

**Genesis 2:4b-9, 15-25; Luke 8:22-25. God, Creation and Us
24 February 2019, CCO and StJN.**

Lord, God of all creation, open our hearts and our minds to your glory and to your word. Amen.

I don't usually start my sermon with a joke, but today's was rather inviting:

Adam had been moping around all day in the Garden of Eden and God finally said, "Adam, what's up with all this moping?"

Adam told God that he was lonely. God said He could fix that, no problem. In short order he could make a partner for Adam, and she would be called a "woman."

God told Adam that the woman would collect his food, cook it for him, and care for all his needs and wants. She would also agree with all his decisions and not question his authority as head of the family.

God also said that she would bear his offspring and not bother him in the middle of the night if the kids woke up and started crying.

She would never nag him and would admit when she was wrong. She would also freely give him love and passion whenever he needed it.

Adam said, "Wow, that's a great partner! What is this woman-person going to cost me?"

And God replied, "An arm and a leg."

Adam thought for a minute, then asked, "What can I get for a rib?" And the rest is history.

Well now, history is a good place for us to start this morning. We're going to be looking at the Genesis reading mainly, and there will be some teaching as well as preaching. And that's because we seem to have got ourselves into quite a pickle where Genesis – and the rest of the Bible – is concerned. I'm sure that like me you have come across people who reject the whole idea of Christianity as rubbish because they look at the story of Creation in Genesis, decide it can't possibly have happened like that, that the world certainly wasn't made in 6 days, and therefore the Bible is not to be trusted and the whole thing is a load of codswallop? And we Christians seem to have allowed that lack of understanding to grow and spread!

It is a problem of our modern western civilization. We have ended up with a rather literal way of looking at things and when the Bible is looked at through that lens, there are all sorts of problems which simply were not problems in times past, when people could think imaginatively and look for deeper meaning behind picture stories. It would not have been a problem in the time of Shakespeare, for instance: can we be sure that every play Shakespeare wrote is literally true, that the so-called history plays are indeed historical fact? NO. Can we be sure that in those plays we find truths about our human condition? YES. That's why they are still performed and loved.

Or think of the parables of Jesus: were all his stories factually true? Was there really a young man who did what the Prodigal son did? Was the Good Samaritan a real person? Almost certainly NOT. But do those stories that Jesus told reveal deep truths about us as human beings and our relationships with each other? Certainly YES.

It has been said that reading the Bible demands three steps: Firstly, we are called to read the story. Secondly we have to interpret it:

what does it mean? what is the writer really trying to tell us here? And thirdly, we have to decide: how do we act upon what we have read? What are we going to do with what we have discovered? The process has been likened to a couple of neighbours, who both have their washing hanging out in the sunshine in the garden: they go into their gardens, and see that the sky is beginning to darken: they *interpret* this as meaning that it might rain. Then they have to *decide*: one might accept it's going to rain and take the washing in. The other might decide that it isn't certain and she'll risk leaving it outside. Read, interpret, decide.

Our Gospel reading is an example. The familiar story of Jesus calming the storm: first we *read* the story. Did it actually happen like that? Is that the right question to be asking? Or should we ask: what is Luke trying to tell us here? How are we *to interpret* this episode? Surely Luke is saying that Jesus is Lord over all creation. Then we, like the disciples, have to *decide*: Who is this man? Who is this Jesus? Is the power he displays really from God? If so, how should I respond to him? Read, interpret, decide.

Anyone who approaches Genesis as though this is the history of the origin of the world runs into difficulties right after chapter one. Why? Because in chapter one we have the story of the creation of the world, don't we? Well, yes. But then in chapter two, today's reading, we have . . . the story of the creation of the world. Only it's quite different from the story in chapter one! Read these two chapters for yourself and you will see straightaway. How can that be? Well, it's clear from the style that these stories are written by different people, but whoever put the book of Genesis together decided to include them both, because THEY BOTH TELL US SOMETHING VERY IMPORTANT ABOUT OURSELVES, ABOUT THE WORLD AROUND US AND ABOUT GOD. Important, but different things.

There is so much in today's reading, but the first thing we hear is that the earth was not fruitful because 'there was no-one to cultivate the land'. Now anyone with a garden knows all too well that stuff grows. Give it a bit of rain and all sorts of things just grow. But the writer is talking about cultivating, about some kind of orderly production, about care and nurture. And that is the job of humankind. To tend and cultivate and look after the earth. God creates man to fulfil that role.

And to underline the point, this version of the creation story tells us that God creates the human from the very earth itself: the Hebrew words for man and earth are Adam and Adamah – almost the same. We humans are part of the very earth that sustains us, the earth that we need, the earth that God has asked us to care for. It's a two-way relationship. Humanity is both the master of creation and the servant of creation. We take, but we also have to give. Sadly, in recent centuries, we have been doing all the taking. We have been warned in the past. Now at last we are beginning to heed the warnings. It has taken a David Attenborough to wake us up to the dangers of plastic. People in other parts of the world are already suffering the consequences of climate change arising from our reckless use of fossil fuels. Just this week we have heard of the dramatic and potentially catastrophic loss of insects across the world, those little critters we may have despised and spent time and effort trying to kill. Those little creatures at the bottom of the food chains that we thought we could do without. It turns out we need them much more than they need us. We need to learn how to work *with* creation, not *against* it.

We have failed to see the connections between ourselves and the rest of the created order. If only we had looked more carefully at Genesis chapter 2. It's all there. God created mankind, and brought the animals to him to be named. This wasn't just so he could talk about them or call to them!

In the Old Testament a 'name' is very important: the command to give names to creatures is a command to understand them and to know how to control them. It marks man's responsibility towards them.

The Garden of Eden is the symbol both of the beauty of God's created world, and of our proper status in it as God's custodians, responsible to him for its care and maintenance. I wonder how God thinks we are doing. What do you think? What will we be handing down to our children and grandchildren? Read, interpret, decide. What should we be doing now?

And now let's look at the creation of woman. Some people have used this chapter as proof that woman is inferior to man, and should therefore be subordinate. The man came first, they say, so it's obvious, isn't it? However, if you use that argument there is a problem. In Genesis chapter 1, the animals are made first, and then the man and woman (who in this version of the story are made together). But if being made first is a sign of superiority or authority, then that would make the animals superior to the humans, with authority over US!

Genesis chapter 2 tells of the man, Adam, in need of a suitable partner, or helpmeet. He can't manage on his own – ladies, does that surprise us?! But seriously, the writer makes it clear that God thought 'it is not good for the human being to be alone'. In other words, we are made for relationship. We are not intended to live in isolated little capsules, separated from each other. God intends us to share the responsibilities he has given us, to have companions, to help each other.

But what about this rib business. I have to say, sadly, that I have met Christians who have roundly declared that men do in fact have a rib missing on one side. Now that is clearly daft. So what is this

story about? Well, we READ that God put Adam into a deep sleep and opened up his side, took out a rib and formed it into a woman, with whom Adam was very pleased. Now we have to INTERPRET: bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh are Adam's words. In other words, this creature here before me is as close to me as it is possible to be; she is of the very same substance as me; she is like a part of my very self. We clearly belong together. It is a very beautiful image of a good marriage, with none of the 'man dominant over his wife' stuff that comes later in the human story. Here there is true companionship and deep delight in being together and working together, mutual recognition of their need for one another.

It is the ideal that Jesus refers to when he speaks of marriage. We all know that we often fall far short of this ideal, but that doesn't mean it isn't a good ideal to look towards, to aim for.

So within this strange story lie the basic elements of our key relationships: our relationship with God, as the source of all life, the one who has made us and whom we should obey; our relationship with the whole of creation, over which we have power that we must use wisely in ways that will cherish and maintain the beautiful balance of this earth on which we depend; and our relationships with one another, which are intended to be loving and supportive. That's the interpretation. How will we decide to act upon it? Over to you!