

LAUDATO SI'

A Biblical Angle

Nicholas King

WE ARE LIVING in interesting times. Not since *Humanae vitae* (and that was by and large inattentively read) has a papal encyclical attracted so much attention, from all sides, as Pope Francis's latest production. Quite unusually for such a document, *Laudato si'* is, in addition, entirely readable. Both before and after its publication it has been widely commented upon, and it is, significantly, addressed to the entire human race, in every language and all over the world (n. 4). As yet no commentator, so far as I am aware, has approached this document from a biblical point of view, so it seems worth approaching it from this important angle. *Laudato si'* is biblical in at least the following ways.

Citations

Very obviously, and not at all surprisingly, Pope Francis cites generously from the entire Bible, from Genesis to Revelation; but he does not play the game, so common in Jewish and Christian writings, of 'proof-texting', that is to say, proving the point desired by the author through citing a biblical text, wresting it from its original setting without any regard for what it might have meant in the author's thinking. For one thing, the Pope cites every section of the Bible: the Torah (the first five books of what we call the 'Old Testament'; here he gives particular attention to Genesis and Leviticus), the prophets and the 'writings'. And when it comes to the New Testament we have all four Gospels, the Pauline epistles (especially the Letter to the Romans) and, of course, the Book of Revelation. As far as I can see, the Pontiff has not included Acts or the Catholic Epistles in the texts which he cites; but the point stands; and he sets all the texts he does cite in their appropriate context.

The Gospel of Creation

Perhaps for our purposes the most important section of this remarkable text is the second chapter, which, as Francis puts it 'deals with the

convictions of believers', even though he is addressing himself to 'all people of good will' (n.66). The point is—while environmentalists who are not religious believers often charge us with exploitation of nature—that he 'would like from the outset to show how faith convictions can offer Christians, and some other believers as well, ample motivation to care for nature' (n.64).

He starts with an attentive reading of the creation accounts from Genesis, and argues, as several commentators have noted, that 'human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour, and with the earth itself' (n.66). Some Bible-readers may raise a knowledgeable eyebrow at the idea of relationship with the 'earth'; but they should pause before dismissing this notion. These relationships have been ruptured, Pope Francis argues 'by our presuming to take the place of God, and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations' (n.66), and the name of the rupture is 'sin'. Our understanding of the command to 'have dominion' is distorted by our ready assumption that the use of the Hebrew word *rdh*¹ gives us *carte blanche* to use creation as we please in our own interests.

The key point here is that, although we are made in God's image and likeness, 'we are not God' (n.67).² Our task, Francis argues, is the one enjoined on us by Genesis 2: 15, where the Hebrew unmistakably names it as to 'serve [the earth] and to keep it'; this view is strengthened by the constant insistence elsewhere in the biblical texts that 'the earth is the Lord's',³ not ours; to this argument, the Pope adds an original reading of Leviticus 25: 23,⁴ which, as it stands, is really a passage about the territory of particular clans and how the transfer of property is to be handled. He does the same with the well-known passage from Psalm 148: 5–6: 'he commanded and they were created, he set them up for ever and ever; he gave a command and it shall not pass away'.

Relationships in the Bible

Above all, Pope Francis emphasizes the importance in the biblical texts of *relationships*, 'Not only among [human] individuals but also with other living beings "... your brother's donkey ... the mother sitting on her young

¹ Genesis 1: 28, where it is probably best understood as 'rule', despite understandable attempts to read it otherwise. Biblical quotations come from the author's own translation (Stowmarket: Kevin Mayhew, 2013).

² Commenting on Genesis 1: 27.

³ Psalm 24: 1; compare Deuteronomy 10: 14.

⁴ 'For the land is mine, for you are immigrants and sojourners in my presence'.

or her eggs” (Deuteronomy 22:4, 6; n.68). The sabbath rest is not just for humans, but also for ‘your ox and your donkey’ (Exodus 23:12). He concludes ‘clearly, the Bible has no place for a tyrannical anthropocentrism unconcerned for other creatures’ (n.68), for ‘the Lord rejoices in all his works’ (Psalm 104:31, cited in n.69). The argument about divinely enjoined relationships goes deeper with his examination of the stories of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:2–15; see n.70) and Noah (Genesis 6:13), and how everything gets broken when human relationships surrender to violence, or of how sabbath law works, and how concern for all, especially for the poor, is at the heart of getting creation right.⁵ Not only that, but God’s creation and liberation of his people belong closely together;⁶ there is a thoroughly coherent theology and scripture reading underlying the document.

The Centrality of the Creator

Everything comes back to the basic insight that ‘a spirituality which forgets God as all-powerful and Creator is not acceptable’ (n.75),⁷ from which it follows that ‘every creature has its own value and significance ... is ... the



The Creation of the Animals, by Tintoretto, 1551

⁵ See in n. 71 the citations of Exodus 16:23, Leviticus 25:1–4; 19:9–10.

⁶ See n. 73, citing Jeremiah 32:17, 21, and also Second Isaiah, throughout: for example Isaiah 40:28–29.

⁷ This is a central insight of *Laudato si'*.

object of the Father's tenderness, who gives it its place in the world' (n.76). This insight is expressed in this memorable passage that is thoroughly biblical in its attitude, though it does not contain a single quotation from the scriptures:

The ultimate purpose of other creatures is not to be found in us. Rather, all creatures are moving forward with us and through us towards a common point of arrival, which is God, in that transcendent fullness where the risen Christ embraces and illumines all things. Human beings, endowed with intelligence and love, and drawn by the fullness of Christ, are called to lead all creatures back to their Creator. (n.83)⁸

Nor does it stop simply with the Creator, for Pope Francis adds a section on 'The Gaze of Jesus' (nn.96–100), in which he emphasizes the relevance of Jesus' relationship with his Father, with appropriate scriptural references, indicating how Jesus could encourage 'his disciples to perceive a divine message in things' (n.97);⁹ this is given coherence and meaning by the New Testament insight that 'the destiny of all creation is bound up with the mystery of Christ, present from the beginning' (n.98).¹⁰

God's Preference for the Poor

So, right to its very heart, *Laudato si'* is a thoroughly biblical document. There are other themes that mark it as biblical; not the least of these is Pope Francis' insistence on the most vulnerable, the poorest of our world, and the world itself, which has to endure our neglectful treatment of it.¹¹ Of a piece with this emphasis on the poor is the constant challenge to the rich, with its attendant biblical discomfort: 'Is it realistic to hope that those who are obsessed with maximizing profits will stop to reflect on the environmental damage which they will leave behind for future generations?' (n.90) There is more than a hint here of Amos' diatribe against the rich—'You hasten the rule of violence, lying on ivory beds, stretched comfortably on their mattresses ... improvising guitar-music like David, drinking wine by the vat, and putting on the latest perfumes' (Amos 6:3–6)—and compare Pope Francis's perhaps equally powerful language:

⁸ There is a suggestion of Teilhard de Chardin here, who has not always been in such favour in Vatican circles.

⁹ See John 4:35 and Matthew 13:31–32.

¹⁰ See Colossians 1:16–20 and John 1:1–18, of course.

¹¹ They are everywhere in the encyclical but see, for example, n.158.

... we should be particularly indignant at the enormous inequalities in our midst, whereby we continue to tolerate some considering themselves more worthy than others. We fail to see that some are mired in desperate and degrading poverty, with no way out, while others have not the faintest idea of what to do with their possessions, vainly showing off their supposed superiority and leaving behind them so much waste which, if it were the case everywhere, would destroy the planet. In practice, we continue to tolerate that some consider themselves more human than others, as if they had been born with greater rights. (n.90)

Taking the Long-Term View

Another thoroughly biblical aspect to this remarkable encyclical is the invitation that Pope Francis makes to us to take the long-term view, rather than following the tempting alternative of worrying about the votes that we shall receive in the next election or the quick profits that we can make in business. He expresses it in this way:

Our freedom fades when it is handed over to the blind forces of the unconscious, of immediate needs, of self-interest, and of violence. In this sense, we stand naked and exposed in the face of our ever-increasing power, lacking the wherewithal to control it. (n.105)

A little bit later, we read: 'Ecological culture cannot be reduced to a series of urgent and partial responses to the immediate problems of pollution, environmental decay and the depletion of natural resources' (n.111).

The Bible is well aware that there are no easy solutions, and that God does not act with the kind of rapidity that our world impatiently demands. Consider the importunity of the prophet Habakkuk—'How long, O Lord? I cry for help, but you do not listen'—and God's reply: 'Write down the vision clearly on the tablets ... if it delays, wait for it, it will certainly come, it will not be late. The rash person does not make his soul straight.' (Habakkuk 1:2; 2:2–4) Or consider this wisdom psalm, which advises the young to 'be still before the Lord, wait for God ... wait a little and the wicked shall be no more' (Psalm 37:7, 10). Both give a sense that it is possible and proper not to expect God to rush.

You get something of the sort in Mark's Gospel, of course; at the end of his busy first day of ministry, Jesus 'very early, deep in the night, got up and went off to a deserted place, and started to pray there'. This pause with his Father, however, does not at all suit Simon (Peter), who hunts him down and says, 'they're all looking for you' (Mark 1:35–38), wanting



The Sower with the Setting Sun, by Vincent Van Gogh, 1888

something a bit more rapid and ‘up front’, the kind of thing that might help the ‘brand’. And the same message is detectable in Mark’s parable of the seed that grows by itself, while the farmer ‘sleeps and wakes—it grows and gets longer; how, he himself does not know: it bears fruit all on its own’ (Mark 4:26–29).

The Reality of Sin

It is a profoundly biblical instinct to recognise that ‘I am part of the problem’, as, for example, David is forced to do in 2 Samuel 11 and 12, after his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband; so Pope Francis invites each of us to see the truth of our responsibility for the state of the planet, ‘challenging us to acknowledge our sins against creation’ (n.8),¹² and pointing out that,

... many people will deny doing anything wrong because distractions constantly dull our consciousness of just how limited and finite our world really is. As a result, ‘whatever is fragile, like the environment, is defenceless before the interests of a deified market, which becomes the only rule’. (n.56)¹³

And, in the context of a call to all of us to ‘profound interior conversion’,

¹² Citing Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew.

¹³ Quoting his own *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 56.

It must be said that some committed and prayerful Christians, with the excuse of realism and pragmatism, tend to ridicule expressions of concern for the environment. (n.217)

Christians need look no further than Genesis 3:22 and Romans 3:9–20 for the biblical grasp of the reality of sin.

The Victory of Love

However, *Laudato si'* would not be biblical if it did not look ahead to the victory of love, rather than sinking into unshakable pessimism: 'This leads us to direct our gaze to the end of time, when the Son will deliver all things to the Father, so that "God may be everything to every one"' (n.100).¹⁴

Towards the end, the Pope returns to this theme of love, expressing itself in the 'small gestures' that any of us could usefully make:

Love, overflowing with small gestures of mutual care, is also civic and political, and it makes itself felt in every action that seeks to build a better world In this framework, along with the importance of little everyday gestures, social love moves us to devise larger strategies to halt environmental degradation and to encourage a 'culture of care' which permeates all of society. When we feel that God is calling us to intervene with others in these social dynamics, we should realise that this too is part of our spirituality, which is an exercise of charity and as such, matures and sanctifies us. (n.231)

This love, whose status as a biblical quality hardly needs affirming, also expresses itself in terms of the 'common good', a phrase from Catholic social teaching that appears again and again in *Laudato si'*.¹⁵ This accounts for the author's repeated, and eminently biblical, insistence that technology needs to be governed by ethical considerations.¹⁶ If we can get this right, then we shall indeed be enabled to see the victory of love in the wonderful vision that the Bible offers us, from its beginning to its remarkable end.¹⁷

The Unattended Warnings of the Prophets

There is another sense in which *Laudato si'* is biblical. For some years now I have been uncomfortably aware that the warnings of environmentalists cannot be dismissed as the unsupported inventions of 'tree-huggers'; the

¹⁴ Quoting 1 Corinthians 15:28.

¹⁵ For example, nn. 23, 156–159, 178, 184, 189.

¹⁶ See especially nn. 116, 155 and 162.

¹⁷ Genesis 1:31, 2:9; Revelation 22:1–5.

Pope in *Laudato si'* insists (scientifically enough) that we must look at the facts, and that these facts are menacing: 'our common home is falling into serious disrepair' (n.61). He is right to insist that we must take the facts as they are, once they have been appropriately examined; and there is a disconcerting similarity between the unattended warnings of those who think that man-made climate change is getting worse, and the unattended warnings of the prophets.

In both cases the response has been a massive yawn: 'regrettably, many efforts to seek concrete solutions to the environmental crisis have proved ineffective not only because of powerful opposition, but also because of a more general lack of interest' (n. 14). Compare this with the Old Testament prophets. Isaiah is told to 'go and say to this people: "Listen carefully, but you will not understand. Look carefully, but you will know nothing." You are to make the heart of this people sluggish.' (Isaiah 6:9–10) Jeremiah, likewise, finds that the people are not going to listen:

See now what rebellious Israel has done! She has gone up every high mountain and under every green tree she has behaved like a prostitute. And I thought, after she has done all this, she will return to me. But she did not return. (Jeremiah 3:6–7)

Or, as the prophet affirms more strongly, 'Thus says the Lord of Sabaoth, the God of Israel; "I am certainly bringing on this city the evil that I menaced it with, because they stiffened their necks and did not obey my words"' (Jeremiah 19:15).

Ezekiel is given the same impossible task in his vocation narrative: 'Hard of face and obstinate of heart are they to whom I am sending you ... they are a rebellious house ... the house of Israel will refuse to listen to you, since they will not listen to me' (Ezekiel 2:4; 3:7). Matthew sums up the whole history of unattended warnings from the prophets in these brutal terms:

So look—I am sending you prophets and the wise and scribes; you will kill some of them and crucify them and some of them you will flog in your synagogues and some of them you will hunt down from city to city, that all the innocent blood poured out on the earth from the blood of Abel the just to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the shrine and the altar. Amen I am telling you, all this will come upon this generation. (Matthew 23:34–36)

The theme is there: constant inattention to what the prophets (sent by God) have said, with catastrophic results. Now our planet, says the Pope,

is facing a similar disaster—of biblical proportions—because we did not listen.

Meeting the Challenge

This encyclical, *Laudato si'*, is therefore thoroughly biblical in every respect. The Pope has already shown himself an attentive and sensitive reader of the biblical text; and he is no fundamentalist. He quotes the two creation accounts, but insists that they make their point 'in their own symbolic and narrative language' (n.66). Equally, when he brings into play the story of Mary and Joseph, he is attentive to what the scriptures actually say, and he makes his point without sentimentality, and bases himself firmly on the text (nn.241–242).

Not only that, but like the Bible itself, the Pope 'talks human'; he speaks in a language that we can all understand, and insists on our facing 'the facts'. Above all, he is, like the Bible, obsessed with God and insistent that 'we are not God'; that is at the heart of the biblical message. It is no surprise that this encyclical has touched a nerve. The issue of the damage to 'our common home' inflicted by our consumption and consumerism is something that we all knew (some sooner than others) that we had to deal with, but have, for our various reasons, ignored. Catholics can no longer avoid the challenge; and the Bible will confront upon us until we finally deign to listen. We must pray that we shall not be too late; and we can hardly do better, in framing our prayer, than by making our own the two beautiful (and thoroughly biblical) meditations that come at the very end of *Laudato si'*.¹⁸

Nicholas King SJ is a Jesuit priest who after many years in South Africa has been teaching New Testament at Campion Hall, Oxford, and more recently at Boston College in the United States.

¹⁸ See n.246; and read them very slowly.