

2024-02-04 ... 6.30pm Evensong Sermon ... Canon William Price
Genesis 2: 4b – end; Luke 8: 22 - 35

This evening's first lesson (**Genesis, chapter 2, verses 4b-end**) is *a* story of creation from the second chapter of the book of Genesis. At the time when God made earth and heaven, before any grasses or shrubs had sprouted from the ground because God hadn't yet sent rain on earth, God made man out of dust from the ground and breathed life into him. God put the man in a garden in Eden. Then God made the trees and he set the man to look after the garden. The man could eat the fruit of any tree except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If he ate from that tree the man would die. Then God thought that the man would be lonely in the garden and so God made animals and birds to keep him company. The man gave names to the animals and birds. There's nothing about fish, but perhaps they would have been difficult to name. But among all the animals and birds there was no real companion for the man, and so God put the man to sleep and formed woman from the man's rib.

That story has been described as childish, 'with its picture of God moulding a gardener for his paradise out of clay, like a toddler playing with plasticine; and then bringing him to life by blowing breath into his nostrils'.

I said that that was *a* story of creation from the second chapter of the book of Genesis. And so it is. But there is *another* story of creation in the first chapter of the book of Genesis. In it God creates everything in six days. On the first day light. On the second day the heavens. On the third day earth and sea and trees. On the fourth day sun and moon. On the fifth day birds and fish. On the sixth day animals and human beings. And there's nothing about a rib. The relevant words are 'So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them'.

So we have two different stories of creation, creation as envisaged thousands of years ago, at times when people had no idea of the sheer age of the earth or the sheer size of the universe. But they were inspired writings by thinkers who believed that God created everything, God the maker of all. Scholars are almost unanimous in concluding that the reading which we heard in the first lesson this evening was written in about 950 BC, when a single writer or a group of writers composed a history based on traditions which had circulated orally for centuries. The first chapter of Genesis was written by a priest or a group of priests in about 550 BC, 400 years later. So chapter one is so much younger than chapter two. Chapter one, creation in six days, seems to me to be written especially to stress the importance of the sabbath, the holy seventh day when God rested from his work. The second chapter, our reading tonight, is very different from the first. It is much more vivid and exuberant than the first chapter. The writer thinks of God in human terms, a God who moulds clay, breathes, plants, and builds.

At some point the two different writings were brought together with others to make the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament. If I were editing these different writings, and I have written and edited many books and articles in my time, I would have realised that the different writings, over 400 years apart, contained many contradictions, and I would have left out some writings which didn't agree with others. But the contradictions have been left in. There are, however, similarities in the two stories as well as differences. God is the Lord of creation in both. He existed before creation in both. Human beings are the crown of creation in both. God has given human beings authority over animals in both. So both stories tell us something true.

And there's the second lesson. St Luke (**St Luke, chapter 8, verses 22-35**) tells how Jesus quietened the wind and the waves and then cured a man possessed of evil spirits. We might say mentally ill today. Jesus drove the demons out of the man and they went into a herd of pigs which ran down a steep slope into the lake and were drowned.

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There was a Bishop of Lichfield between 1731 and 1749 called Samuel Smalbroke. He wrote a book in which he calculated that each pig received 3 demons. The clue was in the words 'we are legion'. A Roman legion consisted of 6,000 men and there were, according to St Mark's account, but not St Luke's, 2,000 pigs. 6,000 divided by 2,000. The Bishop acquired the nick-name 'split-devil Smalbroke'. (By the way when he wasn't writing the Bishop took care of his family. He made his son, also Samuel, Rector of Wem, one of the richest livings in the diocese, probably a six-figure sum in today's money, and Samuel was Rector of Wem for 53 years, although for years before he died, still Rector, he stayed in bed for most days and left the parish in the care of a curate paid a pittance)

I finish by considering the two lessons together. One might think of the story of creation in the first lesson as a study in order and the accounts of the tempestuous weather and the healing of the man possessed by devils as studies in disorder. Creation went very smoothly – first the man, then the trees, then the animals, then the woman. No hitches. All very straightforward. Then in the second lesson, when things had gone wrong in nature, we read of two miracles, one a nature miracle, quietening the winds and waves, and the other a miracle of healing on this poor man. But what matters is that both miracles are examples of Jesus's authority over the chaos in nature and in man.

We may fear chaos, uncertainty, and confusion in our own lives or in the lives of people dear to us. We may certainly fear chaos, uncertainty, and confusion in our dangerous world today. Our world today is not Garden of Eden. We need to pray more earnestly the collect of this Sunday, called Sexagesima in the Book of Common Prayer: ***'O Lord God, who seest that we put not our trust in anything that we do (although we do usually trust what we do); mercifully grant that by thy power we may be defended against all adversity'***. And we are strengthened in this ***'through Jesus Christ our Lord'***, that same Jesus who stilled the wind and the waves and restored the sick man to his right mind. Jesus is still our Lord and Saviour.

To God be the glory.

William Price