

2019-02-24 ... 6.30pm Evensong ... Revd Canon William Price
Genesis 1 - 2:3; Matthew 6: 25 - end

One of my favourite novels, which I've read many times, is *Decline and Fall* by Evelyn Waugh. It tells the story of Paul Pennyfeather, sent down from Oxford for something which wasn't his fault, and finding a job as a master in a boys' prep school in North Wales. One of the other masters was Mr Prendergast, who had been a Vicar in a lovely parish in Worthing before he began to have *Doubts*. He explained to Paul that he hadn't had an hour's real happiness since he had had the *Doubts*. They weren't, he said, the ordinary sort of Doubt about Cain's wife or the Old Testament miracles or the consecration of Archbishop Parker. He had been taught about those when he was in college. His doubt was much deeper than those: 'I couldn't understand why God had made the world at all'. He went on: 'Once granted the first step, I can see that everything else follows - Tower of Babel, Babylonian captivity, Incarnation, Church, bishops, incense, everything - but what I couldn't see, and what I can't see now, is *why* did it all begin'.

Well, our first lesson this evening doesn't precisely tell us *why* God made the world, but in a beautiful way it tells us *how* God made the world. It's not a scientific explanation, and it's not a historical explanation, but it's a theological interpretation of the creation of the world. The account is what we might call a myth. In common usage to say that something is a myth implies that it is not true, but such an attitude is based on a mistaken idea of the true nature of myth. It is, of course, true that a myth is not history, that is, it is not and does not claim to be, a record of events which happened in a particular place and at a particular date. In the case of an account of the creation of the world it can't be a diary, recording what happened at that time. But historical truth, important as it is, is not the only kind of truth. Indeed a myth can, and often does, represent a kind of truth which cannot be expressed in historical categories, like the creation of the world. The account doesn't speculate about the existence of God, but it paints a picture of the world as God meant it to be.

What matters in the story is that the author makes clear his conviction that the creation of the world did not happen by accident. It was the work of a Supreme Power. It is likely that the author, writing in perhaps 500 BC, was a priest in the Temple in Jerusalem, and his purpose was, I think, essentially to stress the importance of the seventh day, the Sabbath, a day not only of rest, but also of recreation in the deepest sense. So he pictured the world as made in six days, followed by the seventh day when God rested from his work and looked at what he had done with satisfaction. It was all good. So human beings would rest on the seventh day for recreation and for communing with the Creator. The author was rather like those people who in a Christian context are in the Lord's Day Observance Society (if that still exists). I certainly regret the almost total abandonment of Sunday as a special day in our own society.

The author had no idea of the sheer immensity of the universe or of the huge age of the universe as we understand these things now. Indeed he undoubtedly thought of the world as a saucer mounted on pillars, with the solid dome of the sky above and the waters of the great deep beneath. But the reading asks us to see that the whole universe is not the result of chance or of blind evolution, but the work of a Supreme Being, whom we call God. And the Bible insists that before there was a universe at all, there was God. Whatever is there because God willed it. He is the power behind and within all that exists. We still cannot solve Mr Prendergast's doubts as to why there is anything as opposed to nothing, but we can say that the universe came into being because God said: '**Let there be...**'

And moreover God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was very good. Picture God looking at his creation with approval at what he had made, and this has a message for us.

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If God made it, and especially because God delighted in it, it is not for us to spurn the material things of life. God gave the world and all that is in it to us, and, although the Bible has much to say about the wrong use of material things, do not forget that this is God's world, God's world which he saw to be very good. If things have gone wrong in the world, and still go wrong in the world, that is no part of God's work or will. That's where sin comes in, and the story of the Fall.

There's actually a different account of creation in the second chapter of Genesis, clearly written by a different author writing earlier than the first author. The details vary, and for instance in chapter one God creates human beings as male and female, whereas in chapter two woman is created out of man, but what matters is that the world was created by God for a purpose. It didn't just happen. And if God saw that his creation was good, we might confidently assume that God himself, the God who gave us this good world, is good.

And that takes us on to the second lesson. These words of Jesus are addressed to those who: **'seek first his Kingdom and his righteousness'**, that is those who have devoted their lives to God. To this total gift of themselves God will respond by giving them what they seek above all – his Kingdom – and all other things will be added as well. Jesus did not preach carelessness, but the commitment to God of all our cares, in humble and joyous faith. And especially he asked us to commit to God the care which can destroy many peoples' lives – anxiety over tomorrow. This anxiety includes, but goes beyond, material cares. It might be the fear of old age, the fear of death. It is not in our power to add one cubit to the span of our lives. We must rather receive life from God day by day, and live under the gaze of our heavenly Father to the best of our possibilities, in gratitude for what he gives us, and in the confident certainty of never being abandoned. Anxiety is pagan. It denies the love, the faithfulness, and the omnipotence of God. It chains us to the things of earth.

But, we might say, does not anxiety dominate our lives in spite of ourselves? If we are honest we must say that it often does. It is a 'temptation' from which God alone can deliver us. But in the last resort anxiety always springs from our desire for external securities, from our refusal to commit to God alone the care of our life and of our death.

Our attitude to God should be one of trust and confidence, an attitude which is founded on the belief that the world is God's world, a world which did not come into existence by chance or accident, but according to God's will and purpose. And our lives are to be lived in God's service, trusting in his goodness and mercy.

On the two last Wednesdays I have had the privilege of celebrating Holy Communion in St Chad's Church in Shrewsbury, and at the end of the service in their booklet is the Prayer of Thanksgiving from the Book of Common Prayer. I believe that the words are sublime. We are assured that we are **'very members incorporate in the mystical body of thy [God's] Son, which is the blessed company of all faithful people'** and the prayer continues: **'And we most humbly beseech thee, O heavenly Father, so to assist us with thy grace, that we may continue in that holy fellowship, and do all such good works as thou hast prepared for us to walk in'**.

Our good God, our good Creator, has given us a good world, and it is up to us, with his grace, to live good and useful lives to his honour and glory, to do always such good works as he has prepared for us to walk in, and to do all this always in Jesus' name. Amen.