

A SERMON IN KING'S COLLEGE CHAPEL

A Last Hope?

It is often said that because 'Science' has disproved the story of creation, we don't need the first few chapters of Genesis. But in a world, as we are today, afflicted with pain and suffering and sadness and grief; in a world full of crises, I suggest we cannot need what these stories have to tell us less. For all the advances of science, we have not solved the problem that these ancient stories are trying to tackle.

Genesis chapter 12, from where our first reading this morning comes, is at the end of a run of crises in the first few chapters of the Bible just as traumatic and earth-shattering as any in our world today. With the benefit of modern understandings, we struggle to take them as literal, scientific history, but nonetheless the movement, the mythos, they describe is instinctively recognisable to us.

At the beginning, God has made the world, and God has seen that it was good. God then invites humanity to help in running it, firstly in naming the animals. And then humanity messes up, tries to become like God, and things fall apart. Our forebears play with God's words so that they can do as they will, they eat the forbidden fruit, and angry at what they perceive as God being unfair to them, they try to set themselves up as the arbiters of life and death, and with knowledge of all things. By these human actions – and even without needing a literal Adam or Eve, we know and recognise the desires and actions they show and take – shame and the craving of vengeance are seen to come into the world that God had created good.

God responds to their actions; and yes, there is punishment – and no light punishment at that – but God also provides clothing for their newly recognised nakedness.¹

¹ Genesis 1-3

We see this again a little further on in the story, when the first murder occurs. Cain kills his brother Abel in anger, claiming the power of life and death sought by Adam and Eve with the forbidden fruit. And again God punishes, as we know, actions have consequences – but God does not offer simple justice. Such a justice would surely require Cain’s blood to atone for Abel’s. Instead God offers an alternative plan, and marks Cain so that his life is protected.²

The story again continues – though I’m sure we are all glad not to have read aloud chapter five’s expansion of the story with the unfamiliar names of the generations that pass. The consequences of human failings have now spread to the whole earth. The thoughts and inclinations of every human heart, so the writer of Genesis tells us, were ‘only evil continually’. And so God again provides the consequences of these evil deeds. But first, yet again, God identifies a way of hope.³

The world was full of evil, but still God found one person, and that was enough to keep trying. The one was Noah, and this time the consequence was so great that the whole world was destroyed by the Great Flood. But God provided a means of hope, a way forward. The evil being done, for the sake of justice, required the complete destruction of all things. God provided, quite literally, a life boat.⁴

Even such a dramatic event does not break the cycle though, even with God’s gracious promise to limit still further the effects of justice and never again allow such destruction. For just a short time on, and we come to the Tower of Babel. It is the same mistake – humanity trying to be God. And so, since justice requires consequences, the people are scattered.⁵

² Genesis 4

³ Genesis 6

⁴ Genesis 7-9

⁵ Genesis 11

But God does not leave it there, for the cycle to continue to repeat. Just as God made a lasting promise to Adam, to Cain, to Noah, God comes again to make a new promise, a new covenant for the good of God's creation. Not repudiating the old, but offering yet more mercy, yet more grace, yet more leniency from what a cold, simple justice requires.

God makes a new promise with a chosen family, and with their descendants. God makes a promise to Abram and Sarai, later called Abraham and Sarah, that God will make of them a great nation, and through them all families of the earth shall be blessed.⁶

In some ways, these verses of Genesis mark the transition from a mythic pre-history into rather more concrete historical events. But the story they mark the end of is by no means a made up one. It tells us the story of how we human beings truly behave, and how God responds. It tells us the story of how every time we turn away from God's path, God doesn't simply punish, but God offers an abundance of promise and hope. And as the events move into the more historical, we see this continue, with ever increasing swathes of hope upon hope, promise upon promise, opportunity upon opportunity.

In what I would suggest is the most important liturgy of the Christian Year, the Great Vigil Celebration of Easter in the night before Easter Morning, the Deacon sings a song of praise, the Exsultet, which speaks of 'the truly necessary sin of Adam... the happy fault' – the *felix culpa* – 'that wins for us so great a Redeemer.'

Rather crazily it is human sinfulness, and God's extraordinary response to that, that elevates human destiny from the, yes happy but ultimately limited, life in Eden to the promise made and accomplished in Christ to be children of God and coheirs with him in the Kingdom of God.

⁶ Genesis 12

God cannot but act with justice in response to evil and sinfulness. That is part of God's fundamental nature, part of what makes God, God. But God does not give up on God's creation. God does not abandon God's own. God keeps coming back, and God keeps offering more and more and more. As St Paul puts it in his great letter to the Romans, even 'where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.'⁷

God weds Godself to God's people. However much those people sin, however much they – we – turn away from God's path, God cannot quit. Just as much as justice is fundamentally part of God's identity, so too, is fidelity, faithfulness to God's promises. This reaches a climax in the Son of Man who, like the serpent in the wilderness, is lifted up, lifted up on the Cross that, as we heard in the Gospel this morning, 'whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.'⁸

God keeps going that extra mile – it should come as no surprise that God is willing to go so far as to cost God life itself. God is pained by human sin, but God maintains that through God's people, 'all families of the earth shall be blessed.'⁹ And so, God does what is necessary. God provides 'so great a Redeemer' – God, as God has done throughout the story, enters into the odious reality of human sinfulness, and acts to make it better. 'For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son... that the world through him might be saved.'¹⁰

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Genesis 12:1-4; John 3:1-17*

⁷ Romans 5:20

⁸ John 3:15; cf. Numbers 21

⁹ Genesis 12.3

¹⁰ John 3.16-17