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**Telling Tales: Stories from the book of Genesis
'In the beginning...'**

Genesis 1, 1-5, 14-19 and 26-31

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If you go to Hereford and into the Cathedral you will find a celebrated Mappa Mundi – a fine example, perhaps 700 years old, of a type of map of the world produced in the middle ages, and of which about a hundred are still in existence. One very obvious and striking feature of this particular map, and of nearly all such maps, is that Jerusalem is placed at the centre of the world.

Now you may realise straight away that the placing of Jerusalem at the centre of the world was not meant as a geographical claim – so that to denounce this map as geographically erroneous would be to make a rather silly mistake. Maps of this kind were not produced as a navigational aid – and you wouldn't get very far if you tried to rely upon it. The map served other purposes, and Jerusalem's centrality is, of course, religious not geographical – the map proposes, if you like, a spiritual geography, not a physical one.

Rather unfortunately, the book of Genesis has not escaped the sort of mis-categorisation to which the Mappa Mundi would be subject if it were treated as a rudimentary version of Google Maps. The book of Genesis is regularly, but absurdly, regarded as a purported contribution to scientific cosmology or the history of the emergence of life – either to be roundly denounced by Richard Dawkins et al or, just as absurdly, to be defended by so-called creationists. On both sides of this unprofitable contretemps, Genesis is taken to be recounting what happened at the beginning of time, meaning to insist that the God really did make the world in six days – on that the New Atheists and the Fundamentalists are agreed. Their disagreement is just that one side thinks the book is wrong about what happened; and the other side thinks that what it says is right.

When and why it was that people starting reading Genesis in a flat-footed, cloth-eared, scientific, literal-minded manner is a long story. But something has gone very wrong here – since Genesis is not the sort of book which should be filed in the library under Science, History of the Cosmos – any more than a Mappa Mundi should be filed under Geography, Early Maps. The Hereford Mappa Mundi isn't in the business of telling us where things are and Genesis is not in the business of telling us what happened way back when – it is, in fact, not a book about what happened, but a book about what happens.¹ But I'll come to that.

¹ I have relied here and extensively on, and recommend highly, L. Kass's excellent commentary, *The Beginnings of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (Chicago, 2003).

Of course that first lesson we heard is so often attacked as bad science and bad history, that we are in danger of lapsing into taking it for granted that that is just what it is. But in fact, when we start to think about it, the supposition that this chapter is meant as cosmological history doesn't make a lot of sense.

Why? Let me mention two rather telling points. In the first place, the story of creation in chapter one is immediately followed in chapter two by another story of creation, which is simply incompatible with it if both were intended literally. It is as if I were to announce that my love is a red, red rose AND the light of my eyes – I really don't need someone to point out to me very solemnly that if she is a rose she can't be a light or vice versa. The two stories of creation very obviously contradict one another if meant literally – and that would be pretty obvious to anyone, writer or reader, and is not a brand new and shocking discovery. So it seems unlikely that they were meant as straightforward reporting of what happened when.

Second point: nowhere else, either in the book of Genesis (which is 50 chapters long), nor anywhere else in the Old Testament, nor anywhere in the New Testament, do we find any reference to, or reliance on, the first chapter of Genesis as a piece of cosmological history. Nowhere in either of the two testaments, do we find anything to suggest an interest in scientific cosmology, theories of the universe, or of the evolution of species. To suppose that these opening chapters are really intended as contributions to *New Scientist* or *Nature*, we would need to believe, in other words, that there are some fifty or so verses of the Bible that are quite unique in their interest or purpose. Well, it's not impossible; but I am as ready to believe it as I am to believe that the October issue of *New Scientist* has an article on autumn style for the woman about town, or that the last number of *Nature* has a feature on winter breaks in the Highlands.

I am sorry to say something very obvious – but we would do well to understand the opening chapters of Genesis in the light of the rest of the book. And there is a clue to what Genesis is really about in the titles of our sermons for the rest of term: Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah, Babel, Abraham, Joseph. Babel is the name of a place, of course, but the rest are names of people – and even in the case of Babel, the writer is not interested in Babel as a place, but in the people who built it and lived there. Genesis then, is about humankind – more specifically, it's about the problem of humankind. As we all know, and as we heard this evening, the first chapter begins with a consciously poetic, declaratory, rhetorical flourish: 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.' But as this simple declaratory headline is unpacked in the remaining verses of the chapter, we will find – and this is the crucial point – that the writer of Genesis is telling us that mankind is both more and less than we might think. And it is in this being more and less, that mankind emerges in this story as a problem – as of course mankind is indeed a problem for the rest of the Bible.

First of all, humankind is more than it might be taken to be, for the reason that the rest of the universe in which we are placed is in these opening chapters, with some gentle polemic and some straight-faced irony, cut down to size.

Of course, as every children's first bible shows, the starry heavens feature in the story of creation – God will be pictured hurling stars and universes into existence with great abandon. But notice, that though every children's bible majors on stars and planets and so on, the heavenly bodies have only walk on parts in this story – no more. For the heavenly bodies are not really as important as some – Israel's neighbours included – have supposed.

Now nearly all people, at nearly all times, have looked up to the starry heavens above, imagining that up there, there are powers which must be revered and propitiated or managed. Sun worship, except in the informal sense of lying on a beach too long, doesn't occur to us as an option – but the sun, in its magnificence, its power and beauty, and with its significance as the source of light, warmth, and thus of the growth of crops, has always been a popular candidate for divinity. And even now people solemnly read their horoscopes, seeming to believe as many people have before us, that our fate is written in these other stars.

What this first chapter of Genesis does is roundly to deny, indeed to mock, any pretensions to divinity amongst the heavenly bodies. Take the sun. Where does it feature in the story? Well in one sense it doesn't feature at all – the sun is not mentioned directly, and when it is indirectly mentioned, it is already day four, when God makes the two 'great lights': the great light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night, along with the stars. They are not even named. And the indignity of this merely passing reference on day four is palpable – it is as if I were to list the leading chapel choirs of Cambridge and came to our very own choir at number 8, between the choirs of Pembroke and Downing. In the story of Genesis, light was created on day one, whereas the unnamed sun and moon and stars, don't appear until day four – after God has made vegetation. Cabbages, courgettes, and cucumbers are created before the sun – which is a bit of a come down for a pretended god.

With this quiet polemic against the universe, the stars, the moon and the sun – with the resolute denunciation of their claims to divinity – mankind emerges as more than he might have been supposed to be. The sun, stars and moon are merely creatures – and we owe them neither service, nor duty, nor special regard. They are like us; they are not the origin of things and we do not stand below them.

But if this displacement of the heavenly bodies makes more of us than we might have thought – since here we stand in grand freedom with no need to propitiate or placate a host of nature gods – so we are also less than we might suppose, or at least, we have it in us to be less. For if there is no creature which is greater than mankind, mankind itself is ambiguous. What makes us human is just that as we have it in us to be more or greater than these others, so we can be less than them – which is what our being in the image of God seems to amount to.

What it means for human beings to be in the image of God has caused oceans of ink to be spilt. The idea is introduced in sonorous and solemn moment in the text at verse 26: 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness... So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him'. But what does it mean?

An image resembles that of which it is an image, obviously – and man, unlike the other things we have so far met with in the story of creation, resembles God in important respects. God is full of activity and power – he commands, names, beholds, blesses and orders the creatures of the world. And mankind, alone among all creatures we come across, also possesses the power to command, name, behold, bless and order. All the other creatures occupy a specific and defined space or place; only mankind is blessed with the power and freedom which allows humans to ask: what shall we make of ourselves?

But just because we have this power and potential and are more than other creatures, so we are also ambiguous in a way they are not – we may be more, but in our opportunity to be more, there lies the chance of our being less. There is a tiny detail in the telling of this tale, which is easily overlooked and yet suggests a certain ambivalence about the creation of humankind, which the rest of the book of Genesis will warrant and justify many times over. As God creates, he declares this and that good – but not man, or not unambiguously. The ‘it was good’ which follows each and every act of creation is applied immediately and specifically – but for all the dignity and solemnity which attaches to the creation of humankind, on the sixth day, the ‘it was good’, when it occurs, does not specifically, or even necessarily refer to man. God beholds all that he has made – and all of it, in its totality, is good. But the ‘it was good’ is not applied clearly and unambiguously to mankind as such. Why? Because the goodness of human kind remains to be seen, so to speak. Every other creature will do what it says on the tin – as they say. It will do what it was made to do. The grass will be grass and the trees will be trees and the fish will be fish – they will all accomplish their proper and fitting work, doing what it is given them to do. Acorns will grow into oaks, whales will splash about in the ocean, birds will fill the heavens. The planets will circle and the stars shine. They are creatures, not gods, and they don’t resemble gods; but they are what they are and they will not fail to be what they are created to be. Man, peculiarly has it in him to make something of himself – in this respect he resembles God, for mankind too can make and create and fashion and order and hallow and bless. But what he can do, he may not do. He possesses freedom, like the freedom which God wields. But what will he make of it? The ‘it was good’ is not spoken clearly of mankind – because really, it remains to be seen. Man is more than the other creatures – he has possibilities. But in this possibility of being more, there lies the risk of being less.

It is this problem which the book of Genesis is concerned with and will now unfold: read on. What will man do with his great ‘in the image of God’ freedom? What will he make of himself, this one who can order, create, hallow, and bless? How will men and women live with one another? Will brothers be brothers? Can humans organize themselves in cities and great nations and not simply oppress one another? Can strangers become neighbours? Will the strong protect the weak? Can humans master and deal with the sexual desire, guilt, anger, and envy, which are in danger of mastering them? Will our existence be a blessing? What do we find in the book of Genesis? – it is pretty much post-watershed viewing. There is fratricide, rape (male and female), incest, trickery, extortion, hatred, scheming, conniving, betrayal, slavery and oppression. All human life is there – or rather all inhuman life. Is man good or not? Will he who has it in him to be more than a creature, be less? The chapter introduces the question with which this book, the rest of the Bible, and we, struggle.

Genesis is not concerned with what happened, but with what happens. It is not a poor attempt at science, any more than the Mappa Mundi is a poor attempt at giving directions. It really doesn't matter to the book of Genesis by what precise mechanism the universe took the shape it did, or by the operation of what laws human species emerged. That is what happened. But what happens, then and now, is that whenever humans live together, they confront profound challenges if the glory which makes them more than other creatures, is not, in fact, to be turned into the shame of their being worse or less.

What I hope our remaining sermons will teach us is that far from setting this book to one side as so much bad science and history, we would do well to reckon with the fact that the book we are in danger of reading so badly, is able, in fact, to read us very well. The tales it tells, are tales to live with and by, stories which illuminate some of the most important and enduring questions of human existence – for we are, each of us, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, maybe Noah – even Abraham and Joseph. Genesis is not about what happened, but about what happens as their stories unfold anew in ours. If we sit down to read this book carefully, we may just find that it starts to read us – so that we who have it in us to be more and less than other creatures, may, taking it to heart, find ourselves warned against the lesser path, and strengthened and encouraged to take the better.