

Honley Parish Church and Brockholes S. George

18.vi.2017 – Genesis i.1-13, 'Water of Life'

When I was in the fifth form, our English master gave us a list of what were judged to be 'The Best 100 Books of the Twentieth Century'. It had been compiled for *The Daily Telegraph*, and the majority of works on it were fairly heavy. Mr Thomas's advice was that we might like to consider bringing one of them in for our private reading on Thursday mornings. As we perused the list, one title stood out as being rather different from the others. It was number 77: *Delia Smith's Complete Cookery Course*. You can imagine which of the twentieth century's best one hundred books we all brought in the following Thursday, sitting in front of Mr Thomas, reading it as if it were a novel.

Reading *Delia Smith's Complete Cookery Course* as if it were a novel is plainly absurd. No one has ever read it like that – other than a group of puckish schoolboys in the north of England. But sometimes people have tried to do something similar with the opening chapters of Genesis, from which we heard our first lesson. On the one hand, some people read it as if it were an unadorned historical-scientific account of how the world was made – in six twenty-four hour periods, which God having a rest on the seventh. On the other hand, some people treat it as complete fiction, a sort of creation-story *Winnie the Pooh*. I want to suggest as we begin that neither approach will quite do.

For a start, the author of Genesis is really writing not about the world but about God. That much is obvious from the first four

words of our English translation: 'In the beginning God.' And to underline the point for us, each new section begins 'And God said.' This is a theological work.

It is also a saga. The writing is ordered in a particular way, with one thing following another, and with deliberately repeated phrases lending an almost poetic quality to the words. So we read these words as 'theological saga'. For those of us who prefer neat explanations, Genesis might seem rather confusing. Perhaps that is a good thing.

With that warning in place, it is worth spending a few moments looking at what the text does tell us about God and the creation. The first two verses tell us what was there in the beginning. First, as I've already said, there was God – the eternal God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He is unambiguously the one who creates the heavens and the earth. Secondly, there was formlessness and emptiness. You might think of this as saying that rather than there being something, there was nothing – or at least, nothingness as a concept. And if it is possible for nothingness to be disordered, it was. The earth was formless and empty. But thirdly, there does seem to have been water. Darkness was over the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. What we have in the beginning, then, is God, and a watery disorder.

It is God who brings form and beauty out of watery disorder. The way he does it is by speaking. It is impossible for Christians to think of God speaking without thinking of Jesus Christ. As we heard in our second lesson, he is the eternal Word of God, the

Speech of God. And so it was in the beginning. The Father creates through Jesus Christ, as he speaks the world into being. From the very start, the way the Father relates to his world is in and through his Son. As we say in the Nicene Creed of the Lord Jesus Christ, 'through him all things were made.'

The way God does that in the Genesis saga is partly by separating one bit of water from another bit. 'And God said, "Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water." So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it was so. God called the vault "sky". And there was evening, and there was morning – the second day.'

But there also has to be a distinction made between water and everything else. So the writer goes on: 'And God said, "Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let the dry ground appear." And it was so. God called the dry ground "land", and the gathered waters he called "seas". And God saw that it was good.' This is the beginning of a thread which runs throughout Scripture. The land is good, and the sea is a place of turmoil and rebellion. The watery chaos of the beginning of Genesis echoes through the rest of the Bible, so that by the time we reach the new creation at the end of the Bible, there is no more sea.

Nevertheless, the water is not a place only of death: 'And God said, "Let the water teem with living creatures...." So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living thing with

which the water teems and that moves about in it, according to their kinds....' From the watery chaos, God brings about life.

That subversion is what the gospel is all about. Yes, the water is a place of rebellion and chaos. Yes, in the new creation there will be no more sea. But in the mean time, God subverts the chaos of the sea and makes it a place of fertility and productivity. Out of death, God brings life. And so you can draw a line from the water teeming with living creatures in Genesis 1 all the way to the cross, as Jesus dies an ignoble death as a common criminal; and through that death, God brings about life in all its abundance. The water teems with living creatures. As we say at the Eucharist in Passiontide, 'The tree of shame was made the tree of glory; and where life was lost, there life has been restored.'

And that changes the way we look at the world. It changes the way we think ethically about the world. It changes the way we do science. You see, there are Christians who think the world is somehow a dangerous place. They see scientific endeavour as somehow divorced from the Christian faith. This was brought home to me when I was an assistant curate in North London and I realised, to my horror, that the young people in my confirmation class thought science and Christian faith were ultimately incompatible. But the world in which we live, the world we seek to discover, is a world which has been redeemed. It is not simply a place of rebellion against God. It is a place in which God is at work, in and through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, to bring about life in all its fulness.

So, it turns out Genesis 1 has a lot to say about the Christian faith and science. It isn't a scientific text per se. It is rather more than that. It reveals to us a God who brings order out of disorder, and life out of death. The interplay between the world's order and the world's disorder is where we discover God at work: in our own lives, as we seek to curtail the chaos of our lives and to bring about order; in the world of science, as we discover the world and its possibilities; and ultimately in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as Jesus suffers the effects of a world in rebellion against God and brings about a new world order, a new creation.

In the beginning, God.