

One of the features of the changes to the Church of England's liturgy in recent years is that many denominations now have Sunday Bible readings in common. Broadly speaking, Methodists, Anglicans and Roman Catholics, meeting for worship Sunday by Sunday, will be encountering the same Bible passages week by week.

Except today. On the Second Sunday before Lent (sadly a much more prosaic title than the *Book of Common Prayer's* 'Sexagesima') the Church of England goes it alone, and selects three readings and two prayers all based on the theme of creation, on the basis that there is otherwise little opportunity to reflect on this during the year. It is the only time that the Church of England diverges so radically from the other churches who use this lectionary, so it must be important.

Because the Bible readings are selected on a three year pattern, that means finding nine readings and three Psalms for this particular Sunday. You might want to set yourselves a challenge. Imagine you were, for a moment, a member of the Church of England's Liturgical Commission. I was one for seven years, and it wasn't too painful. What Old Testament, Epistle and Gospel readings would you choose to illustrate the theme, and challenge the church year by year?

Genesis is obvious, summing up as it does an image of God as creator and the world as created and flawed. But there is more to this theme than simply to wonder who made us and our world in the first place. If we could deduce every process and explain every means whereby we have come to be here and to be as we are, then, in one sense we will be no further on. There is book after book on neo Darwinism and Intelligent Design, and I am manifestly no scientist. But I do reflect that science trusts what it knows about, until some new discovery is made which changes what it knows. Read our February Magazine for some reflections from the academic scientists among us. I was an English teacher remember, and perhaps I'm really Shakesperean: 'there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy', says Hamlet.

The Bible has, in the end, comparatively little to say about the **means** by which we come to be here. There is something futile in American Legislatures trying to rule on whether schools should teach that the earth was made on six days six thousand years ago, it seems to me, because I don't think that's the question genesis is trying to answer. I think the Bible is much clearer on **why** we are here, what we are here for, and where this will all end. If the Bible has little about the processes through which we have been developed, there is much about the purpose of the created order, and its ultimate reliance upon God. I wonder then whether you have thought of other passages to choose? In the middle of a violent storm Jesus speaks and the winds and waves cease. The disciples move to another level of understanding about Jesus: 'even the winds and the waves obey him'. Or, concerned for their own future, Jesus points to creation to show that God is involved in its every aspect: lilies of the field are clothed like Solomon, birds of the air are fed though they make no provisions for themselves. God in creation is almighty, transcendent and awesome, and God in creation is intimate, immanent and all embracing.

Our distinctiveness, so far as we can tell, in creation, is that we can conceptualise and think great thoughts. So I'm sure that you have pondered other passages which speak of this theme, and you will not have had to look too far as two of the great overarching leaps of imagination and concept were read as our Epistle and Gospel today. 'Christ, the image of the invisible God....In the beginning was the Word' are a long way from the lilies of the field. Here are assertions, beliefs, proclamations, almost choruses and arias of the mind, seeking as they do to express that which words can only strain at and science is unable yet to put into its own taxonomy, its own order.

Just three decades or so after the crucifixion Paul places a statement about God, Christ Jesus, the world, humanity, and the final resolution of all things at the front of a letter to a young church. It is so all encompassing in its thought that its first hearers might perhaps have had to pick themselves up from the floor. I can only think of it as setting the boundaries of our belief about God and the world: the universe made by God through Christ; God revealed fully in Christ; the world finding its continued life in Christ; the world looking for final reconciliation and glory in Christ. How these things come to be is the matter of all our believing and praying and thinking and scientific exploration, but it is as if a map maker has defined the extremities of the territories and then set us to fill in the contours and features of the interior. There is nothing in the universe, says Paul, which is outside the scope of Christ's creative power, sustaining love and reconciling sacrifice.

That is, of course, the proper subject of our scientific enquiry and philosophical speculation. But we do well not to restrict this simply to the empirical logical and rational realm. A belief that God's involvement in the universe is overarching and intimate should be the food of our souls as well. This is about worship and prayer and silence and exaltation. It is generally agreed that these five verses of Colossians Chapter 1 are words taken by Paul from a hymn, a creedal statement used in the worship of the earliest church, and as such they were perhaps already known to the Colossian church. What you sing expresses and shapes your belief. The stuff of your worship is the stuff of your soul – so let's make it deep and rich.

The infinite complexity of the created order leads us to wonder and awe. God's involvement in every aspect of that order is something to be taken by faith, to be encompassed in worship, and to be acted upon with courage. Paul's statement here is that Christ the creator has also recreated a flawed creation: a world which is manifestly fractured is being reconciled through Christ, a world which is manifestly in conflict is being offered peace through Christ. And that reconciliation and peacemaking are effective only because Christ is supreme over creation: all things hold together through him. Our part is to be swept up in that reconciliation and peacemaking; to respect creation and to make peace where we can.

Thanks be to God who has made us and remade us, and allows us to be part of the providence of his creation, as we wait (in the words of another passage you might have chosen) with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God, and the final wholeness of all things in Christ, to whom be all glory in the church and in all ages. Amen