

Genesis 1:1-8, 26-2:3

11.06.17

*In God's creative image*

It is a scene of extraordinary creativity. The writer of the first chapter of Genesis introduces us first of all to chaos – formless, surging chaos which is dark, threatening and destructive: ‘in the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep...’ But then, out of this unruly mass, God begins to create. Light appears, separated from the darkness, and then the waters are parted to make sky, and if we had read on we would have seen the chaos being shaped into an ordered environment, one that beats to the pulse of divine creativity. We would read of dry land appearing, and earth producing vegetation, plants yielding seed of every kind, and then the moon and stars, followed by swarms of living creatures: sea monsters and fish and birds, and then cattle and wild and creeping things – all part of this great surge of creativity by which God, the great Creator, the great artist, fashions a world teeming with life, rugged in beauty and full of possibility. Whenever God speaks, wherever God breathes, things spring into being and order is established and creation is extended and intensified. Such is the creative impulse and imagination of this God.

Then we read in verse 26 that on the sixth day God created humankind, women and men and we are told something very significant about them: ‘God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.’ And much ink has been spilt over the centuries debating what is meant by that phrase ‘the image of God’. What does it mean for us human beings to be created in the divine image? And there are plenty of ideas, but this morning I would like to suggest to you that as we have here in this chapter a depiction of a creative God, so at least part of what it means to be made in that God’s image is to be endowed with creativity too, with the ability to fashion and to make and to manufacture, and so to construct order and beauty out of our environment. And in the following verse where we are commanded to be fruitful and to multiply and to fill the earth and to subdue it we are given a mandate to harness our creative skills in fashioning an environment in which we and all the earth can live and flourish. And it fits perfectly that when we read on a couple of chapters in Genesis we come in chapter 4 to one of these lists of names and offspring that feature in the Bible –

in this case the descendants of Adam and Eve and their sons Cain and Abel. And we tend to skip over these as they are not very interesting, but just listen to this: in chapter 4 verse 19, in the middle of one of these lists of names we read of someone called Jubal of whom it is said, ‘he was the ancestor of all those who play the lyre and the pipe’, and there follows someone called Tubal-cain who, we are told, ‘made all kinds of bronze and iron tools.’ Here is human creativity, expressed in making music and tools and handiwork. Here the image of a creative God is mirrored in the world through God’s human creatures.

And here I think we need to look a bit more closely at this God in whose image we are made in order to understand human creativity better. Today is Holy Trinity Sunday in which we ponder the fact that there is a threeness about God, that a full Christian apprehension of God requires us to speak of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And of course the writer of Genesis had no understanding of that and we must be wary of imposing a Christian view of God on an ancient Jewish text. But nevertheless as we read this Genesis passage through Christian eyes we notice some interesting features. To begin with we read in verse 1 that ‘a wind of God swept over the face of the waters’, and this is the creative breath of God, the wind that harnesses chaos and brings order and life. And in fully developed Christian theology that wind becomes the Holy Spirit who animates creation and who brings salvation and new life to a world invaded by the chaos of sin. And to be made in the image of God means to be endowed with something of that Spirit and this surely is where this great human creativity comes from. Here is the reason for the human impulse to create, to order, to fashion, to shape our environment and to render beauty. It is a gift of the Spirit of God and it is powerful. Just think for a moment of this city, of Amsterdam. Drive in from the airport and you imagine the landscape as it was centuries ago. Water – water everywhere. The deep! And just as dry land was separated out from the deep back then at creation so now land has been claimed from water and there arise these great edifices of concrete and glass and steel, mushrooming, spreading, centres of business and commerce and technology: testimonies to human ingenuity and dynamism. Then alight at the Museumplein and there is the Rijkmuseum, replete with cultural and artistic treasures – paintings and artefacts of every description. And there is the van Gogh museum, testimony to the astounding human ability to wrench glorious beauty out of deep pain and distress. Here is the human spirit, imaging the diving Spirit who brooded over

the waters in the beginning. Here is the image of God in humanity, channelling divine creativity into our world, our environment.

But going back to the depiction of God in Genesis 1, and bearing in mind again that this is Trinity Sunday, we find that as well as the wind of God we have the Word of God present at creation. God speaks creation into being. Verse 3, ‘Then God said, ‘Let there be light; and there was light...’ and each day of the seven day creation begins with ‘God said...’, for God’s word is dynamic and creative. And to be made in the image of God means also therefore to be endowed with speech. We are creatures with language, creatures of word and, as with God, there is a creativity about our speech. With it we transform our environment into a world – and let me try to explain what I mean. Again, if we go on to Chapter 2 of Genesis we find the story of Adam and Eve who are placed in the Garden of Eden surrounded by animals. And note one fascinating detail. God tells Adam to name the animals. We read that ‘God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name.’ Now what is happening here is that Adam, by the use of language, is creating a world to inhabit. Up until now he has an environment: he has surroundings – trees and grass and animals. But what words do is to render meaning and where you have meaning an environment is transformed into a coherent world. You see, animals have an environment in which they live. But they lack language and so they simply react and respond to their surroundings. Humans do more. Human beings are world makers and world dwellers. If I may quote the great philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, he said, ‘the limits of my language mean the limits of my world’. In other words my world extends as far as I am able to name and to articulate it meaningfully. And that is the glory of a world of diverse languages for different languages articulate different worlds and so human life is blessed with rich cultural variety.

Well, if you’ve lost me there – never mind. Put simply, I am suggesting that part of what it might mean to be made in the image of God is that, like God, we speak. We are creatures of the word – and as with God, words have power. They create worlds which we inhabit. And, returning to art, that is why literature is such a glorious gift, for in literature we fashion imaginary worlds, and sometimes imaginary worlds help us to understand our familiar world better. Imaginary worlds can disclose to us hidden aspects of our everyday

world, unveiling deeper truths. When our imagination takes flight we may return ready to engage more fully, more deeply, with our known world. Indeed that is why it is so wonderful that God's revelation comes to us in narratives and stories – some of them, like Genesis 1, not scientifically or historically true, but with immense power to transport us into what has been called 'the strange new world within the Bible' and then to return us with our eyes opened and our vision changed. And so in our reading from Matthew's Gospel, as Jesus takes his leave of his disciples, he sends them out into the world armed with the Gospel message for this is the word of life.

And all this is why we must use words so carefully and so deliberately. Words have power! That is why hate speech is so dangerous. That is why the public lie is so pernicious. That is why we must be so wary of the phenomena of 'fake truth' and 'alternative facts'. Some of you may have seen the recent film 'Denial' which is about the historian David Irving who has denied that there were gas chambers at Auschwitz and who sued the writer Deborah Lipstadt for libel after she called him a holocaust denier. And it mattered that he lost that case for where lies prevail false worlds flourish.

At a more benign level it's been fascinating and depressing – to watch the general election in the UK in recent weeks and the use of language there – the way sound bites and slogans are employed at the expense of genuine discourse. And there is the phenomenon of 'spin', of course – spin which massages the truth, manipulating and distorting it. Words create worlds but words can distort the world. And God spare us from a world where human discourse is reduced to tweets and to texts and to techno-speak.

The great second century theologian Irenaeus of Lyons, writing about the Holy Trinity, spoke of the Word and the Spirit as 'the two hands of God.' The hand that is Spirit of God is glimpsed in the wind that blew over the deep, birthing light and land and life out of chaos. That Spirit is imaged in human creativity, in that technological and artistic genius that engages with our surroundings. And the hand that is the Word of God spoke creation into being in Genesis 1, one day to become flesh. That creative and recreative Word is mirrored in humankind who are bearers of the word, speech-creatures, namers, our ability to generate worlds bounded only by the limits of our language. No wonder words are powerful. They can be used to create or to destroy. They can be used to build or to break. They can be used to reveal or to conceal. They can

be used to praise or to curse. So use them wisely and well, and to the glory of God. Amen.

O holy God, eternal Father, Son and Holy Spirit;  
Creator, Saviour, Comforter,  
we worship and praise you:  
eternal mystery,  
dweller in light before whom the angels veil their faces and cry,  
'holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts,  
the whole earth is full of your glory.  
We stammer to join in their praise,  
tongue-tied and awkward,  
unable to voice what their lips have been loosed to proclaim.  
And we are humbled that in Jesus Christ  
you have laid aside your glory  
and come amongst us and called us friends,  
not mere creatures but companions,  
invited to share in your divine love.  
O God forgive us that we have offended  
both your holiness and your love.  
Forgive us that we have proved fickle friends  
to you and to one another.  
Yet we come, confessing to you our sins and our failures.  
O God come once again to us in grace and pardon;  
touch our lives once more with the fire of your forgiving love,  
and draw us deeper into communion with you with,  
with one another and with your world.  
For we pray in Jesus' name,  
thankful for his love that will not let us go,  
and in the words he taught us, saying.... Amen