

St Brandon's 16 Feb 2020

Genesis 1:1- 2:3

In the beginning....

Where did you learn about Creation?

Was it in Sunday School, or through a book of Bible stories with colourful pictures? Was it in school assemblies or RE? Or was it going for walks, learning names of trees and how to recognise their leaves and fruit, or feeding garden birds and seeing robins, blue tits, chaffinches, blackbirds...

Where did you learn about Creation?

When God made human beings, he made us *within* a beautiful creation with all its colours, shapes, variety and wonder- what a wonderful world- as Louis Armstrong famously sang.

So it is a privilege to preach this morning on Genesis chapter 1, but also a responsibility as we are becoming, finally, so aware of the need to care for our fragile earth and her creatures, whom God has entrusted to humanity.

Against this backdrop, what is God saying to us today about his creation, as described in the opening chapter of the Bible?

We're going to look first at the text, so do have it in front of you or grab a large print version from the back!

This account of creation is full of verbs- what God did.

Most of all, he **said**- he spoke and life as we know it came into being. The word **said** appears 10 times.

But he also **saw** – God didn't simply set things in motion and look away- he saw that what he had made and declared it to be good. As one of our Communion prayers puts it, 'Your face is turned towards your world'. The word **saw** appears 7 times.

Not surprisingly the words '**created**', and '**made**' are also used frequently, 8 times in total and the verbs used have a sense of effortless production which focussed on what is made, not the making.

There is also a lot of naming going on as the new order is brought into being- God **called** Night and Day, Sky , Earth and Sea by their names. In the account in the next chapter of Genesis, he entrusts humanity with the calling of things by name... it's a deeply significant act, often associated with the new life of a place, building or person. Four weeks ago our family was thrilled to hear that a new baby girl had been born but we had to wait about half an hour- it seemed far longer- until we knew that her parents had called her Florence, or Flo for short. And now she is truly herself, in a very distinctive way, Flo!

One of the runners up in the wildlife photograph of the year is the photo of a man looking tenderly eye to eye at a black rhino calf: the very name of this creature now conveys how precious and threatened it is.

Returning to our passage, we are told 3 times that God **blessed** what he had made: let's not skip over this but rejoice in it, for it's part of what we are called to do as God's people made in his image. God **blessed** his creation and he asks us in turn to bless it, not curse it, to build it up, not to destroy it.

And finally, God **finished** - a real sense of completeness and perfection here, and God **rested** – two mentions of this as the Sabbath, the seventh day is as much a part of the created order as the days of work have been.

All of these verbs we have noted refer to God, and it's important that the word Genesis 1 uses for God is *Elohim*, which refers to an almighty deity, rather than Jahweh, or Jehovah, which is how God is described in relation to his own people Israel. This God created everything, holds everything and is for everyone. Which is important when we set Genesis in the context of the book's writing, at the time of the Babylonians, with their many angry and controlling gods. . These verses echo a Babylonian creation account but differ from it importantly in the way they portray God, who watches over his creation with favour, blessing and love.

The theologian Walter Brueggemann goes so far as to say that the central purpose of the opening of Genesis is to challenge the theological narrative of the Babylonian Empire. Perhaps today as we read this account, we may hear a call to challenge contemporary theological narratives of secularism and materialism?

The way this story is told is fundamental to our understanding of human life: it gives rise to our seven- day week, to the changing seasons, rhythms and patterns which are so much a part of how everything has been made.

Alongside the day by day progression, we can see in Genesis 1 a movement between the creation of each physical realm and its inhabitants- earth and plants, sky and birds, sea and fish- each time the place is prepared for what will live there, holding within it all that is needed for life, so long as the perfect original balance is held, and resources shared.

We are in the territory of David Attenborough here with an overwhelming sense of the beauty and the goodness of creation. But alongside that, as increasingly in Attenborough's work through the decades, we see the tragedy of how the world is polluted and perishing at the hands of humanity.

Words can't really do it justice, unless they are poetry.

Many people read Genesis 1 as poetry and I turned back this week to Gerard Manley Hopkins and his poem *God's Grandeur*.

In this poem he asks how people can fail to see the glory of God, but then poignantly captures the tenderness of the Creator towards his creation:

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things; 10
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

The Victorians read chapter 1 of Genesis through the lens of scientific discoveries and emerging theories of evolution. There were issues of truth and fiction, science and faith, which are still around today.

Last century, interpretations of this passage focused on issues of sociology and justice, as Liberation theology emerged from the grass roots of churches in South America and South Africa, and feminist theology enabled the place of women to be honoured and enlarged. But what about us, in 2020?

This week the Church of England's General Synod passed a motion to recognise the climate emergency as a *crisis*- and to reduce the carbon emissions of churches and church property to zero by 2030 (not 2045 as originally proposed), a bold move to do so in 10 years only.

This is the church seeking to lead prophetically and we will hear more on this in the months ahead.

I want to close with three thoughts about our response, and responsibility, here in Brancepeth.

1. We have decided this week in our church to read for Lent a book called *'Saying Yes to Life'* which takes the 6 days of creation from Genesis 1 as its chapter headings. It's the Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent book for this year- more about that in the notices later. I have no doubt that it will challenge us and guide us in how we respond to climate change, both corporately and individually. Do read it and come to the discussion groups about it if you can!
2. We have a very beautiful church in a very beautiful place. We have a Paradise window depicting some of the glories of God's creation, a churchyard full of snowdrops and aconites and a sense of God's grandeur which is almost tangible. Let us both care for it and share it with the generosity which God himself has lavished on us, so that visitors and regulars, locals and strangers may be blessed by this small corner of God's creation.
3. This church is dedicated to the Celtic Saint Brandon. Celtic spirituality has seen a resurgence in recent years, begun most powerfully in the UK by George McLeod and the Iona community, but also in the North East by the Northumbria Community and on the Holy Island of Lindisfarne. The Celtic way was and is to hallow creation as good, and human beings as made in God's image, with the potential to become all he created them to be, through the saving and restoring work of Christ. This positive view was in the past driven out by an emphasis on original sin and the depravity of humanity, which also distanced people from the created world and their part within it.

The Irish priest and poet John O' Donoghue writes that the only way we have any hope of breaking out of the alienation and exile, caused by technology and the

modern heresy that everything can be subordinated to the human will, is to
rediscover those Celtic values of imagination, instinct and identification with nature.

I believe there is a great need to reclaim this: not in any way ignoring or denying the
evil we see, experience and are part of, but saying loud and clear that God's world is
good and is held in his love, and we are charged with caring both for the planet and
all who live on it.

So I end with a Celtic prayer by David Adam, Vicar of Lindisfarne for many years.

PAUSE

Lord let us know your presence

Your power in every living thing

In all your creatures may we perceive you

that your great glory may be seen.

Glory in every sunrise and the cloud

Glory in the seaweed and the sand

Glory in the waves' roar and the quiet

Glory in the stars and in the moon

Glory in the meeting of friends

Glory in the encounter with a stranger

Glory in our homes and in our loved ones

Glory in each journey and arrival

Glory in our being and ourselves

Your glory in all your creation

For you Lord fill your universe

Glory, glory O Lord to you. Amen.