

So we're going to look at scripture together in a moment or two but before we do that I just wanted to really give you some context to why we're starting this series that I've called **God's Earth**. I was thinking this week that each age has its different challenges that lie before it; I guess for the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was that we had two world wars in in that time and perhaps the question of the age was "Can we ever learn to live together? Can we stop warring all the while or are we going to constantly be in Battle for supremacy, one nation against another?" Of course that didn't go away but the question of the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century I think was "Are we going to destroy each other with nuclear weapons?" Do you remember all of that? I remember watching a dreadful thing on TV about what we should do if a nuclear weapon is fired at Britain; and it talked about getting under the table and making sure you had some water under there with you, and I did think to myself 'I'm not sure our table's up to it to be honest, I'm not sure it's going to do an awful lot of good', but that idea at the time was: this is the issue of the age, "Are we going to destroy each other with nuclear weapons?"

Well, I think that the issue that lies before us in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, and it's been there for a while (and the other questions as I said haven't got away) but the question for today for me is: "Are we going to not just destroy each other, are we going to destroy this earth that God has given us that we live on and we share with not just the rest of humanity but with all living creatures?" That for me is the question that lies before us at this time; and I have got some slides that I want to show you and the first one is a one that I think you're going to see a lot of (this particular picture) over the next few months: COP26. Those letters mean something and I can't quite work it out, but basically it's the world's international climate change conference. I couldn't work out what those particular letters were supposed to be but anyway that's what it's about: it's COP26; it'll be meeting in Glasgow, and as you can see there (if you've got very very good eyesight) it's in mid November (I think it's something like the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> of November). This is a vital issue for us to look at and address in this day. And our global leaders will be seeking, trying to address this question of how can we protect this world on which we live, this earth on which we live? How can we protect it and value it.

As people of faith, I think we can address a different question, the question of "why" but I think that question of "why" will then help us to better address the question of "how". But we're able to go back to our values, we're able to look at scripture, and we're able to look at it and understand from it what's God's view of this earth that we live on? What is his expectation upon us as human beings. And so we're going to seek to do that as we look at this. For the next 3 weeks we're going to be looking at this issue, then we're going to take a break in October, and then in November we're going to come back to this issue of "How we look after this earth" for 2 more Sundays which will cover the period when the COP26 conference is running; but we're going to start with beginnings.

And that's where we have to start, that's where we get that sense of the values that we hold as Christians and as people who seek to follow the Lord in the Christian Faith. So we going to look at these first few verses of Genesis chapter 1 through to the beginning of chapter 2. Some of the most famous verses in the scripture these first four words here: "In the beginning . . . . . God"

[Reading Genesis 1:1-2:4]

I wanted particularly to read that whole Passage to you because I think even the cadence of the passage, the way it reads, is important for us to understand. But I've got a question for you before we look into that in more detail. So one of the big debates that has occurred in our world for the last few centuries is around the idea of God creating versus Evolution. A big debate that has been around for centuries. I want to ask the question is this an unavoidable clash? Is it that Creationists and Evolutionists are always going to be at loggerheads with each other, trying to decide who is the one that's right? This is a very well-known bumper sticker that you've probably seen on many many cars over the years: the Fish sign, which of course was the secret sign that the earliest Christians used to indicate that they were Believers, because the word ΙΧΘΥΣ (Ichthus), which is the Greek word for "fish", had a special meaning, each letter meant something. (I'm not going to try and give it to you now, because I'll get it wrong but basically each of the letters of the word Ichthus made a Christian acclamation about God, about Christ). So there's the fish, a very well known symbol for Jesus. But I saw this one on a car more recently {like the Ichthus symbol but with Darwin in the middle and two short legs/feet drawn under it to suggest it was walking/crawling like a lizard/crocodile} The idea of evolution that the fish may represent Jesus but evolution means something added to and a moving on from the static of Jesus that this fish has evolved as Darwin has said it would.

How did all begin? How did all begin? I think it's important for us to say first of all that the Bible starts with these words: "In the beginning God." The Bible doesn't try to prove God's existence; the Bible assumes God's existence. I want to say to you the Bible for me is not a historical or a scientific natural history book. You can look at a parts of that a chapter we just read and you can see that parts of it that don't fit with our understanding of how the natural world developed – that's because the Bible is not a natural history book, it's a faith history book; it's a spiritual history book: it talks about the history of humanity, how God reached out to humanity and how humanity has sought to respond to the outreaching love of God. So in Genesis, the first book of the Bible, we have there this idea of the creator who took initiative in bringing about the creation. And the Bible makes a clear distinction, from the very beginning, between the Creator and the created. The Creator takes the initiative in bringing about the creation.

So, what was it all like? What can we draw from the Bible narrative, from the scripture that we have? If it's not a natural history book, what of the spiritual history can we draw from what we have in the scripture? Well, first of all I think it was: Orderly. It was orderly. When I was reading that passage we found that there was a cadence, it was almost poetry the way that things happened and so time and again we had: "...and God said: 'Let There Be'." And God called the different things, he gave them their names. Time again we have "...and God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning.": the first, the second, the third day. There's a pattern to it, and I think this is what the writer of Genesis wanted to communicate to us, that this was not a random act, this did not come about out of nothing – it came about out of the will and purpose of God. I think this orderly pattern was intended to remind us, and to remind the original Jewish readers – the audience, that original Jewish audience – of God's ordered and planned creative intention.

It's interesting that in the idea of order is also supported within evolutionary science which has been able to play that living things are understood to relate to each other, and so we have the order: the carnivores are at the bottom of the picture there {Picture of tree with Carnivora at root, splitting into branches as it goes up into families (Felidae; Mustelidae; Canidae), which further split into Genus (Felis; Mephitis, Lutra; Canis) with species at the top (Cat; Skunk, Otter; Dog, Wolf)}, and then there's a branching out of different types of carnivores, and so we have the family of

different animals. And then we go up to the genus which is a smaller grouping of certain types of animals and then at the very top we have the species. And so along the top there you can see: the domestic cat, the skunk, the european otter, right on the end is the wolf and in the middle is the domestic dog and all of those are related to each other, by evolutionary understanding they developed but they are different and yet there is an order, a way in which we can understand how these different animals came about.

So, what was it was all like in the beginning? It was firstly orderly. There was a sense of a plan and an order to what happens in the creative act.

Also it was ecologically balanced. In verse 3 of Genesis chapter 1 we had the creation of light. And then in verse 14 we had the creation of the sun and the moon! Now you might say to yourself: well hold on if the light comes from the sun as we believe it does in our solar system, how could they have been light before there was the sun? This is where for me it illustrates that Genesis was written, and the Bible was written, not as a scientific history book but as a spiritual history book. And it's thought that the writer of Genesis was writing to an audience who were hearing a lot about the fact that the sun was to be worshipped as god – they were sun worshippers. And so the writer of Genesis was saying: don't worship the sun, the sun is a created entity, a created thing, just like the moon and every other thing! Don't worship the creation worship the Creator. So there is an ecological balance to what we read in Genesis chapter 1.

Another example of it is that in verse 6 we have the sky being created and then in verse 20 God chooses to fill the sky and the seas with birds and fish. And again in verse 9 we have the creation of the land and it mentions the sea again in verse 9, and then in verse 24 we have this idea of filling the land with all good things, with creatures of different types and kinds. So this sense of the balance between the place that animals and birds and fish will live, and those fish and birds and animals being created. And so there's that balance of ecology within the biblical narrative.

Thirdly. So it's Orderly, it's Ecologically balanced; very simply it is intrinsically Good and Beautiful. And I think we know this don't we when we are in and nature. On occasions I go up to some of the hills – Shirley hills and Addington hills – and I have a wander around there, and I look at the very special type of pebbles you've got up there; and they say that actually millions of years ago Shirley and this part of Croydon was actually covered by sea, and so as you look at the pebbles they're all smooth because they're all washed by an ancient sea that smoothed them all out. And so if you go up there you'll see all of the pebbles there are rounded, they're smoothed away. And I don't know about you, but I just find that amazing that millions of years ago this environment in which we live was being created and brought about. And I don't know about you, but when I see it I look at it and I know in my heart: it is good. Food that I need, the recreation that I crave, the chance to do interesting things and see lovely things – all of this is part of the earth and it is good. It is good. It's given for our blessing.

What's it not all like? What's it not all like? Because I think it's quite important for us to recognise that there were other ideas around; when Genesis was written they were also seeking to respond to some of the other attitudes about what the Earth was like. And indeed what God was like. So what was it not like? Well, it was not like, for instance, the Greek gods; Here's a representation Poseidon who was (many of us may know) the god of the sea, he was also the god of earthquakes – for the Greeks – and also the god of horses, which is a bit of an interesting little addition there. (They do sometimes talk about the waves come crashing in – is it was white horses they talk about, perhaps there is a connection there.) But anyway, this is what they believed that Poseidon was: the god of those three things. But Poseidon had numerous affairs; he attacked, even sexually

attacked, both other gods and humans. He was involved in deceptions and wars. This was no sort of example for how to live a harmonious life. So the Biblical passage in Genesis is saying this is not what: our world, our existence, is not governed by petty warring god's seeking to please themselves.

It's also not an inherently evil world. These two characters here Marduk and Tiamat, they were worshipped by the Babylonians – they were two of the Babylonian gods – but in this picture here (they are slightly different colours so you can work out who the different characters are) the one in brown is Marduk, and Marduk is here presented chasing his mother (who's the one in green), her name is Tiamat, and he is chasing her and when he catches her he kills her. (it's fair to say there were some family issues in this particular family.) But the interesting thing is that when he kills her he then takes her entrails and throws them across the universe, and the Babylonians believed that the entrails, the insides of Tiamat, formed the stars and the planets. Now I tell you that not just to shock you, I tell you that because if that's your belief, if you believe that the universe was created out of the violence of one god against his mother, how are you going to feel about the violence that you might be thinking of doing towards your neighbouring tribe?

It's not going to be a problem is it? Because in the end the gods themselves did the very same thing, and so if you believe those sort of things about the ones that created the whole heavens and universe then you yourself are going to think there's no problem with me dominating and oppressing and killing and doing whatever I want to get on top and to be in charge. The writer of Genesis saying this is not an inherently evil world. It is good. It is good.

Thirdly the planet is not our God. In the Old Testament there are references to Baal and Asherah, and of course there was this constant battle in the Old Testament where the Jewish people were told to worship the one true God but time and again they went off and wanted to do their own thing, and would build temples or altars to Baal and to Asherah. And the whole idea was that these were fertility gods and so they believed that by worshipping these gods that crops would be numerous and they will be able to feed themselves. And actually they were people who believed that the crops themselves became the god, so as they worshipped they were worshipping the crops and the god who brought them about, and that's called "pantheism" - to believe that every stream and every rock and every mountain is a god; we call it pantheism. And they believed that there were little gods all over the place and you had to make sure you sacrificed to each of the gods in an area otherwise you might offend them. But the writer of Genesis saying the planet itself is not our God; there is a difference between Creator and the creation.

So, what's it all for? We've looked at what it's like, what it's not like – what's it all for?

Well I want to bring you on a few centuries and have a little think for a moment: when was the Bible divided into chapter and verse? {Chapters were added since early 13<sup>th</sup> century, with further subdivisions into verses started in the mid 16<sup>th</sup> century, about 1540} My understanding was it was in the 17<sup>th</sup> century with the Authorised Bible, and here we have this authorised by King James, which is where we get the King James Bible from; authorised by King James and so in the 17<sup>th</sup> century I think the chapters and verses were added to the Bible. The interesting thing is Bible scholars had to do that – we perhaps think the Bible has always been divided into chapters and verses; it wasn't, it was only a few centuries ago. And Bible scholars chose when to finish the chapter and start the new one, and they actually chose to finish chapter 1, as we read, after the creation of humans. So chapter 1 finishes actually at the end of day 6 and day 7 follows on in chapter 2. And so we have there the climax of the story is day 7 with God's holiday. Once again, this is a sense of balance – there's been both work and rest in a world where slaves (and

remember that the these words were originally written to people who had been enslaved and who remembered slavery) were this first audience and they received these chapters here of Genesis, and they read that God rested, and that God expected them to rest; and there was that balance of work and rest in the world that was God's intention for them.

So, what's it all for? It's actually all for God's blessing, God's joy – God finds joy in us finding joy in his world. That's why the dedication this morning was so important because actually it's a recognition that every child is a gift from God, and that God wants us to recognise that gift, give him glory and thanks for that child, but also recognise that child themselves can live and love this world and this life, and that is part of God's joy to see us enjoying each other and making the most of our world.

So to go back to our question: is this an unavoidable clash between the sense of the creation God creating the universe and evolution? I don't think it is an inevitable clash, an unavoidable clash of opinions and beliefs. I've shared this with you before but my position is God created the Earth and the universe, and the tool that he used for that job was evolution. Now you don't have to agree with me; we Christians need to learn to be able to disagree, but to do so in a way that we don't have to fall out. We can hear each other, we can respect each other's opinions, so you don't have to agree but this is my perspective: that God used evolution to bring about the world, and there you can see the Finger of God pointing at a lizard and the wording says “God threw a curve-ball and said: 'Let there be Evolution.'”

Is quite interesting: I've heard some people speaking about Charles Darwin and his beliefs, and some people have said that Charles Darwin was an out-and-out atheist, he hated the way that, you know, Christians misrepresented things and wouldn't listen to the possibility of a different view. Interestingly Charles's wife was a very strong Christian and Charles mourned, almost, the fact that he couldn't have that sense of strong Christian faith that his wife had. One of the last letters that Charles Darwin ever wrote, he wrote to a friend and he said to this friend: “You have expressed my inward conviction,” he wrote to this friend in one of his last letters, “that the universe is not the result of chance.” But Charles Darwin also wrote this: “The mystery of the beginning of all things is not soluble by us (we can't solve it), and I for one must be content to be an agnostic.” So Charles Darwin was saying he believes that the world has not come about by chance but he himself couldn't sign up to the biblical view of how the universe came about; but he did believe there was someone behind it, and so he called himself an agnostic – not the rabid atheist that I've heard some people saying he was, he actually was much more nuanced than that.

I want to finish just looking at a wonderful mystic called Julian of Norwich. (We would probably call her Juliana.) She was a mystic of the 14<sup>th</sup> century and she lived in Norwich, and you can visit Norwich now and see the tiny little chapel where she lived. Julian of Norwich: she was a mystic and so she had visions, and she almost died one stage during her life. And she believed that God preserved her and brought her through that, and she was recovering from his illness from which she almost died. She had a series of visions, and in one of the visions she saw in her hand something about the size of a hazelnut and she said this: “I looked at something I was holding about the size of a hazelnut. I wondered how it could survive since it was so little. The answer came from God that it endures and ever will endure because God loves it.”

Why do we exist? We exist because God chooses to love us, and brought us about. Why does everything in this world exist? Because God chooses to love it and chooses for it to exist. This is the answer to the earlier question why: Why does this universe exist, why does this earth matter? Because God loves it and gives it to us to love as well. Amen.

Let's pray together for a moment. Lord we pray that you will help us to reflect on this world in which we live and the responsibilities you give to us to be stewards of it. Lord at this particular time, as we are aware of the developing climate issues in our world, that we will not panic but rather we will look to how we can do our bit, but how we can lobby our leaders and international leaders across this world to be developing policies that respond to the climate crisis that is approaching and to some degree is already with us. Lord we remember that this is a good world given to us to enjoy, to revel in. We pray Lord God we will do all we can to pass on to our future generations a world that is still good, and is loved and is valued by us and those that follow on from us.

Amen.