

Bible Course 1 – Creation (Genesis 1-2) 9th February 2020

*O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder
Consider all the works thy hand has made
I see the stars, I hear the mighty thunder
Thy power throughout the universe displayed*

So begins one of *my* favourite hymns (we had it at our wedding) and no doubt a favourite of many others. And it speaks to the beauty of creation; and not just its beauty, how it points to God as well. His power, His creative genius – and it causes us to wonder.

Maybe you wondered as you saw the snowdrops in the churchyard, or perhaps as you fought through the storm this morning and saw the wind whipping through the trees. May you wonder when you see a sandy beach and a gentle tide, or a snow-capped mountain, or just a beautiful wild flower.

Today we begin a major new series on the bible – over the next 8 weeks we will tell the incredible story of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation. That's a big task, but to make it possible we'll be picking up the big themes, the key moments which help to tell the story.

And so naturally we begin at the very beginning, which as someone once said, is a very good place to start – God creating the world in Genesis 1-2. It is one of the most famous passages of all, and yet I must confess to some frustration, because for most of the last few decades whenever we've read these opening words we've fixated on whether it tallies with the *scientific* account of how the world came about.

It's a valid question, but really it's missing the wood for the trees. Whoever wrote this 3,500 years ago isn't worried about *how*, he or she is interested in the **who**.

The most revolutionary words in the whole text are the first 4: 'In the beginning, God...' Just God. No-one else. All the other accounts of the time have a cosmic clash between good and evil, and the clash creates the world. But not here – there's only one spiritual being at the start – God. The devil doesn't arrive till ch3.

In the beginning God – and this God creates through the power of his word – 'and God said...' That's interesting. Why does God speak to create – who's listening? Again, the point is that this God is not a mute cosmic force, He has a personality, He speaks. (Forgive the use of 'he' – we know later that we can call God Father, but actually this God also has male and female characteristics, because when humans are made in the image of God, we're told they are created male *and* female. And there are references to God in feminine terms in the bible too. But I digress... I'll observe the standard protocol today!)

So by v3 we know that there is only one God, that this God is in charge, and that this God can speak as well as create. And what He creates is beautiful and ordered, it has variety and complexity. And at the pinnacle of what he creates is humanity. In God's eyes it's all good, but humans are *very* good.

And today as we begin our journey through the bible let's go beyond accepting the reality and wonder of creation and ask a deeper question – what else do we learn in these opening chapters which draw out the big themes of the bible, things that we'll come back to again and again? Well, there's a lot we learn about ourselves, precisely because we're made in God's image. So let's unpack 3 things briefly today:

The image of God – what does it mean for us uniquely to bear God's image? Certainly that we're special, and we've already mentioned

that, like God, we have a unique love of beauty, a desire to create. But it also means we have a unique capacity to love, to seek relationship, to seek justice, to organise – and of course the dark side – to destroy, to create our own justice, our own rules. This is all part of bearing the image of God.

I think the image of God is underplayed in our thinking today. We allow ourselves to be distracted by the science, which after all only highlights *how* this image is manifested – it doesn't explain it away. *Recapturing a sense of how special we are, but also what a responsibility it is, is fundamental to our wellbeing as humans.*

Second, **God rests** – it's another surprise in the story isn't it? God has a rest. And therefore he also institutes a pattern of work and rest for us too. Sabbath is not just a religious nicety, or even a practical necessity, it's another fundamental theme of the bible. Our purpose as humans is to enter the rest of God. Once we leave Eden we lose that deep sense of rest, and it's only in Jesus that it is recovered. Ultimately what makes heaven *heaven* is that we finally enter God's rest – his perfect peace and fulfilment. Notice that God's rest at the beginning of ch2 never formally ends – and so in heaven our rest will be complete too.

Finally what is our purpose on the earth? God gives 3 commands – multiply – fairly self-explanatory. Then to subdue the earth in ch1 but to 'take care of it' in ch2. There is the current tension in our environmental debates in a nutshell. How are we to relate to our earth – we both subdue and nurture it. Now we've done a lot of subduing – the science is now urgently telling us that a lot more nurturing is required. Those of us who are gardeners will understand this a lot better than the rest. A beautiful garden is a mixture of deliberate and thorough subduing coupled with equally faithful and careful nurturing.

Looking after the earth is like gardening on a global scale.

It's also why we need Genesis 2 as well as Genesis 1 – there are 2 accounts for a reason. The big picture cosmic version and the intimate, personal account in ch2 when God doesn't just create humanity in general, he creates a pair of people and gives them a beautiful purpose – to take care of our world.

And as I draw to a close, we must remember that Jesus doesn't just save human beings – his purpose is to save the whole earth. John 3 says God so loved the *cosmos* that he gave his one and only son.

And the bible finishes with a new or renewed creation in which God's people dwell. This is the big picture – not just saved souls playing harps on a cloud – but **the true Eden re-created where a renewed humanity can enjoy God's perfect rest**. This is biblical theology – and this is why we need the bible course, to give us that bigger picture. I commend it to you – and also our studies over the next few weeks on a Sunday.

It all starts here – God's world in which we, made in God's image, are given a divine purpose. May that purpose stir our hearts again, that we too may be blessed and also be fruitful, as God intended us to be. Amen.