

SERMON - 19 FEBRUARY 2017

MARTYN BERRY

ST MARY'S CHURCH RIVERHEAD

Genesis 1.1-2.3, Romans 8.18-25, Matthew 6.25-34

Heavenly Father - open our hearts to your Word, and open our eyes and minds to the wonders of your creation. Amen

Today's theme is creation. The word Genesis comes from the Greek 'geneseos', which can mean 'birth', 'genealogy' or even 'the history of origin'. The Greek word may be related to the ancient Hebrew 'bereshith' which translates as 'in the beginning' and is the very first word of the Hebrew bible. And Genesis is a book choc full of beginnings - of the heavens and the earth, of light and darkness, of sea and sky, of land and plants, of sun and moon and stars, of animals on land, in the sea, and in the air, of human beings made in God's own image - the climax of his creative activity; and then, later, of sin and redemption, of blessing and cursing, of society and civilisation, of marriage and family, of art and craft and industry - and a whole lot more.

I'm not going to take a detailed look today at the question of who wrote Genesis and when. The traditional view is that Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible - The Pentateuch. The majority of biblical scholars now appear to think that Genesis is a compilation of, for example, Hebrew traditions and Mesopotamian creation stories, and more, all put together over many years and edited at the time of the Exile in Babylon. And the editing wasn't necessarily very efficient. It is thought that the second creation account, in Ch2 of Genesis, predates the one we heard today from Ch1 and by a long while. If you read both accounts, you'll see that the one in the first chapter of Genesis comes over, even in the English translation, as rather formal - almost liturgical, with God distant and very grand. The second account, in Ch2, shows God in much more intimate, human terms. I rest my case. I think it impossible that Moses wrote both.

Another controversy which I don't want to consider in detail this morning is the - to my mind - false dichotomy between religion and science: I've spoken about this, and at some length, several times over the years, from this pulpit. To put it briefly - it is a grave error to try to make the concepts of creation and evolution oppose each other. 'Creation' is a theological term which acknowledges the dependence of all that exists upon the authorship of God, the Creator. 'Evolution' refers to our current understanding of how God has brought into being the immense diversity of biological objects, including ourselves and, perhaps especially, probably the most complex object in the universe, the human brain. Both accounts are needed in order to do justice to what we can observe in the world around us. And now the genetic mechanism of evolution is being increasingly worked out.

And I can't resist reminding us all about our origin in the stars. The evidence now available demonstrates to a very high level of probability that every atom of which our bodies are built, except hydrogen atoms, was grown in the unimaginably hot furnace of the interior of a star, of many, many stars, and at the end of a star's life scattered into space when the star exploded into a supernova.

We are all of us, quite literally, stardust. I find it wonderful, and something to praise God for, that we are beginning to feel that we may be on the threshold of understanding something of how the whole show is run.

And wouldn't it be wonderful too if all those who profess to run our world, and particularly those many people who demonstrate hatred and violence against their fellow human beings - all of them created in God's image - wouldn't it be wonderful if they all became conscious of their common ancestry?

So now let us look a bit more closely at our passage from Genesis.

Ch1 of Genesis is the first and youngest of the two creation accounts, as envisaged by the author of this part of the book. The style is poetic and repetitive: 'And God said....And it was so....And God saw that it was good....'. The account starts with the famous declaration that God created the heavens and the earth. (I was drafting this sermon with BBC Radio 3 in the background and was it pure coincidence that it was Haydn's Creation which helped me along that evening?)

During the six days - or eras - of creation, everything that is now a familiar part of the world is surveyed and shown to owe its existence to God's sovereign power of creation.

We mustn't take the word 'day' in this passage literally. There's now plenty of evidence that the process has taken about 14 billion years so far, which, in human terms, is a very great number - but if God exists beyond time and space, perhaps this ought not to worry us unduly.

The sequence of creation is worth study and reflection. For example, day one produces day and night, but the lights in the sky to separate day and night don't appear until day four. The account of the creation of sun, moon and stars is of particular interest. For many people in ancient times, and still for some today, the sun and moon represented divine powers, and were worshipped as such. But Genesis demonstrates that they are parts of God's creation and totally subject to his power. They certainly should not be worshipped, nor should they be feared. Indeed, no part of God's creation is to be worshipped. The whole of creation is the work of God, the Creator, and he only is to be worshipped.

But, of course, we can look at that creation and marvel. I can remember, towards the end of World War II, with my elder brother, looking up at the starry sky and, in particular, the Milky Way - there was no light pollution in those days, thanks to Chief ARP Warden Hodges and his comrades - and I remember feeling a deep emotion, which much later I recognised as awe.

The goodness of God's creation is firmly stated in vv4, 10, 12, 18, 21 and 25 of Genesis Ch1. And in v31 the work of creation is finished and God states that it is 'very good'. This theme of the goodness of creation is important. The origins of sin are not due to God, but to the rebellion of a part of his creation against him.

The creation of humankind is the high point of, and the last in the sequence, in the Ch1 account. The only creature to be made in the image of its Creator is man. Or, at least, MAN is what the Hebrew word 'adam' is usually translated as. It is better translated here as 'humanity'.

So humanity 'ADAM' is created in the likeness of God (see vv 25 & 26). What does that mean?

First, being created in the image of God implies a likeness between God and ADAM, and so all humankind, and, further, that there is potentially a personal relationship with God. And, looking forward, we know that this relationship was sealed for ever when God clothed himself in human flesh and dwelt among us.

Second, being made in the image of God suggests that humanity has ownership and authority over the created world. The language used in Ch1 includes the words 'subdue' and 'have dominion over' in referring to the relationship between humanity and the rest of creation. This has been misinterpreted, particularly by the so-called 'religious right' in America, as giving the green light for intensive exploitation of all Earth's resources - minerals, oceans, forests, animals and so on - exploitation without thought for the long-term future. But, surely, being made in God's image implies working on behalf of a loving, caring God as stewards, and indeed as maintenance engineers, for this his planet.

This account of the creation ends by declaring that God 'rested' on the seventh day. This doesn't mean that he was tired, but rather that the work of creation was complete. The Sabbath-rest is an important reminder of God's work, and gives an opportunity - as, indeed, we are taking advantage of right now - an opportunity for worship and for reflection on God's work of creation and redemption.

I'll finish by exhorting you to read Genesis Ch1 again - and then to follow that up by reading Psalm 19, and then Joseph Addison's wonderful hymn - the one which begins 'The spacious firmament on high/with all the blue ethereal sky/and spangled heavens, a shining frame,/their great original proclaim'. [Hymn No. 103 in our hymn books.] The choir may be singing it as we receive communion.

A prayer. Heavenly Father, give us the joy of a full realisation of our being made in your image, and give us also the ability to live at all times as you want us to live - as carers for our neighbours, whoever and wherever they may be - all of them made in your image; and carers too for our tiny planet in the glorious immensity of your universe. Amen.