

Sermon for the Sunday called Sexagesima, or the Second Sunday before Lent, 24th February 2019

Genesis 1:1 - 2:3, Matthew 6:25-34

The week after next, on Wednesday 6th March, will be Ash Wednesday, and it will be the start of Lent. Godfrey and I are going to run a morning and an evening class, each week during Lent. Godfrey's will be linked to the 10.30 Communion service that we hold on every Wednesday in Lent, and will be after that, at about half-past 11. The Lent course session will lead into the Lent lunch, Helen's delicious soup and fresh bread, in St Mary's Hall rather than the Rectory this year. I think we're going to call it 'Faith, Fellowship and Food': Three 'F's.

On the Thursday evening, the next day each week, I will sit down with anyone who isn't able to make it during the day, and we will try to cover the same ground that Godfrey will have done the day before. We will end by saying Compline, and these sessions will run on from each other first our Bible study and then our worship, here in church.

The programme that we will follow is what the Diocese is calling its 'Lent Challenge', which they describe as 'a journey leading to becoming more prayerful and confident disciples in daily life'. It follows a movement which the whole of the Anglican connexion is trying to follow, encouraging the growth of 'intentional discipleship', making us better disciples of Jesus.

At the PCC meeting on Thursday night, one of you distinguished PCC members asked a very shrewd question when Godfrey was telling everyone about the Lent programme. They asked, 'What does it really mean, to be a disciple?'

There are some theologians who have invented a verb, 'to disciple' somebody, which I think means to make disciples out of them but that really doesn't get you much further in understanding what it really means. The noun 'disciple' comes from the Latin word 'discipulus', which simply means a 'learner' or a student (or perhaps it's a diminutive, a 'little learner', really¹), which, interestingly, means the same, in another context, as the word 'Taliban' in Afghanistan. The Taliban were a student movement originally.

In the context of Christianity, the name 'disciple' has grown to encompass not just Shakespeare's schoolboy with his 'satchel and shining morning face, creeping like a snail unwillingly to school'², but something altogether more enthusiastic.

¹ cf. 'homunculus', a little man, perhaps.

² William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act 2, Scene VII

Well, each week we will seek to be inspired by reflections on Lent Bible passages by one or other of the spiritual leaders in the Diocese: Revd Sarah Hutton, the Diocesan Adviser on Spirituality, Bishops Jo and Andrew, Dean Dianna, both the Archdeacons, Paul Davies and Paul Bryer, and Revd Matt Prior, who is the Diocese's Adult Discipleship Development Adviser, whose job is to develop what he calls a 'culture of spiritual growth' across our diocese.

So what are the sort of things that we, as students of Jesus, are going to study? This brings me to these two wonderful lessons which James and Ann have read for us today. Maybe as we look at them, it will give you a clue about the way we will look at various aspects of the Gospel story in our Lent course.

*'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.
And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.'*

That's almost like a secret vice. You couldn't really take it out and show it to somebody else who'd never read the Bible before, for example. They would think that you were a complete nutcase. I know that there are people - I think mainly in America - who are called 'creationists', who believe that this passage in the Book of Genesis and the parallel passage a chapter or so later, where the story gets repeated slightly differently - which we heard this morning - actually do describe how the world began.

Creatio ex nihilo, creation from nothing: from Charles Darwin to Richard Dawkins, people are lining up to tell you that it's all nonsense, that science can explain the whole thing; or rather, that if anything can explain it, science can - but that at present we just haven't got good enough science to complete that task - but we will have. But there is definitely something in the way the Bible story is expressed which means that you can be confident that Genesis 1 is not a scientific description of how the world was created.

It's quite instructive, in a way, to go along with these critics, and re-run the passage, but to take God out. 'In the beginning, the heaven and the earth were created; and the earth was without form and was void. Darkness was upon the face of the deep. There needed to be light; and there was light: it was good. And light can be contrasted with darkness, day and night. Not everything is the sea. There is a firmament, a vault, dry land of some kind, as well as the sea. Up above the sea, you could call it 'heaven'.'

And so on. To some extent, you could be describing the process of evolution. These things gradually came about. But it is missing a vital ingredient. So far as I know, biologists have not succeeded in creating a living thing, although they know how animals and human beings are made; but the process whereby an animal actually starts to live still doesn't find a complete description in any scientific research. At the

moment of an egg's fertilisation, what is the thing which makes that egg start to live? Scientists simply record the fact that it does live.

St Paul spotted it, in 1 Corinthians 3: when he wrote, 'I planted the seed and Apollos watered, but God gave the increase'. God made it grow. It grew. We didn't do it. Scientists can say what would prevent the seed from living, what would kill it; but they can't make it live. What we call 'God' is, among other things, the ultimate creator and sustainer of life; what, looking at the bits that science doesn't seem to be able to explain, how things started, why they started to live, Aristotle called the 'unmoved mover'.

But you will realise that we are tiptoeing on the edge of a number of philosophical conundrums. What is the beginning of anything? Mathematicians will tell you that, as you count down or up, there can always be another number. Or there are other infinities, such as Zeno's paradoxes, like Achilles and the tortoise. See Aristotle, Physics, Book VI: chapter 9 for a discussion! It is extremely difficult to understand how logically there could have been an ultimate beginning - or, for that matter, an ultimate end.

But nevertheless, in our own minds we can make sense of the idea of a beginning or an end. So it may be that we understand just enough for practical purposes in our lives, just enough of something which is much greater than ourselves, which is, after all, one of the things that we say God is.

But, precisely because our understanding is so partial, we have to be very careful about being too literal in our understanding of what is written in Genesis, and in the Bible generally, for that matter. Just as it's perfectly coherent for us to accept that the first chapter of Genesis is a lovely and colourful way of expressing what God has done, what the work of the creator has been, but it's not the same as the working blueprint of the engine of my car, for example.

Some people pull specifics out of this colourful passage - for example, 'God created man in his own image. ... Male and female created he them'. A literal interpretation of that has caused any amount of trouble. Science has told us a lot more about being male and female nowadays, but some people still use Genesis as an excuse for ignoring what we now know scientifically.

But there is a very useful side to it as well. If we are created in the image of God, then it must follow that all men are equal. It is the earliest statement of the idea of human rights. People who are opposed to immigration need to think carefully about that, if they are Christians. Why should somebody who was born in Africa or in the Middle East, in Arabia, be any less entitled to live anywhere than anyone else - as a child of God? Surely if God is the universal creator, and that all humans are his creation, created in his own image, then it follows that they all equally have rights. Maybe it's a challenge, but there it is.

When you look at the first chapter of Genesis, are you a creationist? If not, what are you? How do you describe what God is doing? And then, if we are disciples, we will want to follow what Jesus, God-with-us, the great Teacher, taught: and that will bring us on to the Sermon on the Mount, which our Gospel reading is part of.

‘Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature?

And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin:

And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

Adding ‘a cubit to our stature’ is just like the mystery of creation in Genesis. Not even Charles Atlas can do it. And what price Mr Armani’s finest, or a footballer palace on the Crown Estate? Jesus is, as always, pretty challenging. Food for thought, and, I hope, something we can discuss further during Lent. I do hope you will be able to come to one or other of the sessions. Remember the three ‘F’s - Food, faith and fellowship (or the other way round!), from 10.30 on Wednesdays, and a nice alternative to the Taliban, with me, on Thursday evenings at 7.30.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant