

Tidenham and Tutshill 20/2/22

Gen 2:4b-9, 15-25 – God’s Purposes in Creation

Prayer

Early last week – look up the readings for today – which one to preach on – Genesis or Luke – the storm on the lake. Friday morning, time to sit at the desk and get on with it – the wind picking up by the minute, trees bending, lampposts swaying, it seemed pretty clear which passage – so Genesis it is then...

It’s not easy to know what to make of this. We know history and it doesn’t read like a history book. We know science and it certainly doesn’t read like a science text-book. Do we read it literally? Tricky that. Or poetically – whatever that means? How about this? The early chapters of Genesis are setting out the groundwork for the rest of the Bible story. It’s theology; inviting us to read it with faith and imagination not running wild but guided by the Spirit. We see God creating a human being from the dust of the ground and then breathing into him the breath of life. Here’s something about all of us and all people everywhere, that we are made of the dust of the earth. *Dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return* – traditional words for Ash Wednesday. And words we never hear for ourselves – *Dust to dust, ashes to ashes...* We are made of material stuff and we share 99.9% of our genes with everyone else. We’re only 0.1% unique; we share 98.7% of our genes with chimpanzees and over 60% with bananas.

At the same time God breathed his life into us. We are animal; we are also spiritual beings. I love the words of Augustine of Hippo from the fourth century – *You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you*. There is something in every one of us that transcends the matter of life – food, drink, shelter. We want love, we want purpose, we want meaning. Many people who never darken the doors of a church consider themselves *spiritual* – there’s more to life they are saying, and they are absolutely right. So what’s the real you and me? Both animal and spiritual. We are not animals with ideas above our station any more than we are spirits trapped in earthly bodies longing for release.

So what? Let me draw out just one thing for now. What we have said is true for everyone else as well as you and me. This basic foundational Bible teaching shows up the nonsense and offensiveness of racism. Regardless of colour, ability, culture, health, everyone is my dust and spirit brother and sister. And we need to say this again and again and then again in the face of everything around that looks to divide. What we have in common, literally, genetically, is 999 times what distinguishes us as individuals.

Secondly we find in this passage that God has a purpose for this person he has made. Look after the rest of creation – over the last few Sundays I am sure that many of us have been enjoying ‘The Green Planet’, the latest David Attenborough special. Amazing to see the diversity of the plants and their adaptation especially with the extremes of climate. And God told the man to name the animals – a way of telling him to take responsibility to care for the whole created order – the world of plants and the world of animals. God gives freedom to eat from all the trees – except for one. It looks like God created us to be vegetarians or even vegans – I just put that out there, knowing Anna is planning sausages for lunch, which I’m really looking forward to. But we should not miss the exception – *the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat*. Huge debates about what this might mean, but let me suggest this. We as human beings are given tremendous responsibility to care for the creation and it is given to sustain us, but this power is not limitless. We have lost the plot when we exploit the creation, when we are greedy and careless, when we think it is all about us and our needs

and desires. Sometimes I have heard people being critical along the lines of saying the church ought to stick to spiritual matters and not get caught up in all this environment stuff. Hang on a minute – it's here in the foundation material of Genesis – God has given us the responsibility of caring for and not exploiting the natural world of which we are a part.

But this is not just given to the individual – incidentally the name 'Adam' that we find in some translations is simply the Hebrew word meaning *a man*. It's not a personal name here like one of our neighbours – Adam, married to Cerys. God gives the man a companion. Perhaps some of you might remember from the 70's the feminist magazine 'Spare Rib'? Can't say I've ever read it, but it's a great satirical name. I rather prefer the comment from Matthew Henry who wrote a massive Bible commentary around 1700, and said of this passage: *the woman was made of a rib out of the side of Adam; not made out of his head to rule over him, nor out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected and near his heart to be beloved*. Quaint and some might have an issue with the *protection* bit, but we get the point – equal and companion. Ah, you might say, but what about the word *helper* in verse 18. Aha, the woman is made to be man's little helper! Wait a minute, my friend. Precisely the same word is used in Psalm 33:20 and a number of other places about the Lord God. He is our helper. We certainly cannot say from Genesis 2 anything that implies the woman is subservient to the man. It is not there. As in Genesis 1 where both the woman and the man are made in the image of God; so in chapter 2 they are made equal to be companions in caring for the creation.

But not just companions in the garden. The writer of Genesis goes on to give some fundamental teaching about marriage – *Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh*. This is foundational and why the church sees marriage as one of the basic building blocks of our community. Here is one example, perhaps the prime example of showing the companionship that is at the heart of who we are as men and women.

Now this raises huge questions and I'm sure a few of us want to interrupt and say – *but what about...?* Fair enough, but Genesis 2 is setting out the groundwork. It is not telling the whole story by any means. In the next chapter we have the notorious incident with the serpent, the fruit and the man and woman disobeying God and being sent into the garden, and it was not just they who were affected but the whole created order was knocked out of joint. Whenever we are tempted to say, but this world is not as it should be – absolutely right. It isn't, but God has not abandoned us.

So let's go back for our final visit to Genesis 2 and think about what God said, *It is not good that the man should be alone...* God has made us for companionship. God has made us social beings. God has made us to be a community. These last couple of years have been so difficult and some people have really suffered with their mental health, because it has been so hard to be a community. This year in our church here we have opted to think about what it means to be a community living in the flow of God's love. We are not meant to be Christians on our own. We are made to be together, brothers and sisters in Christ. This is not an optional extra for the sociable and extroverts among us. This is for the introverts as well; this is a challenge to anyone who thinks that we can be a Christian on our own, to any who think that you don't have to go to church to be a Christian. Certainly just going to church does not make you a Christian, but when you are a Christian with a relationship with Jesus he presents us with a whole load of brothers and sisters and says, *Love one another, live in peace and show the world my love...* We might rather it were different, that being a Christian is a private business, but if we read our Bibles from Genesis to Revelation we find we are made for community, made for God, dust and spirit, made to care for the creation, not exploit it, made equally for one another, to be companions, co-workers and helpers. And this is good.

The Collect: Almighty God, give us reverence for all creation and respect for every person, that we may mirror your likeness in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Post Communion Prayer: God our creator, by your gift the tree of life was set at the heart of the earthly paradise, and the bread of life at the heart of your Church: may we who have been nourished at your table on earth be transformed by the glory of the Saviour's cross and enjoy the delights of eternity; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.