

SERMON – 13/8/23**'Humanity'**

Genesis 2:5-25

"Then the LORD God took some soil from the ground and formed a man out of it; he breathed life-giving breath into his nostrils and the man began to live. " (Genesis 2:7)

"And what, pray, are you?" said the Lady [in the sledge], looking hard at Edmund.

"I'm – I'm – my name's Edmund," said Edmund rather awkwardly. He did not like the way she looked at him. The Lady frowned. "Is that how you address a Queen?" she asked, looking sterner than ever.

"I beg your pardon, your Majesty, I didn't know," said Edmund. "Not know the Queen of Narnia?" cried she. "Ha! You shall know us better hereafter. But I repeat – what are you?"

"Please, your Majesty," said Edmund, "I don't know what you mean. I'm at school – at least I was – it's the holidays now."

"But what are you?" said the Queen again. "Are you a great overgrown dwarf that has cut off his beard?"

"No, your Majesty," said Edmund. "I never had a beard. I'm a boy."

"A boy!" said she. "Do you mean you are a Son of Adam?" Edmund stood still, saying nothing. He was too confused by this time to understand what the question meant.

"I see you are an idiot, whatever else you may be," said the Queen. "Answer me, once and for all, or I shall lose my patience. Are you human?"

"Yes, your Majesty," said Edmund.'

So runs one of our family's favourite scenes from C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*. Perhaps you are familiar with it. I read it, though, not just for entertainment but to introduce this morning the same question as the White Witch asked young Edmund – 'What are you?' It is a question that has occupied everyone from little children to great philosophers for as long as people have been asking questions. What exactly *are* human beings, and what are we here for?

Last Sunday, as we read the magnificent first chapter of Genesis, we encountered the Trinitarian God who is revealed in Scripture as Creator, Word and Spirit and we pondered three important truths – that God is in charge of the universe, that there is unstoppable power in God's Word and that darkness has a place in God's plans just as much as light does.

Well, chapter 2 sounds very different from chapter 1 and that's a clue to us that we should not read it so much as something that comes *after* but as something that sits *alongside*, a different perspective on creation within the overall revelation of God. One writer describes it like this – that in ch.1, human beings are described as being the *climax* of creation whereas in ch.2 we are the *pivot* on which creation balances.

Let me come at this another way. When a human tragedy is reported in the news, like the deaths resulting from the wildfires in Hawaii this week or the three climbers who were killed in Glencoe or a capsized migrant boat in the English Channel, we find ourselves initially shocked by the growing statistics – 30, 50, 80, 90 dead in Maui, awful. But then more details start to emerge and it's no longer the numbers that shock us but the fact that these are people with names, with relatives, with life stories. An impersonal number becomes somebody's daughter or husband or friend. Well, in the same way, just as we read last week the poetry that celebrates the creation of the cosmos and we join in marvelling at it too, we come this week to a much more personal perspective and it takes us to a deeper level of wonder. Whereas in ch.1 God created 'human beings' in ch.2 the Lord God (using the *personal* name YHWH which will only later be revealed to Moses at the Burning Bush) forms 'a man' and forms 'a woman' breathing life into the dust as it were by a kiss of the divine love that will find its fullest expression in Jesus. Going forward, the man (the 'adam') will be called Adam (taken from the 'adamah', the dust) and the woman will be called Eve (meaning living or life-giving) completing the shift from the cosmic to the personal, from eternity to the moment, from the universe to the likes of you and me. From the unfathomable vastness of the coming into existence of all things that we were thinking about last week, we are invited this week to wonder at the intimacy of the Creator's

work and to consider that God is concerned about each one of us, calling *us* by name and inviting *us* to call upon the Lord by name too.

So what in particular are we to learn from today's chapter, I wonder? Just as we could have spent several weeks looking at chapter 1 so we could do the same with chapter 2 but for now I want to suggest simply that humanity has been given three particular responsibilities to attend to by God – a responsibility to the created order, the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, the trees, the flowers and the crops of the earth; a responsibility towards one another as human beings, all who are created in the image of God; and a responsibility towards the Lord God.

First, then, our responsibility towards the created order. In chapter 1 God simply gives power to the human beings over 'the fish, the birds and the animals' but here in chapter 2 we come upon words which are not often highlighted but which have something potent to say about our role in creation. We read, "God took some soil from the ground and formed all the animals and all the birds. Then he brought them to the man to see what he would name them... So the man named all the birds and all the animals." Perhaps it doesn't seem all that significant that Adam was given the responsibility of naming the animals and birds but it is about a lot more than calling a cow a cow (or calling the cow Ermintrude) – it's about asserting human authority over the world. We have been given dominion over creation but the trouble is we have turned that God-given dominion into domination. We have been called by God to 'rule' in the created order but we have ruled as tyrants rather than as the servants Jesus showed us how to be. In too many cases we no longer regard animals and plants as God's gifts entrusted to our care as stewards but as commodities to be used for our own selfish gain no matter the wider implications, and how our world suffers and groans as a result. This Genesis ch.2 account calls us all to play our rightful part in the ruling of creation in a way that honours God rather than for selfish human ends. That gives us all something to think about when it comes to the kind of food we demand and the price we are prepared to pay for it.

Secondly, we have a responsibility towards one another. In v.18 God has said, "It is not good for the man to live alone. I will make a suitable companion to help him." In the famous words of John Donne, 'No-one is an island.' We all need company, we all need help. Here in Genesis 2, none of the birds or animals proves to be that suitable companion and so we find described here the biological pattern of male and female, of compatibility and distinctiveness that allows not only for fruitful reproduction but for companionship. Contemporary science describes in terms of XY and XX chromosomes but here Adam sings a song of joy: "At last, here is one of my own kind – bone from my bone, and flesh from my flesh. 'Woman' is her name because she was taken out of man" (v.23) and the foundation is laid for the biblical ordinance of marriage: "A man shall leave his father and mother and be united with his wife, and they will be one." (v.24) Although much of what we struggle with as human beings in our relationships with one another is the fact that we have different ways of thinking, different ways of conceptualising, different ways of listening, of speaking, of acting, it is that fitting together of the jigsaw pieces of our sameness and our distinctiveness that actually allows us to find completeness and even oneness. 'Submit to one another out of reverence to Christ,' Paul teaches husbands and wives before going on to describe their distinctive contributions to the marriage in terms of yielding and sacrificial giving in fulfilling the role of a 'suitable companion' or in the King James translation, a 'help meet'. In these days of struggle over human gender roles we do well to reflect on what God intends for our fulfilment.

Which leads us to the third responsibility outlined here, our responsibility towards God. The scene is set here for the catastrophe that we will see unfold in chapter 3. God commands the man, "You may eat the fruit of any tree in the garden, except the tree that gives knowledge of what is good and what is bad. You must not eat the fruit of that tree; if you do, you will die the same day." (v.16) How many people are immediately dismissive of the right God has to set the agenda for humanity. We scream, 'How dare the Lord set limits on my behaviour.' Perhaps we think we know better than the King of the Universe and we are not slow to question the ordinances the Lord has put in place because

they don't tie in with *our* perceptions of what seems right or wrong to us. But actually , how dare we? Humanity's crowning glory is our relationship with God our Creator and we cannot underestimate the significance of that. Augustine famously wrote that our souls are restless until they find their rest in God but instead of seeking that rest in the harbour offered to us, we too often set off on the restless seas we have made for ourselves and wonder why things end in tears. We do well to ponder these opening chapters of Genesis long and hard as we seek to set the course for our lives.

Let's ask the question: What are human beings and what are we here for? And let's listen for God's prompting. From the soil of the earth we have been formed, along with all the animals, and to the dust we shall all return. But with the kiss of the breath of life we have been blessed by God in person, created in God's image and likeness, male and female, called to servanthood as high stewards of all that God has made, blessed by the various kinds of relationship we have with other human beings – family, friends, spouse – and invited into fellowship with the Lord of eternity. How much we have to rejoice in.

The Greek word that describes the Garden in Genesis 2 is *paradeisos* – that for which God created us. In chapter 3 we will read about paradise lost, but throughout the Scriptures we discover the purpose of God to enable all of us to discover and enjoy the paradise that we were intended to have from the beginning. Let us discover and fulfil God's vision for humanity.