

Genesis 1
Pymble 2.7.17
Creator creates creation

This week we've heard some of the first results from the 2016 census and already we've seen considerable media interest in the trends in religious belief, beside other things.

There has been a rise in those electing "no religion" to 30%, which is a staggering figure in itself and now higher than any of the individual Christian denominations (Catholic 26% and Anglican 15%, UCA 4%); though general belief in God remains fairly high at, I think, 57%. Much of that "belief in God" centres on God being the creator of the world.

In some places around the globe that phrase has become highly politicised as fundamentalist Christians, joined to the political right, do battle with conscientious scientists for the right to teach their beliefs about the origins of the universe in schools. Remarkably, this remains an ongoing battle in some states of the US today.

So how do we understand this creation story in Genesis, and beyond these questions of origin, what does it say to us today?

I hope that, like this story and its place in the Bible, this sermon will provide us with some sturdy theological foundations.

This won't be a verse-by-verse examination of the text but rather an attempt to identify major themes of the story. And just to note, I'm drawing quite heavily on Walter Brueggemann's very helpful commentary on Genesis.

Firstly then, how do we understand or approach this text?

Immediately upon reading this first chapter of Genesis we recognize the poetic form –

the rhythm and repetition of words and phrases:

"There was evening and there was morning the first day... the second day" and so on.

This suggests at least some caution in taking the words literally, as if this text was describing or recording what actually happened on week one of earth's history.

Actually, the idea of the text providing a **scientific insight**

into the historical origins of the universe would be completely foreign to the authors and original readers of the text – it just wasn't their concern. Today we simply don't need to be 6-day creationists if we want our faith to be informed by the Bible. Indeed the Bible remains silent on the "how" question of creation, leaving every form of scientific investigation open to the believer. What the text won't give way on is the claim that all of reality derives from, and belongs to, a sovereign and gracious God.

If it is not science or history, is it correct to call this text, *myth*, in the proper sense of the word – telling us timeless truths about the nature of the world? I think this is closer to the sense of the story but again it is not quite the intention of the text. Rather, Brueggemann would call the text *proclamation* – a carefully crafted narrative directed to a particular group of believers about the relationship between God and the world.

If we accept this idea that it is primarily proclamation, what then is proclaimed by Genesis 1? Many precious things I believe, perhaps summed up in this little sentence, **"Creator creates creation"**; subject – verb – object. We accept that this 3-word rubric is a *confessional statement* about how believers understand the universe – that there is a creator beyond (but intimately connected with) the realms of this physical creation, with the ability and the desire to bring into being that which does not exist.

This is such a major confession. In one sense, everything else flows from this central affirmation. **If we believe there is a creator**, then we will understand that human beings are connected to and accountable for their actions. *If there is a creator*, then all people must be equal before this creator and we must treat them likewise. *If there is a creator* then the "material" of this world, as beautiful as it may be, is not the object of our praise, but rather ultimately points to a gracious benefactor. *If there is a creator*, human beings have a particular relationship with plants, animals and the rest of the earth

by virtue of being co-creatures.
Yes we have “dominion” over every created thing
but that dominion is to be exercised
within the relationships that God has established.
If there is a creator, so many things follow.

The text proclaims the good news
that God has a **will and purpose** for the world,
and if we add in insights from the Ephesians reading,
that plan might be summed up as
willing obedience, unity and beauty.
It is not ultimately up to us whether God will achieve this plan –
that is already determined,
(Brueggemann says humans don’t get a vote in it)
but we can choose to co-operate or not
in God bringing his plans to fulfillment.
God delights in his good creation and it is not aimless;
it is heading somewhere, and that somewhere is a
pleasing, blessed unity under Christ.

The Genesis text also proclaims
that there is a deep and abiding **connection**
between God and God’s creation.
God lovingly wills his creation into being,
allowing it to come forth in response to his powerful word.
This is the start of God’s faithful relationship
with what he has created.
There is never the sense that God creates the world
and then retreats,
allowing it to ‘unwind’ like a watch without him.
God is intimately involved with
and passionately committed to his creation.
This is why there is such sadness in God when humanity
continues to refuse God’s will and way.
God has “skin in the game”, if you like,
and will not walk away from his creation.
Indeed the rest of Genesis, and we might say the Bible,
follows God’s plans and determination to bring his will to pass.

Further, we see in this proclamation of the creation story
that while God has created all things and calls for obedience,
there is **amazing freedom** given to the creation,
and particularly to human beings.
God’s way of relating is by **invitation not coercion**;
God never acts like a tyrant, compelling people to do his will,
rather he risks the gift of freedom with people.

And so the will and plan of God, on the one hand together with the freedom granted to people, on the other set the narrative tension within the text.

Will the creation follow the creator?

How will the creator respond when people choose not to follow him?

How will the divine plan come to fruition?

Finally for this morning,

who might have first received this proclamation, and what difference does that make for us today?

While this text has the characteristics of a very ancient oral story, perhaps shared around the campfires of nomadic peoples, in its present form, scholars tell us it is dated to the 6th century BC to the time of Israel's painful exile in Babylon.

To those despairing tribes, living in the chaos of being conquered, perhaps the story is not so much one of power, but of order.

We are used to hearing verse 1

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, and the earth was a formless void..."

and hearing that as a stark statement of God's power to bring something out of nothing.

However, it is just as accurate to translate the sentence, *"In the beginning, when God began to create the earth, the earth was formless and void..."*

This translation emphasises God bringing order out of the existing chaos, a strong word of hope to the defeated exiles.

What could be more needed in the church today than this word of hope about the power of God to accomplish his will and way?

What could be more relevant to the churches of Australia as they find themselves outnumbered by those who state they have no religious affiliation?

As our mainline denominations slowly decline in number and huge changes inevitably come to the institutional church, we confess through this foundational text, the power of God to bring forth order out of chaos and the creativity of God to bring forth beauty out of despair.