

A Vision of God's Non-Binary Future

A sermon on Revelation 21:10, 21:22-22:5 by Nathan Nettleton, 22 May 2022

© LaughingBird.net

Message

Much traditional morality is based on the idea of separation into binary categories, good and bad, but the Bible also points a path towards a liberating non-binary future in God.

Sermon

You could be forgiven for thinking that ethics should become easier when you become a follower of Jesus. It is commonly thought that the Bible and the Christian Church have clear cut teachings that provide clear answers for any moral question or dilemma.

But as many of you have no doubt discovered, it doesn't really work out that way. You can find a wide range of ethical opinions among Christians, and to be honest about it, you can find several different approaches to moral issues within the pages of the Bible. On many issues that's no big deal because the different approaches all end up coming to pretty much the same conclusions, but that is not always the case.

Just to give one example, and not one that can be explained away by a change that came with Jesus, the Hebrew scriptures contain two different and strongly opposed views on the rights or wrongs of Israelites marrying non-Israelites. Ezra and Nehemiah maintain that intermarriage is such a terrible sin, that foreign wives should be divorced and they and their children deported, while numerous other books such as Ruth and Joel point out that many heroes of the Jewish faith such as Moses and King David married foreign wives, and that God was promising to pour out the Holy Spirit on all people, Jews and gentiles alike.

We've just been through an election campaign in which one of the major party leaders has been fond of trumpeting his evangelical Christian faith, something that's a lot more unusual in Australian politics than it is in some parts of the world. Not only did he trumpet his own faith, but he backed candidates with controversial faith-based moral opinions because he clearly believed that those views, while very unpopular in some communities, would attract votes in some of the places where he most needed more votes. Hence his enthusiastic backing, against the wishes of many in his own party, of a candidate who had expressed her fierce opposition to allowing transgender athletes to compete in women's sports; a candidate who we would have probably never heard of without those views because nobody ever gave her any chance of winning the seat she was standing for. She didn't, and some of her colleagues in neighbouring seats will probably be seething at the damage she and her leader's support of her did to their results too.

Now you might reasonably be wondering where I'm going at this point, because this topic of moral decision making did not feature obviously in any of tonight's Bible readings. And that's true, with the possible exception of a verse in our reading from Revelation that said that nothing unclean will enter the new Jerusalem, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood. But bear with me.

What all three of our readings, and especially the one from Revelation, contain is clear traces of one of the foundational beliefs that underpinned traditional morality, and evidence of the way that those beliefs are subverted by the teaching of Jesus and his followers as a new Jesus-

centred ethical system emerges. And in the face of things like this brouhaha about transgender kids, an understanding of these ethical frameworks has a lot to say to us.

What you will often hear from those who advocate a so-called traditional biblical morality is an appeal to the image of the Garden of Eden and the way things were originally created to be. Our reading from Revelation also recalls the memory of the Garden of Eden, but not necessarily with the same intention.

There are actually multiple allusions to the creation stories in this reading, but the most obvious is the mention of the Tree of Life. If you know the Eden story, you may remember that after the man and woman sinned, God banished them from the garden to prevent them from eating the fruit of the Tree of Life. Apparently eating that fruit would have made them immortal, and it would have been disastrous to allow them immortality while they were entangled in sin.

But now in this vision of God's ultimate future, the new Jerusalem comes down from heaven to earth, and in its streets, along both banks of the river of the water of life, that same Tree of Life is now growing in wild profusion bearing fruit accessible to everyone, all year round.

In addition to that, there are references to the heavens and the earth, to light and dark, to day and night; all things which also featured in the creation stories.

Now what these creation references have to do with the patterns of traditional moral reasoning is "separation". In the account of creation in Genesis 1, God creates by separating things into binary opposites, and the separated results are deemed to be good. So we have the heavens separated from the earth, the light separated from the dark, and the day separated from the night. You begin with an undifferentiated chaos, and then God separates it out into two opposite things, and order emerges. And God saw that it was good.

But what happens then is that the idea of separating spills over into the ways that God's people in ancient times thought about morality. The idea of being God's holy people comes to be understood as being a people who are "separate unto the Lord," and so quickly you get the emergence of this strong Jew-Gentile binary that leads to the dispute about marriage that I referred to before.

Perhaps you can begin to see how this thinking works. If in creation God was overcoming the chaos by separating things out into opposites that shouldn't be mixed, then it would be dangerous and immoral to allow them to mix again. So an interracial marriage begins to be seen as a threat to the very order of creation, as mixing things that God has separated, and that can only lead to a collapse back into the chaos that came before creation.

If you study the ancient biblical laws recorded in the first five books of the Bible, with that perspective in mind, you will be amazed just how many of the laws are expressions of this idea of not allowing things that are understood as separate to become mixed or undifferentiated.

It goes right down to seemingly bizarre details such as Leviticus 19:19 where it says "you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; nor shall you put on a garment made of two different materials." There goes the fashion industry! The fear of unnatural mixing of

opposites that would threaten to tip us back into chaos has gone right down to ruling out having a silk panel on your cotton blouse.

Nowadays, you probably won't find the advocates of traditional biblical morality picketing fashion boutiques to protest about the unnatural abomination of mixing two kinds of fabrics in the one garment, but perhaps you are now beginning to recognise the pattern here and how it does flow into some of today's hot potato morality fights. Like our political brouhahas over transgender and non-binary people, or same-sex marriage.

You don't have to listen to the traditional morality arguments for very long before you will hear this old refrain of needing to respect and preserve a God-given separation and refuse to allow any blurring of the boundaries. The areas of gender and sexuality are probably where this ancient moral instinct still remains the strongest. There is male and there is female and there can be no confusion about the two, and they have different roles and different expectations, and that has all supposedly been separated and settled by God and no one is allowed to mess with it.

I'm not making fun of this. It is the way that our ancient forebears mostly thought, and I recognise that instinct within myself. I'm old enough to remember how much simpler things felt as a cis-gendered straight person in the days when men were expected to be men and women were expected to be ladies and there seemed to be a clear consensus about what that meant.

Of course there were always lots of people who experienced that as toxic and oppressive, but most of us didn't notice them or realise there was a problem. Some candidates in yesterday's election wanted to take us straight back to those days, and in a time when for many people all this talk of gender fluidity and the collapsing of binary notions of human sexuality seem to have suddenly erupted, evoking all those old fears of a collapse back into primeval chaos, it is not so hard to understand why there might be some votes in stoking those fears. Although today it looks like it probably wasn't as many votes as some of them expected.

We also have to accept that what those people are espousing is a biblical model of morality. It's right there in the biblical laws. Deuteronomy 22:5, "A woman must not wear men's clothing, nor a man wear women's clothing, for the Lord your God detests anyone who does this." Don't blur the boundaries, or creation will collapse back into undifferentiated chaos.

So they are espousing a biblical model of morality, but what they usually claim, and what is not true, is that they are espousing THE biblical model of morality.

Biblical morality is a lot more complicated than that, and as we saw at the outset, even before the time of Jesus there were prophetic voices that were challenging the belief that outlawing intermarriage between Jews and Gentiles was an essential part of being faithful to the God who created by separating things out of chaos.

You see, the assumption in this ancient traditional separation model of morality was that the Garden of Eden at the close of the seventh day of creation was the pinnacle not only of God's physical creation, but of the progression of human morality. What came after that was all regression, a sinful descent back towards chaos, and so the ultimate goal of faithful God-

fearing morality is to get us back to the garden where everything was clearcut and simple and pure.

But if you read the Bible all the way from those creation stories, on through the prophets and the gospels, and all the way through to the visions that we heard tonight from the final few pages of the book of Revelation, you will discover that the overall trajectory of the Bible isn't calling us back to the garden, back to the purity of the original creation. It is calling us onwards towards the New Jerusalem, which is certainly not just Garden of Eden 2.0.

And it is when we ask this question about separation again that we see just how different the New Jerusalem is. For as we read the account of the vision we heard tonight, we see that it is God who is collapsing many of the old separations.

Firstly, with apologies to all those who were waiting for the earth to be ended and for us to fly off and live forever in a heaven beyond the skies, God collapses the distinction between heaven and earth. The New Jerusalem comes down out of heaven and is established on the earth. Heaven and earth are no longer opposites.

Then we are told that there is "no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb." Remember the old temple with its system of separated places, all the way from the outer courts to the Holy of Holies, which ensured that the different categories of people were not mingled with one another in the temple. It was all about maintaining clear separations. But in the New Jerusalem there is no longer any temple, so all that careful distinguishing is gone.

And remember how God separated light and dark and day and night at creation. Well now we are told that in the New Jerusalem "there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever." You might even have noticed that with its picture of a river surrounded by wild abundant trees in the middle of the street of the city, there is a sense that the separation of city and wilderness or city and garden is collapsing too.

The collapsing of the divide between Jews and gentiles that was so much a part of the story of the Acts of the Apostles, from which we also heard an extract tonight, is also alluded to in this revelation of the New Jerusalem, because we are told that "the nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it." Through most of the Hebrew scriptures, "the nations" and "the kings of the earth" have been the threatening "other" from whom God's faithful people must keep separate. But now they too are welcomed into the new holy city whose "gates will never be shut."

While there is no mention in this vision of sexual or gender binaries, this big picture pattern of biblical morality asks us not to look for a simple pronouncement, but to follow the trajectory. Where has it gone and which direction is it heading? Well, part of where it has gone is that it has gone through the Acts of the Apostles where one of the definitive stories was the conversion and baptism of the non-binary gendered Ethiopian official. And where it is heading is into this vision of the New Jerusalem where we can see all the old binary separations being deliberately and joyously collapsed by God.

So how come this is no longer seen as a threatening collapse back into a dark and scary primeval chaos?

It's because love has triumphed over everything else, and perfect love drives out all fear. It is because in his resurrection, Jesus has collapsed even the binary distinction between being dead and being alive. It is because our deepest desire in perfect love is to spiritually melt into one another, or as the biblical marriage language puts it, for the two to become one flesh.

So all those old binary distinctions which were about rigidly and anxiously forcing everyone and everything into starkly separate categories of good and bad, included and excluded, are now collapsing not towards a chaos of terror and oblivion where everything is destroyed, but towards a new fusion into the resurrection life of the crucified Jesus, into the endless sea of love, into the very heart of God, where all things are made one and shine in glory forever.