

SERMON FOR 2nd SUNDAY BEFORE LENT 2017 | 19.02.2017

Walking along the high street of the Yorkshire village where my younger daughter has just moved to, many of the solid stone houses are fronted with equally solid low stone walls topped with square box hedges, with a small gate set in the middle leading to each front door. Suddenly she calls out: *but look at this one!* And, sure enough, breaking ranks with the others, this particular house owner had done some rather smart topiary. From the other side of the road you could easily make out the outline of a steam engine - cylinder, drivers cab, chimney and six big wheels. It was really clever and delightfully creative...

In the Church's annual programme we have three Sundays between Candlemass and Ash Wednesday which are 'themed'. Last week we looked at 'Racial Justice', next week is the pre-Lenten 'Mardi Gras'; this week we focus on Creation with the long reading of Genesis chapter 1, coupled with the equally poetic Gospel about the lilies of the field.

Of all the problems that a study of the Bible can throw up, this long account of how God created the world in six days and then rested on the seventh, has turned more people off religion than almost any other. Ever since the emergence of empirical science and the 19th century Darwinian theories of evolution, the Church has had to play ducks and drakes with this story, trying to defend what appears to be a detailed description of how the world came to be.

And while we have all heard rational explanations of how the story is patently not about what happened at the beginning of time but about why, the alternative justifications for keeping it at the very beginning of our Bibles never seems all that convincing. We have to use too many words and by the time we come to the end, everyone has lost interest.

But that doesn't mean that we can't try once more to disentangle ourselves from the literalist hook and discover for ourselves at least, something rather more satisfactory. So let's look first at the building blocks of this long reading: because what we are looking for here is a plan, a plan or a logic behind that great list of what was created and when.

And surely the place to start is in the second line: *the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep*. The Hebrew word for this vacuum is *bohu* – *unreal*. There was simply nothing there; nothing at all. No molecules to randomly come together as some would have us believe, not even a hole because holes are gaps inside something else. This line wants to tell us that the only reason there is a world now is because God made it *ex nihilo*, from nothing. Zilch. The claim can't be watered down or fudged. Sorry Richard Dawkins: we believe that God made everything out of absolutely nothing.

Then the first activity in creation – moving on from that state of one big nothingness - is to bring some definition into the world. And the obvious way to do that is to create time: the clock starts with the creation of day and night. From now on God's purpose of creating, his delight in seeing things happen, has a relentlessness about it, a time frame – as we would say, a beginning and an end, alpha and omega. That was the answer that St Thomas Aquinas gave when someone asked him: *What did God do before he started creating: the answer. Nothing. He didn't have time...*' From the very start, then, you and I are caught up in a story, in a time-line, which began when God set the clock ticking.

Now we can count the days and we can see the ascending hierarchy in importance of all that God wants to have in his Creation. By the end of day three we have not only day and night sorted, we also have other divisions: the distinction between the heavens and the earth and then the earth from the more sinister 'brooding waters'. Light is declared to be good, darkness less so; earth is good but the seas are more of a worry as they have the power to overwhelm and kill those who came near them. The Jews were always bad sailors.

And already we can hear the voices of the writers of this story rehearsing the things which they found congenial and those things which they found worrying. Darkness and the seas may be part of creation and God may have commanded that they appear and brought them into being, but while they have a place in creation they are not without threat too. That is part of the reality of God's creation: both the good and its opposite have to be handled with care. Day four takes us back to day one: now Light and Dark have solar forces, the sun and the moon; in day five the sky is filled with creatures – birds of the air paralleling the vegetation that came on the second day.

In day six the great events of day three are developed and the earth is filled, first with animals and then with human beings – and we hear repeated over every element that is listed these words of blessing: *and indeed it was very good.*

So to recap, the account gives us two sets of three days. In the first God sets up the world; and in the second he fills it with living things that would grow and mature.

From absolutely nothing, empty and purposeless God loved his Creation into being. And following the usual Hebrew way of making numbers significant, *God rested on the seventh day*, the number of perfection.

Interestingly, what distinguishes the Hebrew story of Creation from any of the similar myths written by other ancient Near Eastern civilisations, is that there are no battles as part of the account. Yes darkness and deep waters are to be watched, but there are no battles between gods and demi gods, no deaths, no sacrifices, no conflicts between rival Baals. In this account all that God does is effortless and flows simply from him saying ‘Let it be’. At every point it is as God intends – serene and beautiful – made for mankind in the same way as mankind is made for God.

This, then, is the real message of the Creation story. Not, how did everything get made and how long did it take but the truth that all the corruption and sinfulness in the world will never be the last word. Unable to be scientific, the authors of this story set another agenda altogether: despite appearances, all the horrible things that have happened (and will happen) after Creation are not the last word. Ultimately, God’s will cannot be undone.

And the contrast is with our feeble attempt to be masters of the world. From the time of Adam and Eve, every human and every human society has been involved in trying to make the world a better place. Adam and Eve thought they could improve their lot by taking a short cut - eating that apple - and we have been living with the fall-out of that decision ever since.

But the reality is that – unlike the story of the Fall in Genesis - the best we can ever achieve is ‘to hope for the best’. As St Paul says in Romans 8: *creation is subject to futility and is now groaning, as in labour pains, while we wait for the redeeming work of God to finally take hold of us.*

In symbolic terms, we need to replace Adam and Eve’s ‘apple of self-improvement’ with the Jesus’ ‘Lily of grace’. *Consider the lilies of the field: said Jesus: they neither spin nor reap yet not even King Solomon in all his glory was dressed as one of these.* God’s reaction to our lack of ability to get it right is not to treat us as we deserve but to give us more and more - lavishing on us privileges which are greater than anything we could achieve on our own.

I started this sermon with a little story about a hedge in the Yorkshire village of Menston and the pleasure that someone’s creativity had given to us as we walked by. I tell that story to remind us of the power we often have to bring an unexpected bit of humour to those around us. The loco hedge was a lovely gesture - but it was made in the sure knowledge that the person who did it would never know who they pleased – and that in time the shape of that engine would gradually disappear.

For us as Christians, the best we can do in each and every day, is to try to find out what God is up to, and to make that as obvious as we can to those around us - wherever we are. In a word, in a gentle job well done, in a hedge even we go on doing God’s work of creating.

But we accept our limitations too, carrying on with persistence, with patience – and most of all, with love and genuine kindness.