

Sermon Transcript - 6th June 2021 (Rev. Simon Couper)

Title: What is going on in Genesis 1? Text: Genesis 1:1-24

What are we meant to do with Genesis 1? How am I supposed to share my faith with my friends and family, when the bible begins with those fanciful words, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”? “How can I believe this in the light of contemporary Science?” Perhaps you have found yourself asking the same sort of questions. “Why is there a snake in the garden in Genesis 3? What is the story of Noah all about? What on earth is happening with the tower of Babel?” As incredible and as preposterous as these stories seem to the modern mind, we are nonetheless left with the same questions that our early ancestors pondered, ancient questions about the origins of life, morality and purpose.

The most ardent atheist may spurn the stories of Genesis 1 to 11, but they still have to consider why there is something instead of nothing. They are still left with questions of causation, not so much “how did things begin?” – but “why did things begin?” It is true that Genesis is not a scientific text. It is not given to us to be read as a research paper or mathematical proof. Genesis 1 is not a briefing from Dr Chris Witty at number 10 Downing Street, it’s more like the wonderful analogies of Dr Jonathan Van Tam. Something of vital importance is being communicated here, but by images and under symbols that are familiar and well loved. The greatest error in interpretation, is when we read the opening chapters of Genesis like an IKEA instruction manual, and yet I have found the most tiresome bluster, that the shallowest and often the most vocal critique of Genesis 1 arises when it is read in precisely this way.

So what is Genesis 1 all about?

Well, if we read these opening verses for its theological, rather than scientific content, we discover that actually, the claims it makes are no less staggering. The opening verses of Scripture make bold claims about the existence and character of God, of the natural order, and of humanity’s place within it.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over waters.

The great assumption that the writer of Genesis makes is that there is a God, that God has always been, and that God is one. Indeed, the great liturgy of Israel, the *Shema*, begins with precisely these words, “Hear o Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” Have you ever noticed in the creation stories of ancient mythology, be that Greek, or Norse or Babylonian, Egyptian, that creation is never the work of a single being or intelligence? And yet the Hebrew Scriptures, in stark contrast, God has no consort, or rival, no counterpart with whom he divides the labour and shares the work. In the Bible Creation is not the arbitrary result of a war between despotic deities. Nor is God the personification of some aspect within creation, God is not the sun or the moon or the stars. Creation is not the result of some romantic liaison between primal forces. No, the bold claim of Genesis 1 is that God precedes all things, and that God is one.

“So what?” We may well ask. “What does this mean for the Christian worldview?” Well, it means that God is entirely self-sufficient. God need not look further than his own being for fulfilment, for purpose, for existence. God just is. But God’s existence, God’s “oneness” is not to be mistaken for

loneliness. There was no need for God to create anything. Creation is not an arbitrary project to cure cosmic boredom. God is independent from all that he has made, entirely self-sufficient, entirely complete in the complexity and diversity of his oneness.

And yet God said, "Let there be light."

Here is something of immense importance, that is so often overlooked - here is something that gives unique dignity to the world around us which we inhabit: Creation is the bubbling over of God's goodness. As naturally as laughter follows delight, so creation wells up and moves out from God's divine perfections. Creation has unique dignity because it comes not from a place of need, or conflict, or compromise as in competing mythologies. Creation has unique dignity because it comes from God's sheer delight. Creation moves outward from the completeness and complexity of God's oneness. God is one. But God's oneness is not loneliness.

Let us now think about what this means for the created order. Here we come to that wonderful phrase. "And God saw that it was Good." For those who have studied this chapter closely you will have noticed that there is a repeated formula at work here: Command, fulfilment, report, conclusion.

Command:	And God said "let there be..."
Fulfilment:	And there was ...
Report:	And saw that it was Good.
Conclusion:	And there was evening and there was morning the <i>n</i> th day.

Here's a question. In the order of events reported in Genesis 1, human beings are created on the 6th day, but are the preceding works, from day 1 to 5 described as good? The answer is emphatically, "Yes!" And here is another capstone in the Christian view of the world. The goodness of the created sphere around us is not dependent on our evaluation of it. The created order is not good to the extent it exists as a potential resource to be used. Before humanity is said to have existed, God said the natural world was good. So the world around us is good, not because it has the potential to serve our interests, but because it bears the indelible finger-print of a Good creator. The natural world's goodness is independent of our evaluation or use of it.

Now we will look into matters of ecology and theology in future weeks. But for now, we would do well to bear this in mind: the natural world is not dependent on us, but we are dependent on it. It is good, not because we have so defined it, because God so made it. The theological point is made here in Genesis, that creation is good independent of human existence or evaluation. *Ki Tov* and God saw that it was good.

So what of humanity's place in the created sphere in the theology of Genesis 1, well, I am afraid that will have to wait for next week.

Creation moves out from the completeness and complexity of God's oneness.

God is one. But God's oneness is not loneliness.

God's creative activity is the inevitable bubbling over of his perfection, as laughter naturally follows delight.

And the creative sphere is good not because we have so defined it, because God so made it.