

SERMON – 6/8/23**'Creation'**

Genesis 1:1 to 2:4

“In the beginning, when God created the universe, the earth was formless and desolate. The raging ocean that covered everything was engulfed in total darkness, and the Spirit of God was moving over the water.” (Genesis 1:1-2)

On Sunday mornings between now and the beginning of Advent, with a few interruptions for some particular events, our focus will be on the Book of Genesis – we will be looking this month at our universal parents, Adam and Eve, then in September at the global story of Noah (climate change has been a threat before!), then during October and November we'll spend some time with Abraham, the father of God's covenant people, but we begin this morning with the story of creation.

It's worth saying right at the outset that some people (believers and unbelievers alike) find the opening chapters of the Bible a huge stumbling block because they find a conflict between what is written here and what our contemporaries have to say about the origins of all things. I don't want anyone to get stuck here so I really want to emphasise that this opening chapter of the Bible was not written as part of a scientific textbook but as part of the revelation of God's purposes. It's simply not helpful to set science and faith at loggerheads with each other, to say that if science is true faith must be false or that if God's Word is truth scientists must be peddling lies. It's like comparing oranges with pears. An astronomer or a palaeontologist or a biologist would all write different things about the origins of things, as they describe what they each observe in the universe and as they try to explain *how* things came to be. They would start in different places and focus on different things. By contrast what we are reading here is the beginning of God's explanation to us of *why* the world came to be, and what we are dealing with here is more akin to poetry than explanation, something that invites us to wonder and marvel rather than compute.

If you read this chapter aloud as we have done this morning you cannot fail to notice the repeated phrases: 'Then God

commanded... and it was done'; 'And God was pleased with what He saw'; God separated and God named - out of chaos comes order, out of darkness light, dry land from the waters; and the rhythms of creation are established, sun, moon and stars in their orbits, tides and seasons, day and night; and each verse of the poem concludes with its refrain: Evening passed and morning came - that was the first day, the second day, the sixth day - and when God finished what He had been doing He blessed the seventh day and set it apart, something that we ourselves are doing right now.

When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth, we are told, was formless and empty - in the sonorous-sounding Hebrew poetry: *tohu vavohu* - there was darkness and there was water, apt symbols of chaos if you think about how much harder it is for people to do anything in the dark or under the water.

Although the 'Big Bang' theory may be accepted by most people these days as *the* explanation for the origin of all things it is perhaps an unfortunate shorthand, given that explosions generally lead to destruction rather than creation. Someone once said that the possibility of the universe being the result of a big bang is as likely as the result of an explosion in an ink factory being the Shorter Oxford Dictionary! In the Bible's description of creation the Spirit of God is introduced as the One who brings order to the formless desolation. Chaos is brought into order.

First God pushes back the darkness and creates light, then He pushes back the waters beneath - what we call sea - and the waters above - what we call space - and separates them by what different translations call an expanse, a dome, a vault, a firmament and what is literally in the Hebrew poetic imagery a beaten out surface like metal. And with the clearing of the way accomplished, the detailed work of creation can begin in earnest.

So what does this opening chapter tell us about God and about divine ways of working, and what are we able to learn about the banishing of chaos and darkness from our lives and from our surroundings?

First of all, and most importantly, it proclaims to us that God is in charge and that the Lord is over and above all that we experience

in the physical. 'In the beginning, *God* created the heavens and the earth.' Familiarity with these words dulls our reaction, but actually, how amazing is that! Before ever anything existed, God is, and out of nothing He brings everything – in the poetry of the beginning of John's Gospel which consciously echoes this opening chapter of Genesis, "In the beginning was the Word (the One who was made flesh in Jesus)... Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made." (John 1:3).

You get a hint of the way in which God is over and above and beyond all that we know in the verses that we read this morning. 'Let there be light,' says God, 'and there is light. And there is evening and there is morning, the first day.' Yet it's not until the poem's *fourth* day that the sun is mentioned. By the decree of God, light itself exists in the world before any of the physical sources of light that we are so obviously dependent on come into being.

We are similarly reminded of the supremacy of God over the physical in the closing chapter of the Bible, where we read, 'There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light.' (Rev.22:5) This is not something that science is remotely interested in of course – why should it be, for it cannot be observed or measured empirically – but here is something that those who seek to know God may rejoice in. Just as light *preceded* the creation of the sun and will *outlast* it when the sun shines no more, so God Himself precedes the light and will replace it, in the words of another poet, 'when moons shall wax and wane no more.' (Isaac Watts) We need to lift our eyes above the everyday and the physical and recognise that God is actively at work behind all that we see and rejoice in. Behind what we see with our eyes and can even detect scientifically, God is at work. Trees that are apparently dead and bare in winter burst into leaf and into blossom in the spring, and after a summer of sun and rain they bear their fruit. Day after day, year after year, the miracle of new life is re-enacted as eggs are hatched, animals bring forth their young, and children are born. All of it is marvellous, and it gladdens our hearts, but just as we wouldn't think of thanking a cake for being so tasty but rather the one who

made it, so we must lift our eyes above the fruits of the earth and the wonder of a newborn, beyond even the light of the sun, and give thanks to the Maker of all things. In the beginning God created, and His work of creation is what goes on to this day.

Secondly, we are shown in these verses that God's *Word* is powerful. 'Then God commanded, "Let there be light," and there was light...' 'Then God commanded, "Let the earth produce all kinds of animal life, domestic and wild, large and small," and it was done.' Again familiarity with the text may have taken the edge off our wonder, but even in a cinematic and computer age where special effects are commonplace, the vastness of the universe and the marvels of the animal kingdom still leave us speechless – God spoke and it was so – and when you begin to take seriously the creative power of the voice of God it unleashes all kinds of possibilities for us who have been entrusted with the written Word of God in which that same power is latent. The prophet Isaiah writes of God's Word, 'It will not return to me empty but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.' When the Scriptures are read, when the Bible is taught, when the Gospel is proclaimed, when any one of us takes on our lips the Word of God, His creative, ordering, transforming power is unleashed in just the same way as it was in the beginning. 'God whose almighty Word chaos and darkness heard and took their flight; hear us, we humbly pray, and where the Gospel day sheds not its powerful ray let there be light.' Here, it is in our hands, it is on our lips, the same Word of God. God commanded, and it was done. God speaks and it is so. Do we have the faith to take up the creative, redeeming Word and let it do its work in us, among us, through us today?

But thirdly, and perhaps this is where we have the most difficulty in comprehending the purposes of God, these verses remind us that although God's Word has the power to banish chaos and darkness, the Lord doesn't abolish them altogether. Darkness remains, but it is held in check by the perfect timing of day and night and the passing of the seasons as the earth turns on its axis and revolves around the sun; the phases of the moon and the rising and falling of the tides which they govern are entirely predictable. And if you think about it, darkness has its place in

the order of creation. It is in the darkness of the earth that a seed germinates and begins to grow. It is in the darkness of the womb that a child is conceived and begins to develop. It's during the night that a child's growth spurts occur. And let it be said, there is a fruitful place for darkness in the course of life . Even though the times that are dark and chaotic are often painful and we would rather they did not happen, often with hindsight we can see that they were the times through which we actually learned and grew the most.

Our lives are often 'tohu vavohu' – formless and desolate. There is chaos and darkness in us and in the world at large. But it is there by God's permission, and it operates within the order that God has established. *God* is in charge. The blessed Holy Spirit hovers still over the surface of the deep, yearning to bring order where there is chaos, light where there is darkness, hope where there is despair, fulness where there is emptiness, life where there is none. So let us allow God's Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, to empower us and through us to be creative, to enable the transforming work of God's Kingdom with power, and may we be co-workers with the Creator not only in the sowing and reaping of harvest, not only in multiplying the human race, but in bringing into the world and into the lives of people the order and light of the Kingdom of God.

"In the beginning, when God created the universe, the earth was formless and desolate. The raging ocean that covered everything was engulfed in total darkness, and the Spirit of God was moving over the water." God is Creator, Word, Spirit. God is still in charge and God is still at work. May God still be pleased with what He sees. And there is evening and there is morning a new day.