

SERMON FOR 2 b LENT | 12.02.2023

Genesis 1: 1 = 2: 3; Romans 6: 18-25; St Matthew 6: 25-end

Was it really 20 years ago that the banners for the film ‘Bruce Almighty’ were plastered all over our red London buses? I suppose it really only caught my attention because of the word ‘almighty’ which we would only otherwise use in Church but you may remember watching Jim Carrey as the frustrated news reporter Bruce Nolan being given the power of God for a week when his job and his love life wasn’t working out as he hoped. e. For the record, in the clip I watched last night God, played by Milton Freeman, was everybody’s idea of God: patient, wise, witty and kind, despite Bruce’s jibe that he wasn’t really very good at being God at all!

Not surprisingly, ‘being almighty’ while allowing people freewill proved to be a good deal more tricky than Bruce had anticipated – and coping with the billions of prayer requests became so overwhelming that he had to set up the equivalent of an ‘out of the office’ answering machine to get them off his back! By the end of the week Bruce had had enough especially when God tells him that although he is ‘almighty’ he cannot solve everything in the world and that Bruce will have to work out many of the answers for himself...

In the very long reading we have today from the early chapters of Genesis, we don’t get so much a picture of a genial God in a crisp white suit as a kind of ‘First Cause’ who - having set up the world from a heap of nothingness - gives it shape and form, stars and seas and plants and living animals, before standing back and declaring them all to be good. So he says to the first humans: *Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.* God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day – and then he promptly took the next day off.

And then we hear in our heads the voice of Bruce piping up: *but you aren’t very good at being ‘Almighty’ are you? Look at the mess we are in!*

Yesterday the Vicar of St Andrew’s Cippenham in Slough visited St James’ in the company of his teenage son who was doing some research for a school project. But they couldn’t resist coming to this corner of Islington as part of their day out as their surname was Popham! As part of the conversation Neil, a physicist, said that he was going to use this Creation Sunday to talk about Global warming and the effects of man-made pollution - and the worries that these inevitably produced.

Up and down the country many parishes will be doing the same, wrestling with the challenge in today's Gospel about not worrying.

But in the face of the overwhelming tragedy in Turkey and Syria this week, where the numbers of the dead and injured just shoots up every time we listen to the news, I wonder whether we can just let the response in Bruce Almighty pass by without a good deal more thought. To his enquiry, the Milton Freeman type God says that although he is 'almighty', he cannot solve everything in the world and that Bruce will have to work out many of the answers for himself...

Let's wait a moment and let that really sink in: because in the face of these great tests of our faith, are we saying that such tragedies are just part and parcel of a world of 'individual liberty'? The murderous attacks on innocent civilians all over Ukraine, the collapse of scores of concrete apartment blocks which crush whole communities in minutes; are these also to be considered part of the natural order and somehow inevitable?

In reading Genesis - and in particular the later story of Adam and Eve eating the apple - can we really argue that our metaphorical 'sinful disobedience' of God in the Garden of Eden is in any way responsible for the natural disasters such as we have seen this week? How can anyone imagine that, in the rubble - the result of seismic movements on the Anatolian fault line - that this was the responsibility of we sinning humans?

Or closer to home, in the debates in General Synod of the Church of England about human sexuality, where there are such hugely different scientific understandings about gender and the apparent emergence of so many who feel themselves to be non binary or same sex attracted, how are we to look at these apparently intractable discussions and say blithely, *and behold it was very good*? Isn't the Church of God just as divided as so many civil societies around the world, incapable of resolving these deeply challenging issues in ways that reflect a loving Creator God?

And may we not also have to consider we live in a divided state where the world for some (and that may include us) is relatively easy to live in while the world for all too many others is absolutely unbearable.

How difficult these questions soon become.

And it into that series of conundrums that Jesus comes to meet us in the words of the Gospel. *Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?*

Now let's be clear: Jesus is not saying *don't worry folks, everything you want will fall into your lap*. What he is admitting is that the world is currently unfair and that some are getting what they need and some aren't. But he is saying, *don't spend your time worrying about the causes of this unfairness – which is, frankly, beyond all of our imaginations and well outside our pay grade. In this life we will never fully understand the geophysical issues behind earthquakes or the intricate science that describes the width of human sexuality. Some of these things simply have to be put onto the back burner until we understand the issues better. In the light of the film I have been referring to, we should stop trying to play the almighty.*

What we are required to do, on the other hand, is to allow ourselves to be open to the needs of others, wherever they are and in whatever form they come. I can't imagine what it is like to lose a child in the rubble in Idlip anymore than I, personally, can understand what it feels like to be transgender. I don't have that ability.

Which is why Jesus says, *Don't worry about these things. They will be resolved at some time in the future - and probably by somebody else. Right now, all I ask of you is to be loving and caring in the circumstances in which you find yourself. Don't go chasing after arguments and most especially, refuse to be judgmental. There is yet more to be discovered.*

Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

And - as for Bruce - that gives us a tremendous sense of freedom and release. In God's creation there is so much diversity to enjoy: as St Peter said in his first epistle, 'let go and let God'. Let him lead us, slowly, to his final destination.

Or to put it another way, stop worrying: let him be Almighty – because only he understands how to do it properly!