

Molescroft/Minster – Sun Feb 23rd 2014 – 2nd before Lent

Readings: Gen 1.1-2.3 Rom 8:18-25 Matt 6:25-end

Theme: Taking part in creation

Aims: To explore our response to the first creation story

In the Standard Attainment tests, or SATS, that are given to children at the age of eleven (at end of primary school), the English test has two parts, one of which is a longer written test. Here's an example of what they might be asked to do:

"Imagine a person called Pip Davenport who became famous for inventing new kinds of funfair rides over a hundred years ago. Here is the outline of his life...(some facts of his life are given) You can add your own ideas using your imagination. Your task is to write a biography of Pip's life..."

It's a piece of imagination writing, something which is thought to be an important skill for young people to have (and they'd only have 45 minutes to write it...how would you do?...!)

Now imagine that you are living in the middle of an occupied country, and that the national identity of your own people is at risk of disappearing.

What sort of imaginative piece of writing might you compose to help everyone?

What would you want to urge them to think or believe?

How would you console them?

The country was Babylon. The people were the Israelites.

About 600 years before Christ the Israelite nation had been deported to Babylon, after being defeated in war.

The verses of Genesis that we heard, chapter 1 plus a bit more, are a poem – a piece of imaginative writing – that was written to console the people of Israel when their national identity was at risk.

Their identity was wrapped up in their belief in God.

How could their God – who was all powerful – let this happen to them? And where was he now? It was a crisis of faith.

Those who wrote the first creation account wanted to encourage their people to remember and know that God was the context and reason for their existence.

This creation account has things in common with other origin stories of the Near East of ancient Israel. The unique thing about this one, though, is that it's monotheistic – it's about only one God.

A recent translator of the Old Testament, Nicholas King, says of Genesis: "It is not intended as a scientific treatise, but as a narrative indicating that our story begins, where it must also end, with God...the context, all the time, is the unfailing fidelity of God who never goes back on the promises that he makes..."

If we approach the first creation story as a poem, we can be drawn in by its rhythm and descriptions:

"In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth..." could also be translated "In the beginning when God began to create the heavens and the earth..." – a change in tense which suggests a creator who goes on creating.

This was just the beginning.

And in the beginning, this story suggests, there *wasn't* nothing. God didn't create something out of nothing.

"The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep."

There was chaos, which God began to order.

The wind, or spirit, of God swept (or hovered) over the face of the waters...and then God spoke.

God spoke things into existence – light, sky, seas, dry land, vegetation, the sun, moon and stars, living creatures and then humans, the culmination of his creation.

Every time God spoke things into existence, he saw that they were good.

God blessed the humans he had made, in his image. He gave them dominion over all other animals. He gave everything he made vegetation to eat – there is no hint of killing animals for food – and then he rested.

The story describes an idyll, a very happy, peaceful and simple situation into which life was placed.

The Israelite people in Babylon were to take comfort from remembering that their relationship with God was still there, that it went back a long way, and that God had not now abandoned them.

Of course, if we read on into the rest of Genesis, we find that life didn't stay idyllic for long.

Life isn't like that.

The explanation for the reality of life as we find it is the disobedience of Eve and Adam, as sin finds its way into the world – a turning away from God.

Suffering is the result, as described by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans; a suffering which is not just experienced by humans, but by the whole created world.

He says, "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only creation but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies." (8:22,23)

For Paul, Adam brought sin into the world, and Christ redeems it.

So for us, this side of Jesus' resurrection, there is hope.

Life isn't idyllic, far from it - but there is someone who has been offered to us by God as a saviour, Jesus Christ.

And by the work of God's Holy Spirit, we can engage with God our creator, in a renewed relationship.

How can we engage with our creator,

and with the first creation story,

in a way which brings us life?

Here are five ideas (you may be able to think of some more).

First, like the ancient Israelites, the context in which we live is that God existed before us; we live in his world.

He is unfailingly faithful to us, his people.

Even when we turn away from Him, or suffer so much that we think he has abandoned us, he exists.

The constant message of the Old Testament is that God is steadfast. We can rely on him.

And the goodness of the first creation – that which God saw was good – still prevails as the backdrop to our existence.

He created with exuberance and gave it to humankind as a gift.

Despite the presence of evil, goodness – peace, health and flourishing - is still the thing which human beings seek, rather than the opposite.

Second, as we are made in God's image, we too are creative! Creativity is something which is in us. He chose to give it to us.

Creativity is one of the joys of life – just look around us at the amazing creativity needed to build this church – the windows, the ceiling, the decorations, the banners, the flowers

Some of us are more creative than others, but even those of us who are not confident at it can take pleasure in creating, and remember that it is a gift of God. Some retreats are built around creativity – I've seen adverts for a knitting retreat recently, and one for artists and for musicians; if you'd like to explore your God-given creativity, I'd recommend them.

Thirdly, one way in which we are creative is in reproducing. Parents of new born babies often experience awe at the sight of something created by them, and by God. This sense of being involved with something bigger than them and wanting to say thank you for it is sometimes one of the reasons for asking for baptism; it's a recognition that we live in the context of God.

Fourth, the fact that we are at the top of the food chain gives us immense responsibility to take care of our world. We have been given the stewardship of God's creation, which is a huge privilege. How are we doing, do you think?

The recent wet weather and floods have caused people to look again at the predictions made a few years ago by those championing global warming. Yes, things are changing; apparently, wetter winters and hotter summers are on the cards (according to our weather forecasters).

Campaigning for looking after the world better is not the preserve of God's people, of course – many have realised that if we don't, there will be no future for future generations, nowhere for them to live.

And finally, fifth, we can rest, as God did. Creativity needs resourcing. Sabbath rest, which is a key part of Jewish life, can also be a welcome part of our lives.

Unfortunately it is very easy to fill our leisure time with activity – going shopping, playing sport, watching telly, going to church...!... so that the idea of spending time with God on the sabbath gets displaced.

How can we give attention to our relationship with God during those times we have to decide what we do? I have heard of some Christians giving Saturday over to personal or family time together with God, because Sunday is so full of activity.

What works for you?

John Polkinghorne, a Christian priest and research physicist, has written this:

"The play of creation, as we perceive it, has more the appearance of an improvisation than the performance of a predetermined script." (*quoted in Runcorn 2003 p.121*)

Improvisation is supremely creative – it is made up on the spot – there is often a structure to it, but it only takes shape when it is performed.

Creation is supremely creative.

In the beginning, God *started* to create the world, as the first verse of Genesis says. And he carries on creating it; on his own, yes, but also with our help.

He gave creation to us and he made us creative, so that we could improvise our own response to life with him, working with the Holy Spirit.

We can improvise together.

He can help us get better at it, so that life can be improved.

May we turn to God for guidance
and have the confidence
to be what he made us to be, created in his image.
May he help us to engage with him in creation,
in ways which bring us life.
Amen.