exclude Adam, the created man *par excellence*, and Adam clearly cannot be said to have been so subjected otherwise than as a result of his own choice. The suggestion that the reference is only to unbelieving mankind is unlikely, since, while it is true that *κόσμος* (RV: "world") is sometimes used of unbelievers in contrast with believers, it is unlikely that a New Testament writer would use in this way a term which expresses a relation to God in which Christians stand equally with non-Christians and in which, moreover, they above all men must rejoice. That angels are referred to seems also unlikely, no really convincing suggestion being forthcoming as to what v. 20 could mean with reference to them. The only interpretation of *ἡ κτίσις* in these verses which is really probable is surely that which takes it to refer to the sum-total of sub-human nature both animate and inanimate.

The objection to this interpretation that it is inconsonant with Paul's use of personal language here is not to be sustained. Paul's use with reference to irrational nature of *ἀποκαραδοκία, ἀπεκδέχεται, οὐχ ἑκοῦσα, ἐφ' ἐλπίδι, συστενάζει* (RV: "earnest expectation", "waiteth for", "not of its own will", "in hope", "groaneth . . . together") is, as John Chrysostom recognized,² an example of personification such as is quite often to be found in the OT.³ There is a poetic quality in parts of Romans 8, and especially in vv. 19-22, which must be recognized, if Paul's meaning is properly to be understood. What we refer to is not a matter of the things which belong to the outward form of poetry so much as of those things which belong to its inner essence - such things as imaginative power, feeling for the evocative word, deep sensitivity, universality of sympathy, and a true generosity of vision and conception. It is this poetic quality which is to be discerned in the personal language of these verses. With poetic boldness Paul speaks of the earnest anticipation, the neck-

¹ For details of the history of exegesis reference may be made to volume 1 of my forthcoming commentary on Romans in *The International Critical Commentary*.

² *PG*, 60, col. 529.

³ Cf., e.g., Ps. 65:12 f; Isa. 24:4, 7; Jer. 4:28; 12:4.

craning expectancy,¹ of the whole splendid theatre of the universe and of all the manifold sub-human life within it as eagerly awaiting the revelation of the sons of God. By "the revealing of the sons of God" Paul means that revelation by which those who now are truly sons of God (cf. the present tenses of the verb "to be" in vv. 14 and 16) but whose sonship is veiled and imperceptible except to faith, will at last be made manifest in their true glory, that public and open proclamation of their adoption which – rather than their adoption as such – is what is meant by *υιοθεσία* (RV: "our adoption") in v. 23. Until that time, in the words of the Scottish paraphrase,

"Concealed as yet this honour lies,
By this dark world unknown".²

The "For" at the beginning of v. 20 indicates that what follows explains why it is that the creation awaits so eagerly the manifestation of the sons of God. The explanation consists of vv. 20 and 21 together as a whole; but it is necessary to consider it piecemeal before we can hope to understand it as a whole.

We take first the words *τῆ . . . ματαιότητι ἣ κτίσις ὑπετάγη* (RV: "the creation was subjected to vanity"). The aorist tense shows that the reference is to a particular event, and the passive voice is no doubt to be understood as an indirect reference to a divine action.³ Paul probably had in mind the divine judgement recorded in Gen. 3:17-19 (note especially the words in Gen. 3:17: "cursed is the ground for thy sake"). The position of *τῆ . . . ματαιότητι* at the beginning of the sentence gives it special emphasis. In view of the parallelism between *τῆ . . . ματαιότητι . . . ὑπετάγη* and *τῆς δουλείας τῆς φθορᾶς* (RV: "the bondage of corruption"), some interpreters have assumed that *ματαιότης* must here be used as a synonym of *φθορά* and others that the two words are intended to signify respectively the mutability and the mortality which characterize creaturely existence as we know it. Some have taken *τῆ ματαιότητι* to be an example of the abstract used for the concrete, and have understood Paul's meaning to be that the creation was subjected to vain men. Others have thought that the clue to the meaning of *ματαιότης* here was to be found in the way the cognate verb is used in 1:21 (RV: "became vain"): they have therefore suggested that Paul had in mind the subjection of the creation to man's idolatry which exploits the sub-human creation for its own base and futile purposes (cf. 1:23, 25), and have gone on to explain *φθορά* as signifying the moral corruption resulting from idolatry (cf. 1:24, 26-32)

¹ The basic idea expressed by *ἀποκαρδοκία* (also *ἀποκαρδοκεῖν*, *καρδοκία*, *καρδοκεῖν*) is that of stretching the neck, craning forward to see something which is approaching (*κάρα* is a poetical equivalent of *κεφαλή*): the *ἀπο-* is intensive, as also in *ἀπεκδέχεσθαι*.

² *The Church Hymnary*, rev. ed., Oxford, 1938, no. 483.

³ Cf. below on *διὰ τὸν ὑποτάξαντα*.

and the *δουλεία τῆς φθορᾶς* as signifying the sub-human creation's bondage to man's corrupt and futile abuse of it. Others have suggested that, since *ματαιότης* could be used to denote a god of the heathen, Paul may have meant by subjection to *ματαιότης* subjection to various celestial powers, and Gal. 4:9 with its reference to bondage to the weak and beggarly *στοιχεῖα* (RV: "rudiments") has been adduced in support of this view. Yet others have maintained that it is along the lines of the sense which it has in Ecclesiastes, where the majority of its occurrences in the Septuagint are to be found and where it denotes the futility, the disorder, the sheer absurdity, of things, that *ματαιότης* is to be interpreted here. But the most natural and straightforward interpretation is surely that which understands it in its basic sense as denoting the ineffectiveness of that which fails to attain its goal (cf. the adverb *μάτην* which means "in vain"), and so takes Paul's meaning to be that the sub-human creation has been subjected to the frustration of not being able properly to fulfil the purpose of its existence.

And, if the question is asked, "What sense can there be in saying that the sub-human creation – the Jungfrau, for example, or the Matterhorn, or the planet Venus – suffers frustration by being prevented from properly fulfilling the purpose of its existence?", the answer must surely be that the whole magnificent theatre of the universe, together with all its splendid properties and all the varied chorus of sub-human life, created for God's glory, is cheated of its true fulfilment so long as man, the chief actor in the great drama of God's praise, fails to contribute his rational part. The Jungfrau and the Matterhorn and the planet Venus and all living things too, man alone excepted, do indeed glorify God in their own ways; but, since their praise is destined to be not a collection of independent offerings but part of a magnificent whole, the united praise of the whole creation, they are prevented from being fully that which they were created to be, so long as man's part is missing, just as all the other players in a concerto would be frustrated of their purpose if the soloist were to fail to play his part.

On the assumption that "the creation" signifies the sub-human creation generally, *οὐχ ἑκοῦσα* (RV: "not of its own will") is naturally understood as meaning "not through its own fault".¹ It is man, not the sub-human creation, which is to blame for the frustration of the latter. Contrasted (*ἀλλά*) with *ἑκοῦσα* is *διὰ τὸν ὑποτάξαντα* (RV: "by reason of him who subjected it"). There is no doubt that *ὁ ὑποτάξας* must be God, not Adam, nor man in general, nor Satan; for it would be intolerably harsh to take the participle to refer to anyone other than the agent implied by the passive *ὑπετάγη* ("was subjected") in the earlier part of the verse, who

¹ If "the creation" were understood to mean or to include mankind, *οὐχ ἑκοῦσα* would have to be understood along the lines of Augustine's interpretation of it as referring to the involuntariness of the creation's submission to the penalty imposed upon it.

must surely be God, since no one other than God could be said to have subjected the creation ἐφ' ἐλπίδι ("in hope"), and, moreover, "subject" clearly denotes here an authoritative action such as neither Adam nor man in general nor Satan could have effected.¹ It is significant that Paul opposes to ἐκούσα not a mere reference to man's responsibility but a reference to the judicial decision pronounced by God on account of man's sin; for by keeping God's part firmly in view he preserves the thoroughly evangelical quality of what he is saying.

The words ἐφ' ἐλπίδι (RV: "in hope") are more naturally connected with ὑπετάγη ("was subjected") than with ὑποτάζαντα ("who subjected it"). The sub-human creation was not subjected to frustration without any hope: on the contrary, the divine judgement consequent on man's disobedience included the promise of a better future, when at last the judgement would be removed. It is possible that Paul may have thought of the promise in Gen. 3:15 that the woman's seed should bruise the serpent's head (cf. Rom. 16:20: "And the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly"). Hope for the sub-human creation was included in the hope for man. The reading διότι is probably to be preferred to the variant ὅτι, and, in view of Pauline usage, διότι should probably be understood as meaning, not "that", but "because" or "for" – that is, as introducing a statement explaining why the creation was subjected to frustration "in hope" (the subjection was "in hope", because the sub-human creation itself is going to be set free . . .). In καὶ αὐτὴ ἡ κτίσις (RV: "the creation itself also") there is an implied contrast with the children of God (cf. vv. 16 and 17, and also the "us" in v. 18 and "of the sons of God" in v. 19). That Paul's main interest in these verses is in the certainty of the coming glory of believers is no doubt true (cf. the εἰς ἡμᾶς (RV: "to us-ward") of v. 18); but to state categorically, as one commentator does, that Paul "is not concerned with creation for its own sake"² is to do him a grave injustice (there is nothing in this context to warrant such a statement, and to cite 1 Cor. 9:9 in support of it would surely be unfair). The implication of these verses is surely rather that, with a noble breadth and generosity of vision and sympathy such as may be expected of one who truly believes in God as Creator,³ Paul sees the future glory of believers not by itself but accompanied by the glorious liberation of the whole sub-human creation. This liberation (ἐλευθερωθήσεται is more accurately translated "shall be

¹ Karl Barth's suggestion (*A Shorter Commentary on Romans*, London, 1959, pp. 99 f.) that Paul was thinking of Jesus Christ as having subjected "man, and with him the whole creation, to vanity" by the judgment pronounced and executed on Golgotha, is surely a forced interpretation of τὸν ὑποτάζαντα – though it is, of course, thoroughly true that the Cross was the final revelation of the ματαιότης to which the creation was subjected on account of man's sin, just as it was the final revelation of the wrath of God (cf. Rom. 1:18).

² C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, London, 1957, p. 165.

³ Suggestive in this connexion is the way in which in Genesis 1 God's approval of his whole creation including man (v. 31) is preceded by the often-repeated refrain of his approval of his sub-human creation (vv. 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25).

set free" than, as in the RV, "shall be delivered") is liberation from the condition of slavery to decay, death, corruption, transitoriness, into the condition of freedom (ἀπὸ τῆς δουλείας τῆς φθορᾶς εἰς τὴν ἐλευθερίαν). The words which follow, τῆς δόξης τῶν τέκνων τοῦ θεοῦ (RV: "of the glory of the children of God"), define this condition of freedom. The first of the three genitives has often been taken to be adjectival to the preceding τὴν ἐλευθερίαν (so the AV has "the glorious liberty"); but it is more consonant with the structure of the sentence and with the thought of the passage to take it to have a sense corresponding to that of τῆς φθορᾶς. As the δουλεία τῆς φθορᾶς is a bondage to corruption, the bondage which corruption may be said to impose, so the ἐλευθερία τῆς δόξης τῶν τέκνων τοῦ θεοῦ is the liberty which results from, is the necessary accompaniment of, the (revelation of the) glory of the children of God. (The meaning is, presumably, not that the creation will possess the same liberty resulting from glory as the children of God will possess, but that it will possess its own proper liberty as a result of the glorification of the children of God.) And this liberty which will come to the sub-human creation when at last the children of God are made manifest will surely be the liberty of each several part of that creation, whether animate or inanimate, fully and perfectly to fulfil its Creator's purpose for it – the liberty which it cannot have so long as man is unready to play his role in the great drama of God's praise.

What then may be said in conclusion about the significance of these three verses?

It is true that their function in their context is to underline the greatness of the believers' hope (the fulfilment of that hope is even longed for with eager anticipation by the sub-human creation, since it will mean its deliverance from its present bondage); but this does not mean that Paul was not interested in the sub-human creation for its own sake.

That the sub-human creation's subjection to ματαιότης is ἐφ' ἐλπίδι, that it is destined to be liberated in the way indicated in v. 21, this clearly has an important bearing on the Christian's relation to the sub-human creation and – more generally – on the whole subject of "the environment" about which there is now such widely felt concern. It is of course true that the debt of love which we owe our fellow men includes the obligation not to spoil or destroy their environment but to cherish it for their sake. We have an obligation to the sub-human creation for men's sake, for the sake of our living fellow men and also for the sake of those not yet born. Of this truth we must not for a moment lose sight. But these verses indicate that this truth is by no means the whole truth of the matter and that to value the sub-human creation solely as man's habitat, man's environment, man's amenities – even if we do think of "man's" as meaning "our neighbour's" rather than "our own" – is to be guilty of idolatry. If the sub-human creation is part of God's creation, if to it also

he is faithful, and if he is going to bring it also (as well as believing men) to a goal which is worthy of himself, then it too has a dignity of its own and an inalienable, since divinely-appointed, right to be treated by us with reverence and sensitiveness. And our duty to it is not only a part of our duty to love our neighbour as ourselves, but also an integral part of our duty to love God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind, and with all our strength. Since God has not created the sub-human creation solely for man's use and comfort but also with the intention of bringing it in the end to that liberty of which v. 21 speaks, true love to him must involve not only loving our fellow men as ourselves but also treating with respect and with a proper sense of responsibility his humbler creation, whether animate or inanimate.

As well as indicating indirectly our obligation to the sub-human creation, these verses show us the hopefulness with which we should set about trying to fulfil that obligation; for they reveal to us the fact that over that groaning and travailing creation stands the promise: *ἐλευθερωθήσεται ἀπὸ τῆς δουλείας τῆς φθορᾶς εἰς τὴν ἐλευθερίαν τῆς δόξης τῶν τέκνων τοῦ θεοῦ*. And those who believe in God know that in the end, in spite of the worst that polluters, spoilers and destroyers, that insatiable greed and mindless cruelty, can do, God's word "shall have its course".

And these verses remind us too that the Christian hope is something far more wonderful and more generous than at most times our preoccupation with ourselves and the feebleness of our concern for God's glory allow us to conceive.