

Genesis 1:1 - 8, 24 - 2:2

‘In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth...’ With those words the entire drama of the Bible begins, and in particular the story of creation, of God bringing into being the cosmos, and the world, and life and then human life. And what are we dealing with here? Science? Certainly not! Poetry – certainly: but more importantly, theology, for what we have here in Genesis chapter 1 reveals profound truths about God, about human beings, about our role and purpose in life.

We didn’t read it all, but if we had we would have read a description of creation in seven days, seven stages. And what I’d like to do today is to share with you one helpful way that I have found of understanding this passage and our place in it.

So, when you hear Genesis chapter 1 what you have to imagine is the building of a temple, a dwelling place for a god, something very common in the ancient world. And in ancient times that construction of a temple took place in stages, culminating in the final step, when the god came to dwell in the completed building. It’s as if, with the stages of building completed, the god is given the keys. Now, in this case, in Genesis 1, there are seven stages, six days of construction, with the seventh being the sabbath day when God takes up residence, resting in his finished temple. One crucial thing, however: in this case the temple is not a building, rather it is the whole creation, all that he has made. God is creating a dwelling place for himself in the theatre of his handiwork. And it is not surprising therefore that if we had read on we would have found God walking and talking with the first man and woman in a garden – this was always the plan, that heaven and earth should overlap, God’s space with ours, and we should live together in peace.

Well, that brings us to the next important feature of an ancient temple: apparently on the penultimate day of building, the god would insert in the temple an image of himself, a representation of himself. This would become a symbol of the god dwelling there, a token of his presence. Now, as we read, what is interesting in our passage from Genesis, where God fashions his temple, is that on the sixth day he indeed places an image of himself in it. As we read in verse 27: ‘So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.’ Here in God’s great temple of creation his image is displayed, in human beings – you and me.

Now, of course, this is of immense significance. For a start, this gives us human beings a value, a status, a dignity - as image-bearers of the living God. Much thought and discussion has gone into what it means to bear the divine image and we will touch on that, but fundamentally it means that we bear God’s stamp upon us, something of the divine is reflected in our faces. We are not just piles of atoms. We are not just conglomerations of molecules, not just the product of random genetic mutations. We are divine image bearers, of eternal worth, symbols of God’s overwhelming desire to come and dwell with us.

Indeed we could push this further. If at this point we were to jump ahead to the New Testament, and to John’s Gospel, we would find John drawing heavily on this opening chapter of Genesis. ‘In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth...’ begins Genesis.’ ‘In the beginning was the Word...’ says John. And suffice to say here that John too is describing God coming to dwell in the temple of his creation, just as in Genesis. And if we were to read on in John we would come to that moment when Jesus has been arrested and stands on trial before Pilate. And note that this happens on a Friday, the sixth day, corresponding to day six in Genesis when the human bearers of God’s image are created. And as Jesus stands before Pilate, what does Pilate say? He says, ‘Behold the man!’ ‘Ecce homo!’, in Latin. Behold the man: the true image bearer of God! Behold, in this prisoner, humanity in all its glory, in all its divine vocation! And behold God’s purpose for us, that we should become like him, divine image-bearers. It’s wonderful!

What, then, does it mean for us to become God’s image bearers? What does it mean for us to have been created on this sixth day, living symbols of God’s desire to dwell with us? Well, what it means from one point of view is that we are in-between people, people who stand, as it were,

between heaven and earth, facing both ways. On the one hand we are creatures of the earth, the last in a long line. As we go through the seven days of creation we find God making seas and the dry land from which there emerges that great procession of life that we learn about in evolution theory. And finally on day six he makes us and we are in continuity with all that has gone before. And we are called to live in community with all creation of which we are a part – with the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the wild animals, and everything that creeps upon the earth - and, of course, with our fellow human beings.

But that is not all! We are also creatures of the sixth day, bearers of that divine, holy image. And as such we are called into relationship not only with earth but with heaven too – with dominion and authority over creation, yes, but also with submission and accountability to God. And so we are gifted with the capacity for worship, for prayer, for walking in the light of the Lord in a way unknown to any mere animal. As human beings we stand in-between, pointing both ways, called into union with earth and with heaven.

This is what we find expressed in Psalm 8 from which we quoted at the start of our service. The psalmist looks out at the glory of creation and asks, ‘what are human beings?’ and it continues, ‘You have made them a little lower than the angels, and crowned them with glory and honour...’ Here is our heavenly horizon. But then the psalmist goes on, ‘You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, the beasts of the field...’ Here is our earthly horizon. And we stand in-between. If I may quote, as I do occasionally, from the poet and singer Leonard Cohen, he has a line in a song which speaks of ‘an ape with angel glands’. That, surely, is such a graphic description of the human: we share 99% of our DNA with chimpanzees, and yet we are so much more - created a little lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honour. And there is that striking account in Mark’s Gospel of Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness at the start of the ministry, which concludes with the words, ‘he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him’. There we have it: the human bearer of God’s image, set in the temple of creation, poised between angels and wild beasts, between heaven and earth, and in communion with both.

Here, then, is our vocation as human beings, divine image bearers. We stand at the heart of God’s temple of creation, holding together heaven and earth, embracing both, and that is the key to creation’s peace and wellbeing. But if we deny our vocation and become detached from heaven, if we become severed from God, then everything falls apart: we lose our divine image, the centre does not hold and creation falls apart. And then earth becomes not a holy temple for God to indwell, but a wilderness. This, surely, is what we see around us: we see earth infected with a deadly virus, and we see protest and unrest and the ugly spectre of racism: we see communities hard hit by deprivation, and people everywhere caught in vicious circles of poverty and inequality and suffering disproportionately from the virus: we see bonds of community fractured, broken.

Well, here is the task of the church: to be a community set in the midst of the world, open to God, open in love and reverence and in worship and obedience; and open in love and respect to one another and to God’s magnificent handiwork. Here, in the church, heaven and earth are drawn together and we pray ‘may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven’.

And the church is entrusted with a sign: a meal. Here, at this table, heaven and earth come together. Here we gather in Communion with heaven, with the God who meets us at this table. And as we eat and drink we are drawn into God’s life. But here we gather too in Communion with earth, with creation: bound together as we are with one another, bread and wine symbolising the produce of the earth which forms us. And we may be scattered in our homes and by distance, but we are nevertheless united in Holy Communion.

At this table heaven and earth are bridged and God comes into our midst. And we discover our vocation, of making the world a temple fit for God’s dwelling. Amen.