

THE BEGINNING

Genesis 1

The Bible is a unique Book. It's the world's all-time best seller and it's been translated into more languages than any other book, and most importantly it's God's revelation to us through the prophets and apostles – it is God's true word to us.

Yet that doesn't mean that the whole Bible is to be read like a scientific text book or even a history book. The Bible contains many different kinds of literature – for example poetry, song, prophecy and historical narrative to name but a few. Each needs to be read appropriately. We shouldn't expect to read every word of a poem literally like an historical narrative. A poem does contain truth, but it's a picture rather than a literal truth. Also the Biblical authors were much more interested in presenting spiritual and theological truth than in giving detailed, chronologically ordered accounts – we see this throughout the Bible in both the OT and the NT. For example, the creation account in Genesis 2 is in quite a different order from that in Genesis chapter 1.

Now our reading today was originally written in the form of Hebrew prose poetry, so I believe we need to interpret it as such and not as if it were an historical narrative. Don't struggle with this as though it were a literal account, the early Church fathers all interpreted Genesis chapters 1 and 2 in a figurative way and indeed it's only in the last 100 years or so that some Christians have been trying to interpret them literally. The author of Genesis, Moses, also cast chapter 1 in such a way as to refute certain aspects of other primitive beliefs about the universe. Our text IS truth BUT a poetic truth rather than a literal truth. It's also spiritual and theological truth. It tells us that God created our whole universe and something about how and why he did it. If we attempt to interpret Genesis chapter 1 as if it were a scientific text book, then I believe that we will be diverted and we'll miss the important truths it does contain.

So bearing all these things in mind let's search out those important truths from our text this morning. As we look at it together, please open your Bibles at the beginning of the first book – Genesis – so that you can follow it along with me.

This is the first chapter of the first book of the Bible so appropriately it deals with beginnings. Interestingly, we get the word “Genesis” from the Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew word “Bereshith” which means a ‘beginning’ or ‘origin’.

Verse 1 of our text is a short verse, but it has a great deal to tell us. The first thing we learn is that God created the whole universe and everything in it – look at this verse 1:

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” (Genesis 1:1 NIV)

Apart from any scriptural affirmation, the necessity for a creator and designer God is found in so many aspects of our universe, particularly in the nature of that universe and the existence of life within it.

This verse 1 tells us that the universe had a beginning. That's very much in accordance with the scientific view that the Big Bang which originated the universe marked the origins of space and time. This verse also makes it clear that God existed before the universe began. In fact this is even clearer in the original Hebrew where the word order is “In beginning created God ...”. We also see that this verse means that God didn't create the universe out of pre-existing matter, He created it out of nothing – a point which is emphasised in Hebrews 11:3 which says:

“By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.” (Hebrews 11:3 NIV)

Christianity and Judaism are the only ancient belief systems to advocate this; all other ancient belief systems have their gods creating the world out of pre-existing matter. That's important because the ability of those primitive gods to control and shape their creation was limited by the nature of the pre-existing matter they had to work with.

Our God created out of nothing at his will and could thus shape creation as he wished without any limitation.

This verse also gives us an indication of the Trinitarian nature of our God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, because the word used for God 'Elohim' is plural in a sense that in Hebrew usually refers to more than two, whilst the verb 'created' is in the singular.

Let's move on to look at verse 3:

"And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light." (Genesis 1:3 NIV)

Interestingly this is what scientists now believe the first fraction of a second of the existence of the universe was like. It was so hot and energetic that nothing but photons – the particles of light – could exist. Here it's interesting to note that in the Bible light is always good – as our text affirms in verse 4:

"God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness." (Genesis 1:4 NIV)

whilst darkness is always bad – for example darkness came over the earth during the crucifixion. So the origins of the universe in light make it clear that creation was good as is affirmed throughout our text.

Moving back to the last part of verse 2 we read:

"... the spirit of God was hovering over the waters."

So the spirit was intimately involved in creation and no doubt in the later creation of life in our universe. Here it is interesting to note that the Spirit was also intimately involved in creating that life which was the incarnation of Jesus.

I'm not going to attempt to deal with all the details of the creation story this morning, let me just say two things. Firstly, I don't think we should struggle too much with questions of ordering or how long creation took; remembering that this is essentially a poem about creation. Secondly, and notwithstanding my first comment, I do think that the portrayal of a number of separate acts of creation is

completely consistent with all the scientific evidence. Having said that, let's move on to verse 10:

“God called the dry ground "land," and the gathered waters he called "seas". And God saw that it was good.” (Genesis 1:10 NIV)

Here, for the first time, God affirms the physical creation (as opposed to light) as good. The Bible continually affirms the created universe as “good”, contradicting Greek philosophy and most other pagan philosophies which see “physical matter” as bad and “spirit” as good. In our text alone we are told that physical creation is “good” no less than five times – this repetition is one of the few parts of the poetic nature of the Hebrew which translates into English – and in the final verse 31 we are told that it was “very good”. Thus we shouldn't be surprised that Jesus was resurrected into a physical as opposed to a spiritual body or that scripture tells us that we will be resurrected into physical bodies at the second coming of Christ.

Let me take us back to verse 26 of our text:

“Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."” (Genesis 1:26 NIV).

Again we can see hints of the Trinitarian nature of God as it is expressed “.. Let *us* make man ...”. Now this is probably the single most important verse of our text as it tells us that man was made in God's image. As tennis star Andre Agassi used to say when advertising for a camera company “image is everything”. In my view the word ‘image’ here primarily means a spiritual and mental image rather than a physical image, especially as scripture tells us that God the Father is spirit.

But, we should not totally discount the physical here as God has appeared to man in human form – as in Ezekiel 1:26:

“Above the expanse over their heads was what looked like a throne of sapphire, and high above on the throne was a figure like that of a man.” (Ezekiel 1:26 NIV)

Also the concept of image implies paternity and affirms us as sons of God and tells of our true dignity and worth.

Our mind was made in the image of God's mind and the soul which Genesis chapter 2 and verse 7 tells us He breathed into us is also in His image. Here 'mind' encompasses our ability to think and reason and is the seat of our will; 'soul' is the seat of our feelings and emotions (God has feelings and emotions which is why he placed them in us). God has also placed His spirit within us, so that we are tripartite beings – comprising mind (which is contained within our body), together with soul and spirit as 1 Thessalonians 5:23 tells us: "May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." (1Thessalonians 5:23 NIV)

Interestingly enough, man is not specifically affirmed as 'good' in the account of his own creation we see in our verse 26 - perhaps such affirmation was considered unnecessary as we were made in God's image. Our affirmation as 'good' only comes to us as a part of creation generally in verse 31:

"God saw all that he had made, and it was very good." (Genesis 1:31 NIV)

The fact that mankind was created by God in His image effectively places us at the apex of creation. Indeed the words "Let us make man" used by God in our verse 26 as He contemplates our creation - which differ from the words used in connection with all the rest of His creation, make that abundantly clear. We are the only life form made in the image of God. Although I think this is made clear by the text itself, it is also emphasised by the form of the text in verses 26 to 28, where the previous repetitive formula used for the rest of creation breaks out in powerful Hebrew poetry.

In our verse 26 God also assigns mankind a high role - to rule over other created life forms and in verse 28 to multiply and subdue the earth:

"God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and

the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” (Genesis 1:28 NIV)

These verses have sometimes been used to justify the unrestrained exploitation of our planet and its life forms by mankind, but I consider that to be an unbiblical interpretation. Other OT passages - such as Micah 6:8:

“He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8 NIV)

make it clear that mankind was and is to rule over creation as God’s helper in accordance with God’s nature – that is with justice, righteousness and mercy.

Additionally, mankind’s rule is now subject to the ultimate authority of Christ, who has been appointed to rule over us as Revelations 19:15 tells us:

“Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron sceptre."” (Revelation 19:15 NIV)

We should feel amazed, and also humbled, that God, in His mighty power, has seen fit to produce such a huge and magnificent creation for us and that He has placed us at its head. What an awesome responsibility! However, let us not be too proud of this high calling as we remember that we were created out of the dust of the earth as Genesis 2:7 tells us:

“the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.” (Genesis 2:7 NIV)

So let’s just take a few moments to summarise what we’ve learned so far this morning. Firstly we saw that God created the whole universe and everything in it including us. Secondly we saw that this whole physical creation is affirmed by God as ‘good’. We are told that our material existence is good not bad. Thirdly, and most importantly, we saw that we are made in God’s image – the only part of creation of which this is true. Fourthly, we saw that this effectively places us at

the Apex of creation and explains why God initially appointed us to rule over the whole created order. However, this is a high responsibility which we ought to exercise as God's helpers in line with God's nature – with justice righteousness and mercy. We have NOT been given a licence to misuse and despoil God's good creation.

Finally, we can see that the nature of creation reveals much to us about the nature of God. We see that he is eternal, he existed before our space time history began. We see that God is powerful, he had the power and might to create the vast cosmos in which we live. We see that God is transcendent or separate from creation. We see that God is immanent or active in creation. Lastly, we see that God is personal, he cares about his creation.

Let's just close with a few words of prayer. Father, this morning we have seen that you are a God of beginnings. As a God of beginnings you change things and bring us into new relationships with you. We pray for new beginnings in our lives; for new and better relationships with you and with each other. Strengthen us and help us accept the change and growth that these things will bring. We pray in Jesus' name Amen.