

## **In the Beginning: The Glory of God in Creation (Genesis 1:1 – 2:3)**

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Addresses given for Walsingham Bible Weekend

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Address 1: ‘God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.’

*An exploration of the beauty and order of creation, and God’s sovereign act of creation, but also how this passage relates to other views of creation in the Bible and in our own experience which are not always ‘very good’.*

Address 2: ‘The heavens are telling the glory of God.’

*From the very beginning, in the heavenly lights, and in the structure of the seven day week, creation prompts us to worship the creator. An exploration of the idea of sacred space and sacred time, what it has to say to us today, and how it relates to worship.*

Address 3: ‘Crowned with glory and honour’

*Within God’s creative acts, that of humankind, male and female, is the crowning achievement. We consider what it means to be in the image of God, what it means to ‘have dominion’, and what this means for our relationship with the environment today.*

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## Genesis 1:1-2:3

### Day 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.

### Day 2

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.

### Day 3

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.

### Day 4

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.

### Day 5

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.

### Day 6

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.

## Day 7

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.

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## Address 1: ‘And indeed, it was very good.’

One of the significant gains for many during the COVID lockdown has been a renewed sense of the natural world around us: for me, this has meant longer walks for the dog, and (at least at first), more time in the garden, hoeing and digging it into some sense of tidiness and order; and less noise on the roads and in the skies. I guess for all the uncertainty, nature has become a haven, and a place for people to reconnect.

In reading we have just heard, I wonder what impression it leaves with you. To me, it is that sense of order, rhythm, and delight. It is not quite a psalm of praise – it is more restrained than that, and there is no direct address to God here. But it gets close to praise: evoking worship, rather than being worship as such. If anything, we might compare it to the solemn overture of a great operatic work. The plot, the action with all its complications, will start in the next chapter, when the focus zooms into the first man and women, Adam and Eve, but for now we are given the overview.

Incidentally, it is important to recognize that relationship between this chapter, ‘in the beginning’, and what follows in the narrative of chapters two and three. As far as we can be certain about these things, we have two different narratives from two different sources, differing in the detail and in style, for instance in how God is depicted, and in the order of creation – we will see that in respect to the first human beings in the third address. Nevertheless, these two accounts are consistent in sharing in the same faith of God as creator, and of the dignity of humanity, male and female. The fact that these accounts are allowed to stand side by side indicates that they are meant to be read together, but it is also a hint that we should not attempt to harmonize them into one detailed, scientific account of what actually happened at the beginning. They offer a different kind of truth. As one commentator says, the correct question about these texts is not ‘Did it happen that way?’, but ‘Is that how it is?’<sup>1</sup> What do they tell us about world as we know it, and about our place within this world? We’ll come back to that question though, about how things are for us now, because it is not quite so straightforward.

### *God’s sovereign act of creation*

But let us return to the sense of order in this passage. There is rhythm and repetition: ‘And God said’... ‘Let there be’... ‘and it was so’ – in Hebrew, these two phrases are much closer sounding – *yehi - wayehi* (‘let there be’ - ‘and there was’). Then comes the divine approval, ‘And God saw that it was good’. We tend to think of ‘good’ as moral perfection, and maybe it is, but ‘good’ can just mean ‘fit for purpose’, so perhaps this is the God the maker assessing God’s handiwork, giving the nod of approval at the finished product. So: God said – let there be – it was so – God saw that it was good; and lastly: the marking of a day – evening, morning – the first day, and so on. Remember that in Jewish tradition, as in our liturgical calendar, a day starts in the evening, the vigil.

Important too are the number of days, seven, as this is the first week, the beginning of time. This, of course, as will see in the next study, is important for the idea of Sabbath, and it also means that the days of God’s work of creation are squeezed into six days, even though on days three and six there are two acts of creation. So pattern of six days of creation reflecting the working week is quite intentional.

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<sup>1</sup> Westermann, Claus, *Genesis: A Practical Commentary*. Translated by Dave E. Green. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987, 86.

Furthermore, those who read these texts closely detect the number seven in other ways two: in the original Hebrew, verse 1 contains seven words; in verse two, there are fourteen (seven times two).<sup>2</sup> The statement ‘it was good’ appears seven times – seven is itself the number of perfection, wholeness in the Hebrew Bible. And, wait for it, the seventh day contains thirty-five words (a multiple of seven), including three sentences of seven words, each of which includes the expression ‘the seventh day’. In case you are wondering, I did not work that out for myself, but the commentator lists many other such instances. So once again, this all suggests a very careful, deliberate crafting of the text, reflecting God who carefully brings shape and order in creation.

In addition to that, there is, within those six days of creation, a patterning, where the days in the first half of week each in turn correspond to their opposite number in the second half.<sup>3</sup> So, on day one, there is the creation of light, and on day four, the first day of the second half, God creates the luminaries which give the light (I know what you are thinking right now, but we’ll come back to it!) Day two sees the separation of the waters above and the waters below, together with the naming of the sky (or heaven), whilst, in the other half, day five has the creatures which inhabit the waters and the sky: the sea creatures and the birds. Finally, day three has the formation of land, as well as the growth of vegetation, whilst day six, sees the creatures which dwell upon the land and feed upon its produce, both animal and human. This again suggests to me that the intention is not to give what we would now call a scientific account of what actually happened, but a reflection of the sense of ordering and patterning of this world, a world which is very good.

Incidentally, if you are wondering how there can be light on day one, before the sun and moon on day four, perhaps it reflects the concern to mark the days of the week right from the very beginning, even before there was a sun or moon. Maybe also it is to play down the importance of the sun and the moon, since in other cultures and their creation accounts, these were themselves regarded as deities. This is also probably the reason why they are referred to just as ‘the greater and lesser light’, because the Hebrew terms for ‘sun’ and ‘moon’ were actually the names of gods in ancient world. In Genesis, these lights are simply created by God, and are not gods themselves.

So let us now turn to the nature of God’s activity in creation: how does God create? Well in two ways, which we might call by *fiat* and fashioning.<sup>4</sup> Fashioning, because God creates by doing: God ‘makes’, God ‘separates’, God ‘sets’ the lights into the sky. This aspect of God’s creative activity is even clearer in Genesis 2: there God ‘forms’ the man from the dust of the ground, God ‘breathes’ into his nostrils, God ‘plants’ a garden, God ‘builds’ the woman from the man’s rib. It is, as I said, earlier, a different way of depicting God, but it also shows God’s investment in creation, where God becomes intimately involved, like a potter working the clay. It also shows the dignity of human creativity - our making and forming, and planting and building, and affirms that all of this work is good. So God ‘fashions’ the world as we know it.

Nevertheless, what is distinctive about the first chapter of Genesis is not so much creation by fashioning as creation by *fiat* – *fiat* is the Latin translation for ‘let there be’ or ‘let it be’: ‘Fiat lux’ – ‘let there be light’, and so on. God creates through speech, so it is about the creative power of God’s word. It denotes a sense of effortlessness in creation, of total sovereignty, and dramatic effect: God speaks, it happens. Incidentally, sometimes there is a combination of fiat and fashioning: God said, ‘Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters’

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<sup>2</sup> Levenson, Jon D., *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1994, 66, citing largely the commentary Cassuto.

<sup>3</sup> Wenham, Gordon J., *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary, Waco: Word, 1987, 7.

<sup>4</sup> Moberly, R.W.L., *The Theology of the Book of Genesis*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 43.

(v. 6)... ‘so God made the dome and separated the waters’ (v7). So it is not a straightforward either/or.

There is also a third, more indirect way, in which God creates, which is also about how we can continue to see God as creator, because it is about ongoing blessing: ‘Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, fruit trees’ and so on (v. 11), as a result of which the earth *itself* produces vegetation. So inbuilt into creation is its own fertility and productivity. And God blesses: ‘be fruitful and multiply’. So God creates the capacity for growth and reproduction, which we still know, and indeed which is the subject of scientific investigation and scientific wonder, and this too God sees as good.

In a moment, I want to offer a very different perspective on creation, but before that, let us return to the idea of creation by *fiat* – ‘Let it be’, and in particular, two ways it develops in the New Testament. Firstly, in the Gospel according to St John, it develops the idea of God speaking creation into existence into the idea of the Word, which Christian tradition comes to identify as the second person of the Trinity. So the opening of John’s Gospel is a clear echo of the opening of Genesis, as John declares that in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God, and through whom all things were made; the same Word who became flesh and dwelt among us. In other words, the Creator becomes a Creature.

The second way that we find this idea in the New Testament, at least in the Latin translation which became so influential in the Western Church, is Mary’s *fiat*, her yes to God, in the annunciation scene in the Gospel according St Luke, a passage familiar to Walsingham pilgrims: ‘let it be’ – those words of assent uttered by the young girl after the startling message delivered by the angel: ‘let it be with me according to your word’. God’s creative Word becomes effective through *Mary’s fiat*. Of course, the New Testament was written not in Latin but in Greek, and in the original Greek, the words on Mary’s lips are more an expression of her wish, as befits one who calls herself ‘the handmade of the Lord’. ‘May it be’, is a better translation of Mary’s words, rather than the magisterial ‘Let there be’, uttered by God in Genesis. It is the same verb (*gignomai*) but a different form.<sup>5</sup>

In this is the great paradox of the incarnation, and unique Mary’s role in it. As one source has put it, ‘God said, “Let there be light”, and there was light: Mary said ‘Let it be for me’, and there was God.’<sup>6</sup> So again, the significance of this is that Mary’s assenting, faithful word, allows the Word to become flesh in her, so that the Creator becomes part of Creation. The theme for this year at Walsingham has been ‘Mary, Queen of All Creation’, and we will come back to that royal imagery later, but we can see here how Mary becomes the gateway to the new Creation in Christ. It also points to the importance for us to ‘let it be’: ‘let it be for me according to your Word’, so that God may bring light for us, and through us, where there is darkness.

#### *Creation and ‘the persistence of evil’ in the world*

To recap thus far: in Genesis we have the picture of God as effortless, sovereign Creator, bringing a world of balance, order, and harmony, which at the end of day six, God pronounces very good; and this is achieved through God’s spoken word, but also God’s fashioning and blessing. But for this next part, I want to question this. In the introduction, I suggested that the question we should asking about Genesis 1 is not ‘Is that how it happened then?’ but ‘Is that how it is now?’ This is the question I want to dwell on now: is this world really one of balance and harmony, and is it all

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<sup>5</sup> The Lucan text uses the optative mood to express desire.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Fiat lux et lux erat. Fiat mihi et deus erat.’ Ascribed to Maximilian Kolbe, but without reference.

very good? I mentioned our new experience of nature at lockdown, and yes my garden did look its ever best, for a while. However, it did not take long – a little rain, a little sun, a little neglect – for those weeds to return, and try as I might, I have not been able to keep them totally at bay. Not to mention the slugs, or the pigeons, or the squirrels pinching my fruit!

More seriously, of course, a renewed experience of nature may have helped to gain a restored sense of harmony in our lives, but there is the other side too: disorder, dis-ease, and, tragically, often death. In this, and in so many other ways, as we look at the natural world around us, surely we cannot always say that it is very good. Or that it is under control. So how can we square the world which Genesis portrays in its opening chapter, with the world we know and experience?

Well, there are various responses, and as far as reading Genesis goes, the most obvious is summed up in the idea of the Fall, according to which God created the world good, but sin entered through human transgression, in particular in chapter three. This is an idea that becomes particularly influential in the Western Church, though less so in the Eastern Church and even less so in Judaism. In terms of Genesis, the idea is expressed just as dramatically in the flood, which I will mention in a moment. After the flood we get a sort of new creation, with renewed blessings, but, perhaps tellingly, God does not declare this to be very good. There is what has been called a new realism after the flood, which I will mention in the third address. So human sinfulness is part of the complicating factor, but I think it is wrong to attribute it all to that. Why? Because I think there is something more ambivalent about creation itself.

So let's go back to the question, and try to answer it in terms of creation itself: how can we square the world of Genesis chapter one with the world that we know and experience now? The first thing to say is that those who first heard this passage had an experience no less troubled than ours, and in fact much more so. Scholars are fairly confident that this passage was written during the time of the Jewish exile in Babylon. It was a hugely disruptive experience, being wrenched from their home land, when their beliefs about the God of Israel were deeply challenged, and where they encountered other very persuasive versions of reality, and where the gods of their victors seemed much more powerful and convincing than the God of a tiny, defeated Israel. It most probably against that background that this passage was authored and heard, which makes it all the more remarkable for its sense of security and optimism. The vision of the God of Israel as creator is a call to faith and hope: when all around is disorder and death, God can and will restore order and blessing.

But even within this passage there are small hints of a more mixed experience of the created world. When we hear the words 'In the beginning' we think we know what this means. It sounds clear and confident, and through the influence of later theology, we tend to think in terms of God creating everything out of nothing – *creatio ex nihilo* – as theologians call it. But this is not necessarily so in this case. It has to be said that the first word of the Bible is almost impossible to translate, which is why in different versions of the Bible there are different translations, from the traditional 'In the beginning, God created the heavens and earth', to 'In the beginning *when* God created the heavens and the earth', or even 'When God began to create...'

Then we are told that the earth was a formless void, and that darkness covered the face of the deep. But there is question from this: is that how the earth was after God's first act of creation in v. 1. before God then started to set it to some shape and order? Or is it the case that this formless, dark void was the raw material out of which God started to create? In that case, it is not God creating out of nothing, but out of a primordial chaos. So which is it? Well, it is not clear. It is not clear because this was probably not a distinction which meant much to the ancients as it has been

to later theologians and philosophers. This is because, as we have seen, God's creativity is seen much more in terms of ordering and separating, alongside making and fashioning. Creation is about the separation of darkness from light, water above from water beneath to create air in between, and of land from sea.

So, for instance, when we get to the Flood story in Genesis, this is very much presented as a return to that primordial watery chaos: in the beginning God separated the waters above the heavens, and the waters below to form sky and dry land. At the flood, God removes these stops in the sky and in the land, and the watery chaos of destruction returns and remains, until God puts the stops back and allows the new creation to begin.

Behind this and other passages of creation in the Bible are ancient myths of creation which involve struggles between gods, where creation arises out of a battle of one god over the forces of chaos, often symbolized in mythical sea creatures. There is little doubt that Genesis one is written to present an alternative view, since there is no hint of a struggle or of rival gods here.<sup>7</sup> Yes, there are sea monsters in Genesis 1 (if you don't believe me, look at v. 21), but even they are created by God, not defeated by God.

Nevertheless, read verse 2 again, the earth is 'a formless void' – or better it is 'chaos and emptiness', and, moreover, darkness covers the deep. It is over this that the Spirit of God hovers. When God does start to create, God says 'Let there be light'. He does not say 'Let there be darkness', because there is already darkness. Likewise, God causes land to appear, but there is already water. The point is that in the ancient world, as often in our own imagination, darkness and water represent chaos and danger. What God does, is to contain these elements. However, they remain, perhaps with the potential to destroy if they are ever unleashed. On day one, only the light is declared good, not the darkness.

This idea of creation being a containment by God of elements of destruction and chaos is only hinted at in Genesis. However, in other places in the Bible it can be a much stronger idea. So, for example, I would like to consider psalm 74, in the middle of which we get this striking section:<sup>8</sup>

God my King is from of old,  
working salvation in the earth.  
You divided the sea by your might:  
you broke the heads of Leviathan;  
you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness...  
Yours is the day, yours also the night;  
you established the luminaries and the sun.  
you have fixed all the bounds of the earth,  
you made summer and winter.

This describes an act of creation, including the sun, the moon, and the stars, the day and the night, but through struggle and the defeat of the chaos of the sea, and its monster Leviathan. So for all its similarities to Genesis 1, this psalm gives a very different picture of creation, because here, God is acknowledged as having conquered personified forces of destruction, which have an existence

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<sup>7</sup> In particular, the *Enuma Elish* - see, for instance, Hays, Christopher B., *Hidden Riches: A Sourcebook for the Comparative Study of the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near East*, Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014, 41-73.

<sup>8</sup> For much of the following: Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, 7-12.

of their own. And it is out of this struggle that God creates order and sets the bounds of the earth. God becomes king.

However, on either side of this past creation as conquest, the psalmist gives the strong sense of destruction and defeat in the present:

O God, why do you cast us off for ever? (v. 1)

Direct your steps to the *perpetual ruins*;  
the enemy has destroyed everything in the sanctuary (v. 3)

*Your foes* have roared within your holy place (v. 4)  
At the upper entrance they hacked the wooden trellis with axes  
they smashed all its carved work. (v. 5)

They said to themselves, “We will utterly subdue them”;  
they burned all the meeting places of God in the land.

‘How long?’ it laments, ‘Why?’, ‘Rise up’, ‘Have regard for your covenant’,  
‘Do not forget’.

This is what makes the psalms so poignant, in that they give a voice to lament. They do not deny the God’s creative power, which is actually God’s saving power, but at times this seems very distant. They appeal to God’s past work of creation, but this act of creation was itself one of struggle, when God fought hard to defeat the forces of destruction, and clearly there is the potential for these forces to overwhelm again, which was the experience of those suffering defeat. Who are these enemies? Here, it will be invading armies, but elsewhere it could be other enemies, or sickness, or death, or some other disaster. But ultimately, they all point to something wrong in the world which requires God’s intervention, to bring order and creation out of the chaos of the world.

So this is a different version of creation, which exists alongside, and is probably older than that of Genesis one, and we know is more reflective of other stories of creation in the ancient world. What I am suggesting is that this version of creation can also be of help to us when world which seems hostile and out of control, and when we want to call on God to wake up and help. It acknowledges a darkness alongside the light, and the sense of struggle, which continues through the Bible.

However, we will not end there. There is still much more to this passage, not least about our part in bring order and in creation and in worship. But for now, my suggestion is that we hold this tension in mind. The dominant note of Genesis 1 is very much of an exuberant optimism about the goodness of God’s creation, a creation which God blesses and makes fruitful, which contains within it the seeds of fertility. There is order, harmony, balance, rhythm. Because of its position at the very start of the Bible, this is our key to understanding the world. The world is still good. But that has to be held in balance with those experiences of darkness, of suffering. The riddle of creation is that both of these hold true.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, when we turn to the New Testament, part of the resolution of this tension, is that God enters into the ambiguities of creation, through the *fiat* of Mary, and God in Christ undergoes the

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<sup>9</sup> See Moberly, *The Theology of Genesis, 54-69*, drawing on Levenson but also in response to Dawkins.

darkness of suffering and death, itself a struggle, and destroys the final enemy of death. But even for us, this is still a reality waiting for fulfilment, which we bring to bear in our worship.

We have started at the very beginning of the Bible, but let me now finish at the very end, the book of Revelation. Here we get a sense that as it was in the beginning in some of those creation accounts I have just mentioned, so it shall be in the end. Here too, through the experience of suffering and persecution, pestilence and disaster, is the dramatic picture of that primordial struggle in which God becomes King. Through this great and dramatic struggle, in chapter 21, emerge a new heaven and a new earth. Significantly, in this new creation, there is no more sea - no forces of chaos; and, in chapter 22, there is a reference back to that original darkness before creation, but also to the appearance of light in day one before the need of the heavenly lights in day four: 'There will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever' (22:5). Amen.

## Address 2: 'The heavens are telling the glory of God.'

Welcome to the second of these three addresses reflecting on the very first chapter of the Bible, Genesis chapter one, or, to be more precise as we will see, chapter one and a bit! In the first session we explored the optimistic note of celebration, the poetic movement, and the sense of order and harmony in the passage, all reflecting that of the created world, which God declares to be very good. But I also suggested elements within creation which are not so ordered: the waters and the darkness, both signs of potential danger and chaos. These are restrained by God's creative act in Genesis, but not abolished, and elsewhere in the Bible, they appear more as a danger unleashed, into which God must intervene to restore the order. In that sense God the Creator is also God the Saviour, and God the King, a king who imposes order over an unruly world. Finally, we reflected on how, in these past few months, we have had cause to reflect on both those aspects of creation: goodness and beauty in nature, disorder in the pandemic.

In this session, as anticipated in that video clip of the Wallingford clock here at St Albans Cathedral, we focus on the link between creation and worship, and in particular under three headings: the function of heavenly lights, the Sabbath, and the link between creation and the Tabernacle built by Moses in the wilderness, which becomes the Temple, built by Solomon in Jerusalem.

### *The heavenly lights*

So as I hope that the monastic clock demonstrated, the marking of time, embedded in the very first week of creation with its sequence of days, is central to worship. So in v. 14 of Genesis 1: 'God said, "Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day and the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years."' 'Signs and seasons': signs may mean portents - such as the Bethlehem star in the Gospel of Matthew, a sign to the magi from the East seeking the new born Messiah; or they could be signs of what is to come (such as warnings of Jesus about coming destruction in Jerusalem and the world, when the sun and the moon would darken, and the stars fall from the sky - Mark 13:24-25); or they could refer simply to the passing of time. Alternatively, 'signs and seasons' could just be referring to the same thing: 'signs for the seasons'.

By 'seasons', however, we should understand the religious festivals through the year. Especially in an agrarian society dependent on the natural cycle of the sowing, the growing, and the reaping, these festivals are very important in marking out the year, in seeking God's blessing and offering thanksgiving. Behind the various Jewish festivals there is a complex history of development, particularly because in the Torah they both mark the natural year of growth and fertility through blessing, but also the historic events of salvation, unique to Israel, in particular the exodus, God's provision in the wilderness, and the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. So you might say that with the marking of 'seasons' in Genesis 1, God has embedded into creation a liturgical calendar. Remember also that the sequence as set out in this first week - 'there was evening, there was morning' - is a liturgical sequence, since the Jewish Sabbath begins on the Friday evening at dusk.

Remember also from our last session, that in other creation stories in the ancient world, the lights (in particular the sun and the moon) were considered to be gods. For example, in the ancient epic of Gilgamesh, widely known in the ancient world, the hero Gilgamesh is devoted to the sun god *Shemesh*.<sup>10</sup> *Shemesh* is the word for 'sun' in the Babylonian language of the epic, but

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<sup>10</sup> Strictly speaking, in Akkadian, the spelling is *Shamash*, but vowel sounds are less fixed in semitic languages.

also in the Hebrew language of Genesis. So perhaps for this reason, the sun, the *Shemesh*, is not named in Genesis since the very word is associated with what others considered to be a god.

In the Bible, the heavenly lights are not gods, rather they are created by God, and they are relegated in importance to serving a function, or three functions to be precise: to rule the day and the night, to give light upon the earth, and for times and seasons. Embedded in the world according to Genesis is worship of its creator: as the psalmist celebrates in the opening of Psalm 19, ‘The heavens are telling the glory of God; the firmament proclaims God’s handiwork’ (v. 1). Notice also this link between *order* in creation (the steady rhythm of evening and day, of day and week, of seasons and years) and the ordering effect of liturgy. The liturgical cycle itself brings rhythm and order to people’s lives on earth, mirroring the ordered pattern of time as indicated by the lights of heaven.

### *Sabbath*

So, to the Sabbath, or day seven: when we think of the highpoint of Genesis 1, we tend to think of the creation of humanity on day six. This is understandable, and as we will see in the next address, it is indeed full of significance, but it means that day seven often gets left out of the thinking. In fact, this is even reflected in the way that the original Hebrew text has been divided into chapters, because these divisions put day seven into the start of the chapter two, and so isolates it from the rest of the week. As it happens, this division of the Bible into chapter and verse was probably an English invention in the thirteenth century – either by Archbishop Stephen Langton or by known as Philip the Chancellor, in other words, at a time very much later than the original text.<sup>11</sup> However, in terms of the logic of the passage, day seven is its natural high point, and indeed the crowning of the week. On day seven, God’s work is complete, God blesses it and hallows it, God rests.

Incidentally, you might well ask: did God really rest, or need to rest, on the seventh day? Well not really; instead, it is better to think of this sort of description of God, where God works and rests, as what we might call divine accommodation: God is described in terms to which we can relate from our own experience, because that is the only way we can start to fathom the mystery of God. Put another way, the Bible is the ‘Word of God *in human language*’.<sup>12</sup> So, regarding this particular passage, the real purpose is perhaps to tell us what God makes happen to *us*. God institutes this pattern at the very beginning for our sake. It teaches us to think that if God, who does not weary or need to rest, did so, how much more should we?

Something else to clear up is the fact that the noun Sabbath (*Shabat*) does not actually appear in Genesis. Indeed, the Sabbath is not formally instituted until the fourth of the ten commandments in Exodus 20. However, the verb, *shabat* (‘rest’), does occur here, twice, and the Sabbath commandment in Exodus 20 does make an explicit connection back to this passage in Genesis. In both Genesis and Exodus, we are told that God blessed and sanctified the seventh day, set it apart; a blessing for the benefit of humanity.

Once again, therefore, we have separation in creation. Before it was the separation of light from darkness, waters above from waters beneath, land from sea. Also, by the way, of the different creatures all ‘according to their kind’. Now, on day seven, there is a distinction between different sorts of time: everyday time, given over to everyday tasks of labour, and sacred time, set apart for

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<sup>11</sup> Barton, J., *A History of the Bible: The Book and its Faiths*, Allen Lane: Penguin, 2019, 362-3.

<sup>12</sup> *The Gift of Scripture: A Teaching Document of the Bishops’ Conferences of England and Wales, and of Scotland*, London: Catholic Truth Society, 2005,17.

rest.<sup>13</sup> It is a gift from the Creator to humanity, and it emphasises that the goal of Creation is not creativity, making and doing, or working *per se*, the goal is holy rest, and the enjoyment of the fruits of creation.

Furthermore, this is a gift for all, and in the Torah, the commandment covers the whole of Israelite society: 'Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, so that your ox and your donkey may have relief, and your homeborn slave and the resident alien may be refreshed' (Ex. 23:12). Note how revolutionary this sabbath principle can be: in the ancient world, leisure was the preserve of the very wealthy and powerful; the whole purpose of slaves was to allow their masters to rest. In stark contrast, the Biblical sabbath is for all; and in this way it becomes a day of subversion, when the usual conventions of work, employment and, yes, exploitation, are reversed; it challenges the injustices of our everyday world. It is for this reason that the prophet Amos can rail against the rich and the powerful in his day who trample on the needy and bring ruin to the poor, who cannot wait for the new moon (the religious festival) to be over, or for the Sabbath to end, so they can resume selling grain at inflated prices, and trading in human lives for a pittance (Amos 8:4-6). The sabbath, and other religious festivals, equalize.

This is especially the case with the Jubilee year in the book of Leviticus, which is celebrated after every seven weeks of years, that is every seven times seven, or forty-ninth year.<sup>14</sup> Thus, at the start of the fiftieth year, the ram's horn is blown to herald in this Sabbatical year: the year is 'hallowed' (as is the seventh day in Genesis), and liberty is proclaimed throughout the land to all its inhabitants: the land lies fallow, slaves are freed, land and property restored. The principle behind this return of the land is that it all belongs ultimately to God, and the people of Israel are but aliens and tenants. By extension we might say we are *all* tenants of the *earth* (the Hebrew word *erets* means both 'land' and 'earth'), that the earth is indeed the Lord's. In this way, this Sabbath year is a remaking of the earth – the land – as God intended and created it in the beginning, as very good.

Incidentally, it is this Jubilee which Jesus means by 'the year of the Lord's favour' in his sermon at Nazareth, when he announces good news for the poor.<sup>15</sup> Jesus heralds the Kingdom, the rule of God, the new creation, which is restoring God's good purposes from the beginning.

A particular hardship over the last few months has of course been an enforced and extended 'sabbath' for many. We have learnt a new word, 'furlough' - paid, extended leave, even up to a year - not so much a liberating year of Jubilee as an unwelcome year of uncertainty. Worse, of course, for many has been the experience of unemployment, or the vulnerability of low or zero hours contracts, or of self-employment. On the other hand, there has been the lack of true rest or any break from the routine and ordinary, especially when we have not been able to get away; and our routine itself has become more tiresome; perhaps you feel a longing for sabbath.

The order of creation is one of balance: work and rest. Both constitute human flourishing and blessing. However, we may define them, in Genesis both are attributed to God. And yes, if I may so, for us clergy, though not just for us clergy, this lack of rest is a particular problem, where the boundaries of work and home become so blurred. This is not easy to resolve, but we do need to remind ourselves, albeit in that tongue-in-cheek way: yes, even God 'needed' to rest. How much more we?

### *Creation and the Tabernacle*

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<sup>13</sup> Westermann, Claus, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*. Translated John J. Scullion S.J., London: SPCK, 1984, 171.

<sup>14</sup> Lev. 25:8

<sup>15</sup> Lk 4:16ff

So, I have spoken about the luminaries as serving the worship of God, marking times and seasons, and about this inbuilt ‘pause’ and ‘restore’ button – the Sabbath, whatever the term may mean for us. I am now going to make a link to the institution of worship at Tabernacle. Before that, though, we need to understand the wider context of Genesis, because as well as being the first book of the Bible, it is more specifically the first book of what Jews call the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, and so, of course, of what Jesus called the Torah. This word is often translated ‘Law’, but that can have too narrow and negative a meaning. More properly, we might call ‘Torah’ ‘teaching’, or ‘instruction’. It is absolutely foundational for Jews as being foundational to their covenant with God.

The beginning of the Torah is Genesis, but its heart, its centre, and its whole focus, is the giving of the law at Mount Sinai, beginning at Exodus 19, and continuing through the book of Leviticus as far as the book of Numbers chapter 10, when the Israelites set out again in the wilderness for the promised land. This giving of the law at Sinai includes, for instance, the ten commandments, but many others – 613 in total; and among them are very detailed instructions for the setting up of the tabernacle, or the sanctuary. The tabernacle houses the ark of the covenant, and becomes the resting place of God’s presence, the *Shekinah*, as the Rabbis called it; and the tabernacle continues to move with the people of Israel through the wilderness, into the promised land of Canaan, and only finds a permanent place in Jerusalem, when Solomon builds the Temple.

Now the point about all of this is that there is a clear parallel between the creation of the world at the beginning and of the tabernacle at Sinai. At Sinai detailed instructions are given for the design and making of the tabernacle, and like God’s creation, it leads to the keeping of the Sabbath.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, in both cases the role of the Spirit of God is important: the Spirit of God hovers over the waters before creation, and the Spirit of God fills the craftsman Bezalel (Ex. 31:3) for the creative work of cutting and carving – the only two cases of the exact term ‘Spirit of God’ in the Old Testament. Finally, the tabernacle is erected on the first day of the first month, in other words, the New Year’s Day of Creation, the birthday of the world (Ex. 40:1). In Genesis, with the hallowing of the seventh day, we have the institution of sacred time; in Exodus, described in great detail, first in command, then in execution, alongside the Sabbath command, is the institution of sacred space, where God’s abiding presence and glory comes to rest.

In all of these, therefore, there is a symbolic connection between the cosmos and what will be the Temple, between creation and worship. Incidentally, a Jewish theologian, Jon Levenson, points out that the instructions for the building of the Tabernacle in Exodus are contained in precisely seven speeches of Moses, with the last of these focussing on the Sabbath, explicitly linking back to God’s resting on the seventh day in Genesis (Ex. 31:17).<sup>17</sup> He also reminds us that that it took seven years for Solomon to build the Temple (1 Ki. 6:38).

So this by now familiar number seven, the number of completion and perfection, underlines the clear parallel between world building and Temple building. Both are good, both are according to God’s plan. That is why in Exodus, after the detailed instructions from God through Moses, we get the repetition of the detail, in the execution of the detail – I guess a bit like the ‘and God said’ – ‘and it was so’, but at much greater length, though this time, it is God who says, but the Israelites make.

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<sup>16</sup> On this: Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 93; Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible*, London: SCM, 1992, 61-62.

<sup>17</sup> Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, 78. Levenson points to other uses of the number seven with regards to the Temple building and dedication.

All of this touches on a wider idea in the ancient world, where the Temple is indeed seen as a microcosm of the world. In terms of Christian theology, we might say that it is a sacramental sign of God's presence in creation, and of creation's sacred potential. Going further, we can see a line from the God's presence in the creation of the world, to God's presence in the tabernacle in the wilderness, then in the Temple in Jerusalem, to God's presence in the womb of Mary, in whom the *shekinah* comes to rest, becoming flesh, through – again - the Holy Spirit. So it is, that Mary is often referred to as the 'Ark of the New Covenant'. This is not just some pious language game, but emphasizes the idea that in Christ, God is truly present among us, with us, born in human form.

In my first address, I spoke of creation as God bringing order out of chaos, often in terms of struggle and victory. This idea is spelt out, for example, by the Jewish theologian I have just mentioned, Jon Levenson, in his book *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*. He argues that this work of creation, of the triumph of order over disorder, is not just a single act in the beginning, but is a constant pattern of struggle and victory: for instance, where justice overcomes oppression, vitality and longevity replace disease and death, and so on.

Levenson also says that the Temple played a key role in this ordering and reordering of reality, and in particular, its liturgy. The Temple was the world in microcosm, but the world as created good by God. The Temple brings order and beauty into a world of chaos and evil. Moreover, it is the liturgy in particular which brings this about, as the worshipping community calls upon God, and recalls and re-enacts God's triumph over the forces of chaos in creation. It is through worship that we are enabled to cope with evil, because it builds and maintains order, and brings to our dimension the kingship of God – the reality of God in space and time; what we also call 'heaven'. That kingship is about restoring as it was in the beginning, when God became king in creation, but also as it shall be in the end, when God will be king, in the new creation: 'end-time' is 'beginning-time'.

Clearly, Levenson is not a Christian, but we can see the roots of our own sacramental worship, and indeed the function of our consecrated buildings. It is through these, that God's presence becomes most focused, representing healing and wholeness, not just for ourselves, but for the communities in which we serve. They bring God's eternal dimension into our passing dimension.

Now, all this I am saying just after we have entered a second lock down, when public worship is being limited to streaming, though thankfully the doors remain open. Whatever the rights and wrongs of this, the absolutely painful aspect, especially of the last lockdown, was of being deprived of these God-given resources, our buildings, the sacraments, just when we, and our communities most needed them. Our Genesis reading, through its link to worship, with sacred time and sacred space, tells us that these are given by God to bring goodness, order, beauty into a troubled world and disordered lives. Those who built such wonderful places as this, or indeed the Shrine of our Lady of Walsingham, got that: bringing heaven – God's reality in space and time – into a world of disorder and struggle. A world which is bereft of these assets, or does not recognize their value, is a world severely impoverished.

So, in the beginning, Genesis, out of chaos and darkness, God builds a world that is very good. In the desert, Exodus, the people of God, at God's detailed command, builds the Tabernacle, a sacred space. God said, and it was so. God ordains too sacred time, for worship, celebration, liberation, rest, and re-creation. As God's people, our priestly task is to be the sign and the instrument of this gift and of God's reality.

### Address 3: 'Made in the image of God.'

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.

We have considered God's good ordering of creation, demonstrating God's sovereign rule; then the link between creation and worship; the creation of sacred time in Genesis, and, through Tabernacle and Temple, sacred space. We have acknowledged that this world is not always 'very good', that we need God to restore order, creation; and we have affirmed the place of our own liturgical worship and consecrated buildings, as a focus for that re-ordering by God. Now, we turn to humanity, as male and female, made in the image of God, in relationship to the created world, the environment.

#### *Humanity and gender*

In considering humanity as male and female, there is the thorny question, about language and gender issues, and I am afraid it involves some Hebrew! In the New Revised Standard Version, God says, 'Let us make humankind'.<sup>18</sup> Traditional translations have 'man'. The Hebrew word is *Adam*. Now, 'Adam' is not the word for male human beings. The word for a male man (if I may put it that way) is *ish*, just as the word for woman is *ishah* (*-ah* is a feminine ending in Hebrew nouns). These words, *ish* and *ishah*, do not appear at all in Genesis one – instead v. 27 has 'male' and 'female', terms used about the species of animals which will enter the ark later on in Genesis (7:9).

So in Genesis 1, God creates *Adam* - human beings, as a species alongside other species, comprising male and female. Male and female is important for Genesis because it is about fertility, being fruitful and multiplying, filling the earth. So the point about *Adam* here is that it is an inclusive for the whole human species, which is why modern translations favour 'humankind'. It sounds a bit clumsy in English, but it is probably the best we can get.

However, it gets a bit more complicated, I am afraid, because the word *Adam* is used slightly differently in Genesis 2 and 3, the Garden of Eden. You remember I said this comes from a different source, and the order of creation here is different. In Genesis 1, human beings are created last of all, after all the other creatures. Humans are also created, it implies, male and female from the start. In Genesis 2, a single *adam* is created first, then the animals, then, out of the *adam*, a woman. It is just about possible to understand the first *adam* as non-binary, neither male nor female, who only becomes a man (*ish*) after the creation of the woman (*ishah*),<sup>19</sup> but most see *adam*

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<sup>18</sup> Gen. 1:26

<sup>19</sup> Tribble, Phyllis, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, London: SCM, 1978, 80

as male from the start. The woman will be called Eve at the end of chapter 3, when Adam becomes effectively the name of the first man. So there you go! In Genesis 1, *Adam* is the term for humanity as a species; in Genesis 2 and 3, it is the first human being, out of whom woman is created. Even so, the word *adam* also continues to be used in the Bible for humanity as a whole.

There is one more thing to say about *adam* in Genesis 2. I mentioned earlier that *-ab* is a feminine ending in Hebrew, so that *ish* is ‘man’ and *ishah* ‘woman’. *Adam* also has a feminine counterpart – *adamah* – which means ‘ground’. So in Genesis 2 (v. 7), the LORD God formed the man (*adam*) from the dust of the *adamah* (‘ground’), then breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. What this does is underline our connectedness to the earth, and our frailty, since we are dependent on God for the breath of life. For this reason, one commentator translates *adam* as ‘earth creature’.<sup>20</sup> So, there is a connection between humanity and the earth, and Adam’s task is to till and keep the earth, head gardener in the garden of Eden.

So looking at both accounts in Genesis together, they both show a distinction within humanity, of male and female, but with an underlying equality. In chapter one, male and female are mentioned in the same clause, and both reflect the image of God. In the next chapter, the woman is formed later, but this does not necessarily mean inferiority, since, after all, humanity is created last of all in Genesis one. In this case, the woman is described as ‘a helper as his partner’ (v. 18). This is hard to translate, but the word for ‘helper’ (*ezer*) does not mean helper as ‘assistant’, but as a source of strength.<sup>21</sup> In fact, in most cases in the Bible, it is God who is the *ezer* of human beings. Of course, there is a deterioration in the relationship between the man and the woman after the eating of the fruit in chapter three, but this is a tragic consequence of disordered relationship. It is not how things are meant to be.

Which leads to another question, pressing in the light of LGBTQ issues: whether Genesis presents the binary relationship, of male and female as a universal norm. It is a question because Genesis has often been used, or misused, to impose this single norm at the expense of alternative identities. On the other hand, there is a strand in Jewish and Christian thinking, which sees a non-binary dimension to the first human in the Bible, going back to the influence of Greek philosophy, but also finding its way into recent alternative readings.<sup>22</sup> More importantly, I think we just have to admit that, as with modern science, it is wrong to expect an ancient text to answer complex questions of human sexuality. Furthermore, nowhere does either the Old Testament, or the New, claim that heterosexual partnership is for everyone, so that cannot be what Genesis ‘means’. Genesis one does have a particular concern with reproduction, because it is the beginning and sustaining of life. But that is not to say that this should always be the priority, as we will see. So, in Genesis two and three, reproduction is not mentioned until the very end, and then only to say that it will be accompanied by birth pangs. Here, instead, the emphasis is on companionship and complementarity, so you could ask why this should be restricted to a male and female relationship? But that is a question this text does not seek to answer, and the skill of reading the Bible is to know which questions we should be asking.

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<sup>20</sup> Tribble, Phyllis, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 76.

<sup>21</sup> E.g. Exodus 18:4 “The God of my father was my help”. Note too that the name *Eliezer* (Eli – ‘my God’, *ezer* – ‘help’).

<sup>22</sup> See, for instance, ed. Greenwood, Kyle R., *Since the Beginning: Interpreting Genesis 1 and 2 through the Ages*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2018, on Philo (pp35-36) and on Gregory of Nyssa (p. 136). For Origen: Trans. F.H. Colson and G.H. Whitaker, *Philo with an English Translation*, The Loeb Classical Library; London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1929, 107. See also Genesis Rabbah 8:1 ([https://www.sefaria.org/Bereishit\\_Rabbah.8?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Bereishit_Rabbah.8?lang=bi)) – accessed 11/20.

## *The image of God*

Moving on from these complex issues of gender, the idea of the image of God itself is set out in vv 26-7: 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...So God created humankind in his image.' There is some similarity to the pattern of creating so far in Genesis, but with a difference: the more usual 'Let there be' becomes 'Let us make', and there is no 'and it was so', nor did God see 'that it was good'.

God says, 'Let us make' - God's own involvement here is much direct than the usual 'Let there be'. To me, this indicates the importance of this creation, something also underlined by the threefold *bara* ('created'), a word reserved elsewhere only for the very beginning (v. 1), the fish and the birds (v. 21), and the very conclusion (2:3). In place of the short, formulaic 'and it was so', we have the extended statement in v. 27. This is the first poetry in the Bible: the first two lines are known as a chiasmus, with the word order of the second half repeating in reverse order the first half. Then the third line is an example of Hebrew parallelism which repeats and expands the previous line: from *adam* to 'male and female'.<sup>23</sup> This lends to this statement a great solemnity and joy, befitting God's crowning act of creation.

As for the plural form, 'us', Christians have often seen this as a reference to the persons of the Trinity but this is very much a retrospect, in the light of further revelation. In context, 'us' is probably the magisterial, royal 'we', or an address to a heavenly court, brevity of the text does not allow us to speculate further, and we should remember that the purpose of this passage is not to tell us what God is like, but what we are like.

I mentioned the absence of any declaration that this was good. 'Good' appears seven times in the creation story, but not here, in relation to humanity. Why is that? One suggestion is that God does declare everything to be 'very good' at the end of the day. However, one Jewish interpretation, which I find attractive, is that the nature of humanity is left open, because it is for us to define whether we are good or not.<sup>24</sup> Our nature is in our own hands, because we alone have freewill, to choose the good or not. Maybe also this is why there is no 'and it was so': we remained work in progress. This idea is different from that found in much Christian theology, that we were created 'very good' or perfect, and then regressed; but I quite like the idea that we were created, not perfect, but with an original potential for good, in communion with God.

So, what is meant by the 'image of God'? Needless to say, much has been written about this: a physical quality (did the ancients believe that humans physically resembled gods?), a spiritual quality, or a capacity for relationship or creativity. Perhaps it is left deliberately open, in order to provoke us into such thought.

Nevertheless, there is now a wide consensus that it links to the ancient idea of a king being God's counterpart on earth. This relates to the idea of order in creation: the king is God's representative, imposing order on an unruly world.<sup>25</sup> He does this by defending borders, repressing rebellions (those primeval forces of darkness and chaos), bringing justice, protecting the weak, providing in

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<sup>23</sup> 'And created God adam in his image,  
in the image of God he created him;  
male and female he created them. (own translation)

<sup>24</sup> Leibowitz, Nehama, *Studies in Bereshit (Genesis): In the Context of Ancient and Modern Jewish Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. 1981, 9.

<sup>25</sup> Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, 111-19.

times of famine, and ensuring proper worship in the Temple. In this way, the king rules in the place of God on earth.

There will be more to say about this rule in a moment, but what is striking here, is that, for Genesis, this rule is not confined to a single person or elite; it is the task and privilege of *adam*, all humanity. It has been called the democratisation of power: humanity is not divided between rulers and subjects: all share in this royal dignity.

Of course, Israel did have kings, though not until later in its story, and these are very much depicted as fallible and disposable, a mixed development. Furthermore, assuming this was written in the exile, the monarchy had failed hugely, being to blame for the nation's failure. Whatever the realities of shifting political structures, Genesis depicts all humans as co-regents with God, possessing a royal dignity.

I must however mention one more interpretation, given by the former chief rabbi, Jonathan Sachs, just sadly departed, and a great advocate of Judaism and faith for our times.<sup>26</sup> When we ask what it means to be in God's image, Sachs reminds us that God has no image. Images of God are banned in the Torah, because they are attempts to delimit and define God, who cannot be delimited or defined. Sachs says the same must be true about us who are God's image. This means that, we also are free in creation to define ourselves, not bound by nature's laws, and this makes us alone capable of dialogue with the Creator.

I find this idea attractive as it links to what I have just said about freewill, that humans have the freedom and the responsibility to create themselves, which Sachs says is a very Jewish idea.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, this does not contradict the idea of God's co-regents on earth, because the very point about ancient rulers was that they had a special link to God, and the relative power to choose. It is our special relationship with God, and our unique freedom and responsibility, which makes us fit to rule: this is why we are the crowning glory of God, kings and queens in creation. This, says Sachs, is the greatest gift of God, but one which can be used or abused.

### *Humanity and creation*

So much for our relationship with God, but what about with the rest of creation? What sort of rulers are we to be? In vv26 and 28, two words stand out: 'dominion' and 'subdue'. These words are often seen as problematic, a licence to exploit the planet, placing us over and above the world, rather than as interdependent in the world. Is not this just the sort of attitude that has led to the climate crisis and animal extinction?

Well, I think that this language can lead to that, and has done so. However, there are many reasons to believe it is a wrong reading: firstly, the creation of humanity is not presented as an act of its own, but on the same day as other land creatures, and together they are declared 'very good'. So humanity is part of creation. Likewise, in chapter two, *adam* comes from *adamah*, the earth, which he then tills and keeps.

Secondly, if we are meant to be co-regents 'in the image of God', we have to ask what sort of ruler is God? The answer: God's rule is creative, blessing, life-giving. Words 'dominion' and 'subdue' are indeed royal terms, and God's creativity does include subduing those rebellious forces of darkness and chaos which threaten order, and we too are tasked with bringing order and justice in

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<sup>26</sup> Sachs, Jonathan, *Covenant and Conversation: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible. Genesis: The Book of Beginnings*, Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2009, 19-22.

<sup>27</sup> Sachs, *Covenant and Conversation*, 20.

society, repressing whatever is destructive. A common image of a ruler in the ancient world was as 'shepherd', and in the Bible, the LORD is my shepherd, so God's charge to humanity is to be a shepherd to the living creatures.

Thirdly, at the end of day six God gives food to eat. But what food? Plants and fruit. A vegan diet! It is not clear how literally we are to understand this, but this veganism indicates the sort of relationship envisaged with living creatures; not exploitative, but caring.

Fourthly, however, as we know, the diet does not remain vegan. After the Flood, God introduces a covenant where human diet now includes 'every moving thing'. This introduces a 'new realism' in creation from the time of Noah: as God says, 'The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth.' - a disturbing change from tenderness to terror; the shepherd becomes the hunter.<sup>28</sup> Another aspect of this new realism is God's declaration that the taking of a human life will be punishable by death (9:6). This verse mirrors the verse about the creation of humanity: both are poetry, with a reversing order, with the theme of image of God. However, this time, it is far from that first joyful celebration. The fact that this commandment is necessary indicates that it is far from God's ideal. It is a concession to human sinfulness. So the point is that the state of things in the beginning, that shepherding relationship of care to the natural world, where there is no need for laws about the taking of human life, remains the picture of a world which is good. The new world after the Flood, God does not declare to be good. For what is good, we have to look to the beginning.

Fifthly, there is the command to 'be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth'. Is this a command to continuous, unbridled growth in population and consumption, a recipe for environmental damage? This is another example, perhaps, where we have to recognize that our situation is very different. Moreover, it would be wrong to assume that this was meant for all people, for all time. As I mentioned in the last address, Genesis is part of the Torah, and within the Torah there are both commandment and fulfilment: in chapter ten of Genesis, humanity expands after the Flood to many nations, and in chapter eleven, after the collapse of the tower of Babel, the people are scattered and so made to fill the earth. So in this first part of Genesis, what we call the primeval history, God's plan is largely fulfilled.<sup>29</sup>

In part two of Genesis, this is mirrored in Israel: Abraham is promised descendants as numerous as the stars of the sky, and by the start of the book of Exodus in Egypt, they have become a numerous nation. The point is that this command to multiply and fill the earth is in large part a command 'for the beginning', which finds a fulfilment.

We can also see this more generally, where peoples expand and become established and settled. Furthermore, if Genesis one was written in the exile, when the survival of Israel was under threat, we can understand this urgency to be fruitful and multiply. For us today, one of the issues about environmental consumption, is that nations become prosperous through growth in population and economy, being fruitful and multiplying, but we know that at some point, we have to change this ever upwards curve.

In a moment, I am going to finish with a final reading, but to recap where we got so far: humanity as male and female, with a sense of equality, for all that we do not generally see this expressed in social realities in the Bible. The suggestive idea of being in the image of God, particularly as God's

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<sup>28</sup> For much of this section, see discussion by Rogerson, in Rogerson, John W., Moberly, R.W.L., and Johnstone William, *Genesis and Exodus*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001, 42-48.

<sup>29</sup> Lohfink SJ, Norbert, *Great Themes from the Old Testament*. Translated by Ronald Walls. Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark Ltd, 1982, 167-182.

co-regents, the crowning act of creation, and then our relationship with the environment, where ‘dominion’ means to care and to tend.

I have not been able to say as much as I would have liked about how the New Testament picks up this idea of the image of God in the person of Christ, who is most fully human, as well as divine. But I will just refer to one statement from St Paul’s Letter to the Galatians: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free, no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). This is thought to be a statement used at baptism, since Paul refers to baptism in the introduction: ‘you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.’ Furthermore, the precise wording ‘male and female’ is taken from the Greek translation of Genesis 1:27: male and female in the image of God. It is also pointed out that these adjectives are actually declined as neuter, rather than masculine and female, and from this, some have argued that it might be hinting at an end of gender distinctions in Christ, the new *adam*.<sup>30</sup> Either way, this passage shows how, in Christ, we find a new unity, beyond any distinctions, which is both about restoring what was in the beginning in Genesis, but also reaches beyond, to our new identities as children of God, sharing in the divinity of Christ.

*Conclusion: Psalm 8*

But now, a final reading. In my first address, I suggested that the opening creation story is not itself a hymn of praise to God, but that it leads to praise. With that in mind, I will end with a psalm of praise, written, I suspect, with Genesis one in mind: psalm 8. It evokes God as sovereign, king (in Hebrew: *adon* – Lord). The heavens reveal God’s glory, they evoke worship, as we considered in the second address in Genesis. There is the suggestion in verse two that God has established sovereignty over hostile powers, this is God triumphing over the hostile forces which we considered in the first address.

The psalm gives the paradox: the vastness of the cosmos, and the smallness of humanity. And yet, it is on humanity that the Sovereign Lord bestows dominion, and crowns them, making them co-regents. This psalm reflects the idea of an earthly being in the image of God, but here it seems democratized, as in Genesis one. As in Genesis too, this is expressed in our relationship with God’s works, creatures of the land, the air, and the sea.

In v. 4, the word ‘human beings’ (v. 4) is not *adam* in the Hebrew, as we might expect, but the more poetic word *enosh*, but then ‘mortals’ in the parallel line is *ben adam* – literally ‘the son of Adam’. This idea becomes important in the New Testament where Christ describes himself as the ‘Son of Man’. In Christ, humanity as God’s viceroy takes on a new historical reality through his triumph over death and destruction, and where, in the words of St Paul ‘he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death’ (1 Cor. 15:27).

O LORD, our Sovereign,

how majestic is your name in all the earth!

You have set your glory above the heavens.

<sup>2</sup> Out of the mouths of babes and infants  
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,  
to silence the enemy and the avenger.

<sup>3</sup> When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars that you have established;

<sup>4</sup> what are human beings that you are mindful of them,  
mortals that you care for them?

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<sup>30</sup> Betz Hans Dieter, *Galatians*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979, 195-200.

<sup>5</sup> Yet you have made them a little lower than God,  
and crowned them with glory and honour.  
<sup>6</sup> You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;  
you have put all things under their feet,  
<sup>7</sup> all sheep and oxen,  
and also the beasts of the field,  
<sup>8</sup> the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,  
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.  
<sup>9</sup> O LORD, our Sovereign,  
how majestic is your name in all the earth!