

## Sexagesima – 2 before Lent 2020 (Year A)

Creation is firmly at the forefront of all three readings this morning both in terms of the wonder of creation itself, but also the place of faith within it – or..... let me purposely turn that statement on its head – the transformation of the way in which we interact with creation through faith. In these times of unparalleled focus on humanity's impact on the ecology of the planet there is much to ponder.

So we start at the beginning – the beginning of our Scriptures: In the beginning – God. God, the one who is beyond comprehension and understanding, yet who nevertheless is at the very heart of Creation – both seen and unseen. *Bereshit Elohim ba.ra shamayim ha.aretz.*

The beauty and balance of Genesis 1 – 2:4 should cause us to wonder. It was almost certainly composed by a Jewish priest or priests after the Babylonian exile. The opening Hebrew word - *Bereshit* – In the beginning - gives us not just the Hebrew name of the book, but a clue to the general theme underlying the whole book of Genesis: the beginning of the natural world, the beginning of human culture, and the beginning of the people Israel - whose story will remain central not just to this book but for the Torah – the first five books - and indeed of the whole Old Testament – the Hebrew Scriptures.

In the cultures which surrounded the Israelites there are similar accounts of creation except that within them there is a sense of violence in the whole of creation – of gods fighting each other - of chaos. The wonder of Genesis is that the writer sees the transcendent presence of God in creation bringing balance to all that exists. The awe-inspiring majesty of the Creator, the inviolable sovereignty of God is without question, and yet Creation is seen not as chaos but as beauty. *God saw that it was good* – that repeated phrase- is the antithesis of other cultures' creation accounts.

As well as that, there is a satisfying order and symmetry. The seven days give us the week – a concept not related to the month (lunar in the Bible) nor the year (which is solar). It may have been a Babylonian practice taken on by the Israelites. This doesn't matter, because importantly, what this seven-day pattern gives us is Shabbat – the Sabbath – one day during the week when we are called to place our particular focus on God in worship.

For the writer, the number seven expresses this sense of divine completeness and harmony. So not only is the week one of seven days, but the phrase 'And God saw that it was good (or very good)' occurs seven times – and not on every one of the days. The word God occurs exactly thirty-five times – (five x seven) and the section dealing with the seventh day – the Sabbath - has exactly thirty-five words in Hebrew. So you see the passage is extremely complexed as well as beautiful. The writer leads us on a journey of understanding the indwelling of God in creation, particularly in the pinnacle of this creation – humanity – the last act of creation when God sees that it is VERY good, following it with the importance of the Sabbath.

The Gospel reading come from the Sermon on the Mount. Like the Creation account, the Sermon is a carefully considered and highly complexed work and today's passage is one of great beauty where we can use our the full stretch of our imaginations. The lilies of the field, the birds of the air, the grass of the field – all are sign of God's creation and indwelling. Jesus uses this imagery to help us understand not just how much God loves each one of us, but with an added call to consider what the important things in life actually are. He does this not by making a moral point but an imaginative appeal to us. If all you are concerned about is money or the ephemeral things of the world, you WILL be worried. Your life becomes one of self-absorption. You will never reach your full potential like the beauty of nature which surrounds us. The balance and the happiness stakes will be lacking.

Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed as the lilies of the field - so why worry, Jesus says, concentrate on the important thing in life - deepening your faith and the knowledge of just how much God loves you. If we all do this, then the way we deal with everything else becomes transformed; the decisions we make, the way we spend our money, our friendships with others, our homes and employment - all become arenas for making God's justice, righteousness and love known in the world. In doing so we then can draw others into the adventure of Faith. The million-dollar question is how do we achieve this?

Some time ago I read a book by the great American theologian Stanley Hauerwas called *Resident Aliens*. He suggests that Christians inhabit society today as resident aliens - outsiders - an adventurous colony in a society of unbelief. Western culture in particular has become devoid of a true sense of purpose other than the cultivation of an ever-shrinking horizon of self-expression and self-preservation. And that's not going well at the moment, is it! Hauerwas's premise is that the People of God are called politically to BE the CHURCH rather than to transform the world. This provocative statement means that the Church must be able to reclaim a joyous opportunity and freedom to proclaim the Gospel in a way we cannot when all the Church seems is to be is warm and fussy. Just to utter mantras about peace and justice doesn't do anything other than make us feel good, or to despair when we feel nothing has been achieved. Ours is a radical faith, because it is founded in radical self-giving love, and the cross is its ensign. Yet with a simple, 'Follow me, 'Jesus invited ordinary people to be part of an adventure – a journey which surprised the disciples at every turn of the road. This is the same journey WE are called to. Our BEING the Church and proclaiming the Gospel is the thing which **actually** changes the world rather than thinking that shoving our hap 'orth into society will make a difference. This is perhaps where I despair over many church pronouncements. It all seems unduly concerned with the media appetite for concerns of the moment and makes the Church appear less and less relevant. I think that it is more profitable for each one of us to allow the Gospel to shape who we are and remember that whilst Jesus challenged people, he never turned them away. You couldn't get a more radical bottom-up approach. It is when **we** are at our most open and vulnerable that we can draw others on the journey of faith just by being who we are.

That leads us to Paul. What a wonderful passage! Again, it is filled with extraordinary imagery. He talks of ‘groaning creation in the pangs of childbirth’ - giving us a sense of the restless nature of Creation. Tied into this is the groaning of people of Faith - we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. What is Paul talking about? Does this take the shine of the Creation story and the Lord’s call not to worry? What does this mean for the Church of God?

What Paul is pointing to is that we are all works in progress – we, who know the Love of God within our lives, are called to journey with Jesus on our hearts, to seek to display the Kingdom and proclaim righteousness and justice within a broken humanity. We are enabled to do this because we know ourselves to be broken and acknowledging this gives us vulnerable yet transformational strength. But it gets better, because God is with us every step of the way. As well as the groaning of creation and of the faithful, the Holy Spirit comes to our aid in our weaknesses, ‘and in groans too deep for utterance intercedes for us.’ This is such wonderful assurance – God’s desire for a growing relationship with us means that there is an inward dynamic of love at work within each of us always longing for our response and interaction.

As the people of such treasure, we are charged to display mercy and promote peace, called to reveal God’s love within the world and to cherish creation. But the thing which we are called to do more than anything else is to proclaim the Gospel – the Good News of Jesus Christ – a more radical and life-changing message than any other. In accepting Jesus’ call to follow him, we are thus able to join Paul as he says, *‘The life I now live I live by Faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.’*



## Genesis 1: 1– 2: 3

1 In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, 2 the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. 3 Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. 4 And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

6 And God said, ‘Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.’ 7 So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. 8 God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

9 And God said, ‘Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.’ And it was so. 10 God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. 11 Then God said, ‘Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.’ And it was so.

12 The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. 13 And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

14 And God said, ‘Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, 15 and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.’ And it was so. 16 God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. 17 God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, 18 to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. 19 And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

20 And God said, ‘Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.’ 21 So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. 22 God blessed them, saying, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.’ 23 And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

24 And God said, ‘Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.’ And it was so. 25 God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

26 Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’

27 So God created humankind in his image,

in the image of God he created them;

male and female he created them.

28 God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’ 29 God said, ‘See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. 30 And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.’ And it was so. 31 God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. 2 Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. 2 And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. 3 So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

**Romans 8:18-25**

18 I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. 19 For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; 20 for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; 23 and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in[a] hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience

**Matthew 6:25-34**

25<sup>c</sup> Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 26 Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? 27 And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? 28 And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, 29 yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. 30 But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? 31 Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” 32 For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33 But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. 34<sup>c</sup> So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.