

Genesis 1:1-3, 11-13, 24-31 – Catching God's heart for creation

This is the first week of our studies based on the Lent book chosen by the Archbishop of Canterbury, namely, Ruth Valerio's *Saying Yes to Life*. This book challenges us to take a fresh look at our world as God's creation. To recognise what we have done and what we are doing to God's world with all its wonderful creatures and to reconsider our ways so that we might begin to mend our planet rather than hastening its death. It calls us to lament and to repent.

The book is not always easy reading. If you want to tackle a simpler book on this subject, can I recommend to you Dave Bookless's, *Planet Wise: Dare to Care for God's World*. It is easy to read but also full of similar challenges to Ruth Valerio's latest book. A previous book by Ruth Valerio, *L is for Lifestyle: Christian living that doesn't cost the earth*, is also easy to read and full of practical advice.

I want to set the scene for this Lent series by looking at the wonderful account of God's creation of our world that we find in Genesis chapter 1.

This is God's world

This is God's world because he made it – he created it.

Genesis 1 describes how God created the world in which we live and how he clothed its land with all manner of plants and trees. It describes how he populated the air with birds that fly across the sky and populated the sea with its variety of fish and other swimming creatures. God then filled the land with its rich variety of animals before, last of all making humankind.

The Scriptures delight to describe the care and craft with which God made this world and the universe around us. Psalm 8 reads:

LORD, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory
in the heavens...
When I consider your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars,
which you have set in place,
what is mankind that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them? (Psalm 8:1, 3-4)

I love the way the psalm describes the heavens along with the Sun, moon and stars as the work of God's fingers; as if God were a potter who has carefully and meticulously shaped each part of the universe before setting it in its place.

And Isaiah says:

Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens:
who created all these?
He who brings out the starry host one by one
and calls forth each of them by name.
Because of his great power and mighty strength,
not one of them is missing. (Isaiah 40:26)

Every star is known to God by name, for he made them. They were there last night and shall be there tonight not simply by virtue of their own enduring existence but because of God's creative and sustaining power; it is because of God's "great power and mighty strength," that "not one of them is missing."

And Job 38-41 describes the wonder and complexity of our created world with its water cycle by which life is sustained and the diversity of the living creatures God has made, including such delightful verses as Job 38:13:

The wings of the ostrich flap joyfully,
though they cannot compare
with the wings and feathers of the stork.

In her book, *Saying Yes to Life* (p. 139), Ruth Valerio writes in similar vein:

We share this world with the most incredible and wonderful mix of strange, colourful, funny, scary, cuddly, scaly, odd, tiny, huge creatures that we could ever possibly imagine! Who could have thought up the star-shaped mole of North America with its 22 little tentacles on the end of its nose that it uses to find food, or the tiny elusive primate called the tarsier of southeast Asia, with its huge eyes, ability to turn its head 180 degrees and super-long back legs which enable it to leap up to five metres from branch to branch? Who would make up the saiga antelope of Eurasia with its strange nose that comes down over its mouth, or the armadillo of sub-Saharan Africa with its long tongue and kangaroo-like ears, or the lion-tailed macaque of India, with its stunning silver-white mane and tail that ends in a tuft like a lion's? Who would think of putting such tufty ears on the European lynx and who would ever have imagined the duck-billed platypus with its duck-like bill and beaver-like tail?! Wherever in the world we live, in the city or in the countryside, we have amazing creatures around us – even if they are not all as fancy as those just mentioned. Why not pause for a moment to think about the animals that live around you and give thanks to God for such an abundance of life?

I am reminded of the song:

I see trees of green, red roses too
I see them bloom for me and you
And I think to myself what a wonderful world

I see skies of blue and clouds of white
The bright blessed day, the dark sacred night
And I think to myself what a wonderful world

We really do live in a wonderful world; a world that is full of beauty and which has so many things that should fill us with wonder, delight and thankfulness. This is the world that God has created and pronounced "good".

But why did God create the universe?

Why does our wonderful world and our amazing universe exist? God did not have to create it. God is all sufficient in himself; he does not need anything else. God was not lonely and looking for companionship, as a person living on their own may get themselves a dog for companionship and comfort. Why, then, did God create the world?

God is love. From all eternity the three persons of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, lived in a perfect relationship of love flowing from each and to each. And I think that this is the answer to the question of why God made the world. God's love is so great that it spilled over into an act of creation that he might delight in and show his love towards all that he created. Indeed, Scripture tells us that the whole universe was made through Christ and for Christ (Colossians 1:15-16). The universe was created through the concerted purpose and activity of the Triune God yet it is spoken of as being created particularly through Christ – through God the Son (see also John 1:3). He is the Word of God that became incarnate at last in the man, Jesus of Nazareth. He is the Word spoken at the beginning through which worlds were formed; the Word first became incarnate in the very fabric of our universe. And the universe was created for him. It is the Father's love-gift to the Son. It is his inheritance. It is his special possession. This is Christ's world.

So the universe was created as an act of love – an outflowing of the love of God. And God loves the world he has created even as he loves the Son through whom and for whom it was created. God himself delights in his creation. He is the one who has declared it to be good, very good (Genesis 1:31).

We have been given a special place in God's world

Humankind, male and female, are spoken of as being created on the sixth day along with all the other land animals. We were created to be land animals. But Genesis 1 also makes it clear that there is a sense in which we are different from all other land animals. The creation of the man and the woman is described as involving a deliberative act by God ('Let us make...' rather than 'Let there be...'), and human beings are described as being created 'in the image of God'.

What does it mean to be created in the image of God? It means that we have been created to be like God, as like God as a human being can possibly be. Jesus himself shows us what this means.

It means that we were created for fellowship with God, to know him and to be known by him. This has been the theme of the series of studies on "Prayer" that we have been considering as a church over the last couple of months. Prayer is an expression of that fellowship and communion with God for which we were created.

And being created in God's image means that we have been created as his representatives. We were made to work with and for God, for the accomplishing of his purposes. In Genesis 1:26 we read:

Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.'

To quote again from Ruth Valerio:

British Old Testament scholar, Chris Wright, makes the point that the grammar used in these verses [vv. 26-28] indicates the role that humans have: 'Because God intended this last-created species, the human species, to exercise dominion over the rest of his creatures, for that reason God expressly and purposefully created this species alone in his own image'. The sense of the verses could then be read, 'Let us make human beings in our own image and likeness, so that they may look after the rest of creation'. [*Living as the People of God: The Relevance of Old Testament Ethics*, pp. 82-83] The image of God, therefore, is not so much any innate quality within us but more like a job title.

In other words, we were created to image God in our attitude towards, and in our behaviour with respect to, his creation. And, by the way in which we treat the created world we are to display the love God has for his world.

With this in mind, let us finish the first of these studies by asking,

How then should we be exercising our dominion over creation?

What does it mean that God has entrusted human beings to have dominion over his creation – to rule over it or to have power over it to echo other translations?

Sadly, human beings have often acted as though we had a mandate to do what we like with the world: to cut down its trees; to decimate the seas of their creatures; to ravage the ground to extract the fuel and minerals we want to feed our insatiable desire for more. We can see and can experience what this is doing to our planet – No, not to our planet but to God's world. The Changing weather patterns have brought a series of severe storms across the Atlantic flooding homes and damaging farmland. Sustained high temperatures in Australia have resulted in fires sweeping through wooded areas and destroying homes, only to be followed by heavy rain and even snow. Changing weather patterns in Africa have brought drought and famine. Warming seas have led to the death of coral reefs. Melting ice caps and retreating glaciers are causing a rise in sea level and threatening to submerge coastal areas and low-lying islands. In this country we have witnessed the decimation of insect populations, including bees which are so essential to pollination and the disappearance of garden birds. Elsewhere in our lifetime many species have become extinct. We are living with the prospect of mass migrations of populations from areas that can no longer sustain them and the increasing threat of pandemics. Where will it all end?

Ruth Valerio brings home the point using the following illustration:

A beautiful tapestry I made some years ago that hangs proudly on my wall: a William Morris design of a peacock in the woods. Can you imagine how I would feel if I came home one day to find my daughters had put it on the floor and were using it to wipe their muddy feet? I'd be horrified ... devastated ... so upset! Well, I can tell you with complete certainty that would never happen. Why? Because they love me and would never dream of doing something so terrible to the tapestry I value so much. And they love it too, because I love it. (*Saying Yes to Life*, p. 57)

God made this world and loves it so much that he sent his Son into the world to become part of it and to give his life for it. He calls us to image him in our care for his world. We are not to treat it as a disposable asset, something merely to be used for our own convenience (pun completely intended). We are to treasure this world and everything in it as God himself treasures it. We are to love and care for God's world as he loves all that he has made. We need to lament over the damage we have inflicted on God's creation and to repent over our self-centred and self-serving behaviour as individuals and as a species. We need urgently to change our ways.

We will look at these themes in greater detail in coming weeks.

But, I don't want to end on a negative note, but rather to conclude with some inspiring words from Jeremy Begbie's book, *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music*:

In much Christian writing on creation, especially if it is alert to our environmental calamities, it is not unusual to find the mood unremittingly bleak – full of regret, guilt by association, a frowning repentance, an earnest determination to act quickly to avert catastrophe. While not for a moment downplaying the seriousness of our situation, for Christians the mandate for any action in the created world ... is essentially evangelical – grounded in the glad news of God's promise, acted out and guaranteed in Christ, that God has a future for the world he made and that he has a place for his people as part of that future...

We who have misdirected our praise have been invited, against every expectation and everything we deserve, to step back into that role intended for us, to voice creation's praise to the resounding glory of the Creator, and to witness wonders beyond our imagining in our own lives and the lives of others. We do indeed have a calling, but it is held aloft by this invitation: to share in the action of the Triune God as he draws all things to himself through his Son and Spirit. (*Resounding Truth*, p. 276)

Let us hear afresh the call of Christ upon our lives and lead a Gospel revolution of loving care for God's beloved creation.

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