

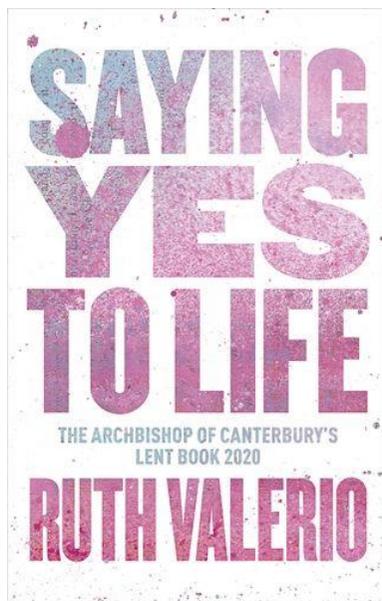
Lent course 2020

This year the Welwyn Team Lent course is based around the Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent book:

'Saying Yes to Life' by Ruth Valerio.

The book particularly looks at environmental concerns and our responses to them in the light of the Gospel.

Enclosed is the material we have produced for the Lent courses, so you can attend them with or without reading the book. However if you wish to purchase and read the book, it is widely available and the Rector has some copies. The cost of the book is £7.



There are further ways to keep this theme in Lent on the Church of England Website at -

<https://www.churchofengland.org/more/church-resources/lent-2020-church-resources>

This includes daily reflections for adults and children, as well as other resources. You can sign up for them on the website

Lent Groups 2020

(Groups start after the first Sunday of Lent – there are five weeks in the course)

Tuesday 7.30 – St Michael’s Woolmer Green group

First session @St Michael’s House, 3 London Road, Woolmer Green, SG3 6JU, then peripatetic,

Led by Dominic Holroyd-Thomas, Colin and Usha Hull, 01438 813043

Wednesday 10.30am St Mary’s New Church House,

Led by David Munchin, 01438 714150

Wednesday 7.45 for 8pm, 1 Codicote Road, Welwyn,

Led by Gay and Mike Carpenter 01438 718439

Wednesday 7 for 7.45pm

All Saints Church Hall, Datchworth,

Led by Susannah Underwood and Catherine Jupp, 01438 817183

Thursday 7.30pm, 60 Orchard Road, Tewin,

Led by Mick Simmons and Susannah Underwood, 01438 817183

Thursday 7.30 for 7.45

Codicote Parish Centre (next to St Giles church)

Led by the Rev’d Philip Waller and others, 01438 504318

Friday 9.30am Time for God Group

Contact Margot Kenworthy, 01438 718732

Each session has the same structure – groups will vary but perhaps 60-90 mins is a good time to aim for:

- **Bible text – read this at least once careful to begin with**
- **A commentary and chapter summary**
- **Some items from art and music for reflection and inspiration**
- **Some questions**
- **A prayer**

Session 1: In the Beginning, and the Lights of Creation

Bible Text

^{1:1} In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. ³Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

...

¹⁴ And God said, ‘Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, ¹⁵and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.’ And it was so. ¹⁶God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. ¹⁷God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, ¹⁸to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. ¹⁹And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

Commentary / chapter summary

The story of Creation in Genesis 1 and 2 is not the only myth of creation human has come up with. Many other cultures around the world want to explain where humanity has come from, and its place within the *stuff* we find around us. Genesis 1&2 are not even the only account of creation from the Ancient Near East, as the Babylonian creation epic *Enûma Eliš* shows us. There are some disconcerting similarities with the Genesis version. However, we have to remember that what we read in Genesis 1&2 is *myth* – which is NOT “untruth” but “poetic truth”. For example, Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18 (“Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?”) is not a horticultural treatise on how to grow early roses, nor is it a meteorological description of early summer weather patterns: it is, rather, a poetic truth about the unfading nature of human love and its relationship to the changing nature of human

life. Similarly, Genesis 1 is a poetic exploration of one, fundamental, truth: the God of the Hebrews is God, the only God, and He is good and He is all-powerful. In this way, it is an answer to the other creation myths with which the Hebrews were familiar. As Walter Brueggeman says, the text of Genesis 1 “transforms these older [Babylonian] materials for a quite new purpose, a purpose most intimately related to Israel’s covenantal experience.”

Incidentally, what was happening *before* creation, *before* the beginning. Dietrich Bonhoeffer tells us a story:

Martin Luther was once asked what God was doing before the creation of the world. His answer was that God was cutting sticks to cane people who asked such idle questions. (!)

We notice three things about this text: 1) God *speaks*; 2) God *judges*; 3) God creates *light* first.

1). God *speaks* Creation into being: creation isn’t made from pieces of the divine body, as in other creation myths. The author of Genesis wants to show us that God is completely, utterly, radically, separate from His creation. Again, as Bonhoeffer says: “God is never the creation, but always the Creator. ... There is no continuum that ties God to, or unites God with, God’s work—except God’s *word*.”

2). God makes a judgment about everything that He does: it is *tōb* (“good”). God’s creation comes with God’s seal of approval. Because His creation is connected to Him by His speaking, God is able to judge it. God marks His own work!

3). Light is the “sublimest element” (Jewish scholar Benno Jacob), without which nothing else can be known. Light is not the *product* of other heavenly bodies (which is why the author of Genesis splits the creation of light from the creation of what we would think are the light-producing objects, the sun and stars). Light is in itself wonderful, but is also *made*. It shows us God, but it is distinct from God.

Light is good, says God, and humanity agrees. We need light to thrive, grow, and, in northern climes, to work beyond the hours of the sun's presence in the sky. But this leads us to a moral problem. How do we generate light? Through the burning of candles, or whale oil, or gas, or electricity? And if so, by the latter, what are the moral implications for more and more light causing chemical and air pollution (the electricity must be generated somehow), and, as can be seen more and more clearly, with an effect on the temperature of the world (global warming / climate change / climate emergency). Also, what does the increasing use of artificial light in the developed world do to our relationship with the night sky, or the effect on creatures who have evolved to depend on regular periods of darkness? Have you ever visited "dark sky sanctuaries", and what difference did it make to your understanding of your place in the world? As Pope Francis has written:

Each age tends to have only a meagre awareness of its own limitations. It is possible that we do not grasp the gravity of the challenges now before us. "The risk is growing day by day that man will not use his power as he should"; in effect, "power is never considered in terms of the responsibility of choice which is inherent in freedom" since its "only norms are taken from alleged necessity, from either utility or security". But human beings are not completely autonomous. Our freedom fades when it is handed over to the blind forces of the unconscious, of immediate needs, of self-interest, and of violence. In this sense, we stand naked and exposed in the face of our ever-increasing power, lacking the wherewithal to control it. We have certain superficial mechanisms, but we cannot claim to have a sound ethics, a culture and spirituality genuinely capable of setting limits and teaching clear-minded self-restraint.

Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* (2015)

From art:

When God creates in Genesis it is by the *spoken* word; in popular culture creation is more often accompanied, or enacted, by music. C.S. Lewis has Aslan sing Narnia into being in *The Magician's Nephew*. In J.R.R. Tolkien's *Ainulindalë* the world is made by the music of the one Creator, Eru Illúvatar, and angelic powers join in the theme. In Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* the long, pre-history, of humanity is told in silence (at least, beyond the noises made by creatures on screen), until the ape-creatures meet the strange monolith that will propel them into the next evolutionary stage. Kubrick underlines the importance of this encounter with the 'Kyrie' from György Ligeti's *Requiem*, which segues into the famous (and now almost proverbial) use of Richard Strauss's *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. For Kubrick, it seems, the "creation" moment of his film (where humanity becomes humanity) requires music. One of the earliest and still the best systematic depictions of the importance of music in understanding creation is from Joseph Haydn (1732–1809): *The Creation* (1798). Haydn gave the opening words of the oratorio to the angel Raphael ("In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth ...") and the chorus responds with the description of the spirit of God moving on the waters. But, when God speak light into existence ("...and there was light"), the orchestra joins in with "perhaps the most famous C-major chord" in music. The premiere was described by a friend of Haydn's:

No one, not even Baron van Swieten, had seen the page of the score wherein the birth of light is described. That was the only passage of the work which Haydn had kept hidden. I think I see his face even now, as this part sounded in the orchestra. Haydn had the expression of someone who is thinking of biting his lips, either to hide his embarrassment or to conceal a secret. And in that moment when light broke out for the first time, one would have said that rays darted from the composer's burning eyes. The enchantment of the electrified Viennese was so general that the orchestra could not proceed for some minutes.

The moment is 2 mins into this clip:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S03cwGuw43s>

More recently, Terrence Malick's experimental film *The Tree of Life* tells the story of the creation of the universe mapped onto the life of a family in twentieth century America. Some audiences found the cosmological sequences to be inexplicable – we cut from time to time to scenes of stars or dinosaurs – but Malick made his intentions clear by beginning the movie with a quotation from Job: “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the Earth?... When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?” The fifteen-minute sequence has an absent-but-implied creator, the most wonderful special effects, and plenty of music: among other pieces, the ‘Lacrimosa’ from *Requiem For My Friend* by Zbigniew Preisner, and the ‘Agnus Dei’ from Berlioz's *Grande Messe des Morts*. It is curious how many of these film depictions are accompanied by classical requiems...

Darren Aronofsky's less high-brow film *Noah* also includes a creation, with Noah telling his children the story told him by his father. The Genesis structure (“In the beginning, there was nothing... the first day...”) is mapped onto modern cosmology (“our world was born, our beautiful fragile home”), and evolution (“the waters teemed with life, great creatures of the deep that are no more...”). Aronofsky accompanies the narrative with a flickering fly-by of the changing world: a cosmological time-lapse.

Books

C. S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew* (London: Bodley Head, 1955).

J. R. R. Tolkien, ‘Ainulindalë’, in *The Silmarillion*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1977)

Films

Stanley Kubrick, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Super Panavision 70 mm, U.K. / U.S.A. (Metro–Goldwyn–Mayer, 1968).

Terrence Malick, *The Tree of Life*, DeLuxe / 35mm, USA (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2011).

Darren Aronofsky, *Noah*, Super 35 mm, USA (Paramount Pictures, 2014).

Music

John Eliot Gardiner, English Baroque Soloists and the Monteverdi Choir, *Die Schöpfung* (Hob. XXI:2), 1996

György Ligeti, 'Kyrie' from *Requiem* (*Requiem Für Sopran- Und Mezzosopran-Solo, Zwei Gemischte Chöre Und Orchester*), 1965

Richard Strauss, *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, Op. 30, 1896

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFPwm0e_K98

Zbigniew Preisner, 'Lacrimosa' from *Requiem For My Friend*, 1998

Hector Berlioz, 'Agnus Dei' from *Grande Messe des Morts Op. 5*, 1837

Questions

1. What's your favourite beginning to any story? "It was a dark and stormy night..."? "The camel died quite suddenly on the second day..."? ""It was the best of times, it was the worst of times..."? "It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen..."? What difference does your favourite beginning make to your enjoyment of the rest of the story?
2. How important is an "origin story" to our understanding of our favourite stories? For example, what difference does a "before they were famous" film make to our appreciation of a favourite film-star.
3. Ruth Valerio says that understanding the Creation through Genesis helps us understand our place in the world and our moral responsibility to the rest of the world/creation/nature. Is she right?
4. Does learning about other ancient near Eastern creation myths help or hinder our understanding of Genesis?
5. What difference does the story of God as the sole Creator of all make to our behaviour? What difference *ought* it to make?

Prayer

O Lord Jesus Christ, who art the very bright Sun of our world, ever rising, never going down: shine, we beseech thee, upon our spirit, that the night of sin and error being driven away by thy inward light, we may walk without stumbling, as in the day. Grant this, O Lord, who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost for evermore.

Primer, 1559

New every morning is the love
our waking and uprising prove;
through sleep and darkness safely brought,
restored to life, and power, and thought.

New mercies, each returning day,
hover around us while we pray;
new perils past, new sins forgiven,
new thoughts of God, new hopes of Heaven.

If on our daily course our mind
be set to hallow all we find,
new treasures still, of countless price,
God will provide for sacrifice.

The trivial round, the common task,
will furnish all we ought to ask,
room to deny ourselves, a road
to bring us daily nearer God.

Only, O Lord, in Thy dear love,
fit us for perfect rest above;
and help us, this and every day,
to live more nearly as we pray.

John Keble, *The Christian Year*, 1822

Session 2: Water

Genesis 1:6-8

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.

Commentary and Chapter summary

The watery chaos that overflows the earth is tamed and divided to create space between the waters of the ground and the water that comes from the sky. Now there is space to inhabit and air to breathe. The “vault” is variously translated “firmament” or “expanse”.

Water is a powerful symbol throughout the Bible. Water is seen as a gift from God - Psalm 65vv9-13 is a joyful celebration of rain. We share in a huge hydrological cycle that uses energy from the sun to create a constant exchange of water between the oceans, the land and the atmosphere, through evaporation, transpiration, condensation, precipitation and runoff. Fresh water covers less than 1% of the earth's surface, but much of creation, including we ourselves, is utterly dependent on it. The Kikuyu people in Kenya say: “water is life”. Water has also been described as the “Hub of Life” - its mother and medium. The Archbishop of Cape Town speaks of water as “sacred”.

Yet - freshwater supplies are being degraded and depleted. In the 20th century, freshwater fish had the highest extinction rate worldwide among vertebrates. Overall freshwater species numbers have declined by 83% since 1970, meaning that in the last 50 years 8 out of 10 freshwater species has been wiped out. Water contamination and poor sanitation lead to ill health among the world's poorest people, depressing incomes and limiting education. Agriculture consumes the largest share of water usage (nearly 70%), and the production of a single cotton jacket on sale in the UK consumes as much as 10000 litres of drinking water - equivalent to what most of us would drink in 20 years.

Currently 60% of the world's population live in areas of water stress - where the amount of water available cannot meet the demand in a sustainable way. After a long period of drought, in 2018, officials announced that Cape Town, a city of four million people, would run out of water in three months. Drastic measures were enforced to limit individual water use to 50 litres per day. The Environment Agency is warning that England could run out of water within 25 years because of rising population and climate breakdown. At the same time, sea water levels are rising and threatening to overwhelm many low-lying lands in Asia. In Europe, we tend to think of averting future climate disaster, whereas in other parts of the world, climate change is a problem of everyday survival now.

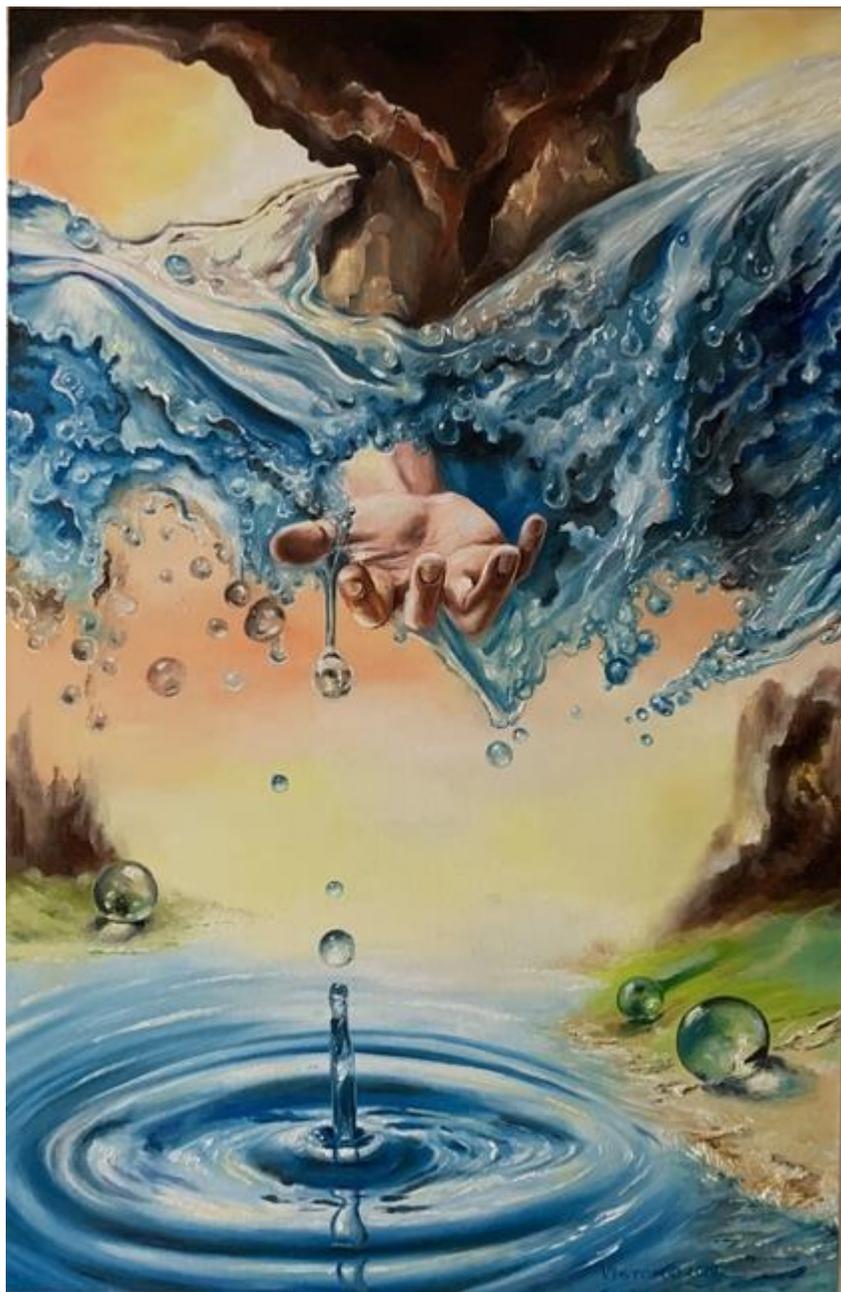
In the book of Revelation, clear bright water flows through the middle of the heavenly city (Revelation 22 vv1-3). It enables trees to grow that are a source of healing for the nations. Water injustice (as well as water scarcity) divides nations and people within nations - in Cape Town, for instance, the wealthy worry about the water in their swimming pools whilst the poor worry about the standpipe in their street.

Suggested actions:

Pray every time you use water in your home - remember those without good access to fresh clean water.

Give to agencies that help to improve access to water or to strengthen flood resilience

Cut down on your own water usage in the home and through the food and clothing you buy.



Viktor Lytvynenko "Creation of the Earth" Triptych

Music: "Albatross" by Fleetwood Mac

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QooCN5JbOkU>

Questions:

1. "Water is sacred, but we treat it as a commodity" says Archbishop Makgoba. If we took this view of water, how might it affect our attitude and use of water?
2. Which of the statements and figures in the central section above (about freshwater supplies) most shock you? Explain why.
3. How might it be for you to live with water restrictions? How would you adapt your lifestyle?
4. What actions could you take in response to the discussion today? Try to be specific.
5. Have you ever been desperately thirsty? If not, try to describe what this might feel like. Jesus described himself as the source of living water (John 4v10). Dare we ask God to create in us a thirst for the living water? How thirsty for God are we this Lent?

Prayer:

Dear Lord, we praise and adore you for the gift of water that sustains all life and constantly reminds us that You are the fountain of living water. Teach us to use it thankfully, to consume it consciously, and to protect its purity. Forgive us our attitudes of greed, dominance and insensitivity towards your beautiful creation, especially water. Help us to see the effects of our use of water not only on our immediate surroundings but also on people living in areas already caught up in climate change. And may we work together for the healing of the nations which is your will through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Session 3 - Let the land produce vegetation

Genesis 1:9-13

⁹ And God said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. ¹⁰ God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. ¹¹ Then God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it." And it was so. ¹² The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. ¹³ And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

Commentary and Chapter Summary

As we continue following the story of creation on Genesis 1 we see a beautiful movement taking place. The Spirit of God moved over the watery chaos. God spoke and there was light. Order was brought to the waters. Now we see the waters being gathered together and drawn back like a curtain so that dry ground might appear. This week we shall consider the land and trees, looking at their role on salvation and how they feature in our contemporary context. We live in a beautiful world. Stop here and share with the group a tree or landscape that you have seen which you find particularly beautiful.

One thing to note in this passage is the gift of fertility. Life is to produce life. It reveals a God who gives not just once but whose life overflows with generous abundance.

God saw that it was good

This refrain is used seven times in this chapter. Its importance as a pronouncement over the earth should not be underestimated, but not all Christians have taken this seriously. D.L Moody the influential preacher of the 19th century speaks of the earth as a 'wrecked vessel' from which souls need to be saved. Theology such as this has led some Christians to dismiss the need to care for creation - what counts more is a spiritual salvation. "We should be

planting churches, not trees” was a recent tweet from someone with such a stance. Such dualism, which separates out body and spirit is challenged however by this persistent phrase ‘God saw that it was good’. “Matter, matters to God” says astrophysicist and theologian Professor David Wilkinson. Bonhoeffer speaks of the profound “this-worldliness of Christianity.” In environmental ethics there is a debate over the value of nature: is it extrinsic (i.e. does its value lies in its use as a resource?) or does it have an intrinsic value (i.e. does it have a value in and of itself, regardless of its use to people?). The Genesis narrative tells us that the value of all created things lies in God and his perception. So to know that God sees what he has created and on seeing gives it value is a deep call to us to reflect on how we see and value the natural world. Think of somebody you love. Think of something that is precious to them. Would you wilfully destroy it when you knew it had great value in their eyes?

Living in the land

This affirmation of the goodness of the land reminds us that the world is not just the backdrop, it is the context in which we live out our faith. Land plays a crucial role in the context of God’s people. Perhaps look up some of these references as examples of the Hebrew tradition of human relationship with land: Psalm 24:1, Leviticus 25:1-5, Leviticus 25:23, Deuteronomy 8:17. Scripture also displays land as having an agency of its own, exuberantly praising God (look at Psalm 148 and 55:12), but also responding negatively to the sins of the people (Isaiah 24:4, Jeremiah 4:28, Romans 8:19-22, Luke 23:44-45). So the land in all its dusty, soily, muddy, earthy physicality is an indispensable part of the story of salvation, and it is no surprise therefore that the future retains that sense with the garden city in Revelation. Many indigenous cultures show a deep understanding of a spiritual connection to the land through story and ritual. An aboriginal custom is to rub earth over babies as soon as they are born. It lets them know of what they are made and where they belong. How this contrasts with the sterilised environment western parents are encouraged to adopt for young children! Rowan Williams once wrote “Receive the earth that God has given. Go for a walk. Get wet. Dig the earth”. Do you think gardening or walking encourages a spiritual connection with the land?

Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said “When the missionaries came to Africa they had the bible and we had the land. They said ‘let us close our eyes and pray’. When we opened our eyes we had the bible and they had the land.”

Trees of Life

Trees play a central part in the bible from the garden of Eden, to the wood of the crib and cross, and ending with the promised tree of life in Revelation. What other stories or images of trees can you think of? John Evelyn the 17th century English writer and gardener expresses this beautifully: “Trees and woods have twice saved the whole world; first by the ark, and then by the cross, making full amends for the evil fruit of the tree in paradise by that which was born on the tree in Golgotha.”

Every region of the world has its issues with deforestation. The Amazon rainforest has an area roughly the size of a football pitch being cleared every minute. *Every minute!* In 2019 San Paulo’s sky was black with smoke largely caused by the fires of deliberate deforestation. The main driver of this is agriculture largely for beef, soy and palm oil. Safeguarding the Amazon which captures 25% of global carbon dioxide emissions is vital in the fight against climate change. African theologian Andrew Kyomo says “We cannot claim to be Christians... if we engage in destruction of God’s creation, like deforestation.” Do you agree?

Painting *La Joie la Vivre (The Joy of Life)* Max Ernst 1936

At first this painting seems as if it is a celebration of the natural world but look closely and you begin to see the competition and dangers within. Can you spot the skull-like flowers, the praying mantis, the creatures with teeth? The life which grows here threatens to entangle the image of a woman and creature, an image of biblical harmony. Ernst painted this whilst watching the worsening political situation in Europe in the 1930s. Is it possible for people and nature to live in harmony – or will life always lead to competition and death? How does your Christian understanding of creation give insight to this?



Questions:

- Have you come across the dualism that is discussed at the beginning of this week's session? How have you seen this expressed? Does a fresh look at the place of land and trees in the bible affect your own thinking?

- 'Life is to produce life'. In which ways do human beings give life to the world and in what ways do we hinder it?

- Consider how your actions impact on forests, whether through meat that comes from deforested land or wood and paper products you may buy. What steps could you and your church take in response?

Prayer:

God of creation, you have taught us to love life. That our longing for life should be above all other desires: a transcendent longing that values all of creation's living creatures. The earth and trees groan because of our failure to care for and protect them, ruling over and profiting from them rather than protecting them from death. We have viewed the earth as a resource to be exploited rather than as our mother. We accept the challenge of taking care of ourselves in order to care for the earth our mother and our common home, for the trees and for life itself. We recognise that you have given us an understanding greater than other living creatures in order to reflect your creative, communal and loving character towards everything that exists. Lord, we commit to live caring for all nature, guarding our hearts from selfish desires and not living as proprietors, but as brothers and sisters and in community with all living things, especially the trees that are the source of life. Amen.

Session 4: The creatures of sea and air

Bible Text – Genesis 1:20-23

²⁰ And God said, 'Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.' ²¹ So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. ²² God blessed them, saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.' ²³ And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

Commentary and Chapter Summary

This is the first time we meet living creatures in the bible. It is a picture of abundance. Not only is it abundant, it is also diverse, and sometimes rather weird – as countless TV nature documentaries testify. To be honest we don't really know how diverse – but an estimate is 11,000 bird species and 30,000 species of fish. If we include insects as flying things that may add another 6-10 million. God looks at this abundance and diversity and actively approves of it – it is good. Moreover not only is it good, but God blesses it and wishes it to multiply. In Hebrew there is no special word for soul – the word is *nepes* which is here translated 'creature' or 'being'. In this sense there is nothing special about the creation of Adam. He is *nepes* just like all the other animals.

It is a great encouragement to birdwatchers that of course Jesus validates the worthiness of their hobby 'Consider the birds of the air' he commands (Matt 6:26). Sometimes difficult to translate, there are 30 species of bird mentioned in the bible. Indeed the Spirit 'hovering over the waters' at the very start of the creation story (1:2) is an avian image. The two most commonly mentioned birds are doves and ravens, and both feature in the story of Noah's Ark. These were turtle or rock doves – not pristine white birds, but a bit grey and perhaps a bit more like pigeons. They were used in OT sacrifices, and were considered 'kosher'. However the starring role for the dove is in the baptism of Jesus where the Spirit, 'descended in the form of a dove.' Also in the Song of Songs the turtle dove represents faithfulness between lovers, and allegorically between God and Israel (or Christ and his Church). The dove thus

becomes a symbol of faithfulness – between lovers in the Song of Songs, and also between God and Israel. The dove finding no dry land but only an olive branch before returning to Noah’s ark, became a rabbinic metaphor for the Jews finding no rest among the nations. Ravens also have a special place coming to feed Elijah in 1 Kings 17. Perhaps the most famous image of a bird in the bible is that of the soaring eagle (Isaiah 40). At the other end of the scale no bird is too small or insignificant to escape God’s care, as Jesus reminds us of the sparrow in Matthew 10 and Luke 12. Finally the mother hen to whom Jesus likens himself (Matthews 23) is offset with the cock that crows twice to remind Peter of his denial.

Birds are amazingly adaptive and resourceful creatures – woodpeckers are known to store 50,000 acorns in one tree each in their individual holes. However they are steep decline: 14% of species at risk of extinction, UK bird numbers down 50% in forty years, tree sparrows in the UK down 95% in 50 years. Much of this is due to changes in agricultural practices and loss of habitat to increased urbanisation. In this country we can easily help by not eating factory farmed birds, and supporting organic farms where reduced or nil use of pesticides help bird populations to flourish. Hunting for game birds has over the last 200 years decimated our nation’s raptor population. However isolated measures are not enough, because birds migrate over vast distances – the sooty shearwater covering a staggering 42000 miles! Therefore a global conservation approach is required. It is notable that in the apocalyptic prophecy of Jeremiah (4:25) the sign of the end is that ‘every bird in the sky had flown away.’

So as Psalm 104 reminds us (‘there is the sea ...teeming with creatures beyond number’) this abundance is eclipsed by that of the seas which cover 71% of the earth’s surface. The sea itself features as a character in bible stories – often as a symbol of primeval chaos – as in Exodus or Jonah. In Ezekiel 47 there is a vision of the river flowing from the Jerusalem Temple down into the dead sea. Because of that special location it is seen as particularly overflowing with fish. In the New Testament, (though not strictly speaking a sea) much of the action takes place with fishermen around the Lake of Galilee, and meals and catches of fish feature prominently before and after the resurrection, following the initial promise to the disciples that they

will become ‘fishers of people.’ However unlike the birds, the bible does not differentiate between different sorts of fish (apart from monsters like Leviathan) – they are either scaly with fins (kosher) or not (non-kosher). However they are still capable in their own way of praising their maker (e.g. Ps 148, 69, 96, 98 and Rev 5:13).

The seas sustain nearly half of the world’s population (3 billion) who live on its coastal regions. It is the one great sink we have for harmful CO2 gas. 33% of fish stocks are being farmed at unsustainable levels, as a result of industrial fishing methods. Coral reefs which are vital for biodiversity and protect low lying land from inundation may well disappear entirely by the end of this century. Plastic pollution has also been recently highlighted as a massive threat to the marine environment – 3 billion people have no proper refuse and recycling systems, and a dead whale was recently found to contain some 40kg of plastic. Although in Welwyn we are not particularly close to the sea, limiting our use of plastic is the most significant way in which we can help protect the marine environment.

Derek de Young – Four Panel Brown Trout



In Haydn’s Oratorio – The Creation, these verses conclude with a trio and chorus ‘The Lord in his great might’.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QYUk4wgJpus>

Questions

1 What experiences have you had of seeing 'teeming' in the natural world? Reflect on those and take time - on your own or in a group - to appreciate those experiences and thank God for them.

2 In this chapter, we ponder the suggestion that it is unchristian to eat meat from chickens that have been reared in cramped and intensive conditions. It is likely this has implications for the majority of us reading this book. How do you feel about this? Do you agree or not, and why?

Watch this chapter's interview, featuring Professor Meric Srokosz from the National Oceanography Centre, and use his expertise on the oceans to stimulate your own thoughts and discussions. You can watch the video at www.spckpublishing.co.uk/saying-yesresources.

Do you have a favourite sea/ocean place to be, or favourite memory? If you do, sit still and allow yourself to go back to that place or memory and, as you do so, ask God what he might want to say to you.

Make a mental note of the different ways in which you use plastic. Maybe look around you or around your house and notice how much there is. What plastic things will you decide now to abandon or find an alternative for?

How could your church get involved with the topics this chapter considers?

Prayer from young person in Vanuatu"

O Jesus,
be the canoe that holds me in the sea of life,
be the steer that keeps me straight,
be the outrigger that supports me in time of great temptation.
Let your Spirit be my sail that carries me through each day,
as I journey steadfastly on the long voyage of life.
Amen.

Session 5:

Let the land produce living creatures and let us make humankind in our image

Genesis 1: 24-31

And God said, “Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: the livestock, the creatures that move along the ground, and the wild animals, each according to its kind.” And it was so. 25 God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.

26 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.”

27 So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

28 God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

29 Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. 30 And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food.” And it was so.

31 God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.

Commentary and Chapter Summary

As we have worked our way through Genesis 1 during this Lent course, we have seen how the bible – particularly the story of creation – is not just a story about human beings, but a story about the whole world and creation in its entirety. In this final session we will think about the final created space getting filled – the land. Similarly to verse 11, when the land is told to bring forth/produce vegetation, now it is to bring forth living creatures. The literal translation is: ‘living beings’.

Toward the end of the chapter, green plants are given to “everything that has the breath of life in it” (v. 30) This could also be translated as everything that has the “soul of life” in it. It reminds us that the soul is not just a distinct spiritual entity that only humans have, trapped inside our bodies waiting to be freed. It is a description of who we are as created beings, both human and non-human. All of us have God’s breath in us.

In the categories of living creatures which we read in v. 24, we see a basic division: domestic animals, crawling things and wild animals. The author needn’t make these distinctions. We see this distinction again when Noah, in Genesis 6, is command to take two of every kind into the ark. It reflects the overall stress in the Hebrew bible on appreciating and respecting the distinct nature of different kinds. It is argued that this text is concerned with biodiversity and the preservation of each separate and distinct species. Here too, in v. 24, we are reminded of the inherent worth of each distinct species and its worth in God’s plan.

Having created the land animals, God once again pause to look and appreciate what he has made, and, again, declares it ‘good’ (v. 25). This deepens the affirmation we have seen throughout Genesis 1 of the value and worth God places on all elements of creation. God loves each aspect of the created world for its own sake: each thing has goodness in and of itself in the eyes of God.

The story of creation centres around people and God’s unfolding relationship with them, but the wider natural world is never far away. The biblical text is full of trees, birds, fish, field, gardens, stars, insects, the sun and moon, and

the animals created on day six. In fact, animals in general are pictured alongside people right the way through the bible. Noah's ark is the obvious example, but it is important to remember that God's covenant with Noah is also with 'every living creature that was with you' (Gen 9: 10) The Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) and their families always have animals with them. And it is interesting to note that even on the night of the Passover, when the Egyptians are wailing at the death of their first born sons, even the Israelites' dogs keep quiet and do not bark (Ex 11: 7). Animals are also included in the laws of the Sabbath, including the wild animals that may eat off the land in the Sabbath years (Lev 2: 6-7).

Remembering God's love for his animal creation and their place in his plans for redemption strengthens our motivation to be living and acting in ways that do not harm them, but instead enable them to flourish. Given unprecedented extinction rates, this is desperately needed.

Let us now consider the last thing God creates: human beings. There is something different here that sets this final species apart from all else that has been created. Humans are made in the 'image of God', and this puts us in a particular relationship before God. As Blocher says: 'God creates man as a sort of earthly son, who represents him and responds to him.' Despite this 'special' status, it important for us not to make too much of a distinction, after all, humans are created on the same day as the other land creatures. We must allow that to engender humility within us: humans are not given a day to themselves. But, like the animals, we too have the breath of God in us.

Throughout history, it has been seen that humans perceive total control and authority over the natural world. Often translated as 'dominion' (Gen 1: 28), the KJV reads: 'have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.' It is the human being who is chosen by God to bear his image and be his representative. Being made as God's image-bearers gives us a job to do which no other part of the created order is tasked. It impacts how we view our relationship with one another, and it impacts how we view our relationships with wider creation, and other creatures in particular. Do we appreciate this

God-given trust, or do we abuse the power given to us? We occupy this special role as caretakers, or gardeners, of this world.

The creation of humankind in God's own image also raises the issue of equality – particularly issues pertaining to gender. Barth highlighted something that is important: the image of God is found in human beings as male and female together, in equality. For true human flourishing to occur, both women and men need to be able to live their lives to the full. Of course, our understanding of equality is much wider than solely issues of gender, indeed in the UK, there are many 'protected characteristics' including race and ethnicity, disability and sexuality.



Music: Carnival of the Animals

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1L993HNAa8M>) (It's over 20 minutes, so you might like to listen to a couple of parts)

Questions

1. The famous photograph of the polar bear indicates the dire situation the world is in. How has our understanding of humanity's 'dominion' over creation allowed us to remain blind to unfolding atrocities for so long?
2. Pope Francis calls this world 'our common home' in his encyclical *Laudato si*. Reflecting on this term, what does this say to you?
3. What does it mean to you that all people have made in God's image? Are there people in your circles or society you need to remind yourself have been made in God's image?
4. Throughout the first account of creation, at the end of each day (except day two), God sees that it is 'very good'. Now God looks at *all* that he has made and sees that it is 'very good'. Is creation living and working together harmoniously the 'goodness' scripture is alluding to? What changes must we make to our lives to allow creation in its beautiful entirety to flourish?

Prayer

You might like to say together the Cantic of Creation written by St Francis of Assisi...

**O Most High, all-powerful, good Lord God,
to you belong praise, glory,
honour and all blessing.**

**Be praised, my Lord, for all your creation
and especially for our Brother Sun,
who brings us the day and the light;
he is strong and shines magnificently.**

O Lord, we think of you when we look at him.

**Be praised, my Lord, for Sister Moon,
and for the stars**

which you have set shining and lovely
in the heavens.

Be praised, my Lord,
for our Brothers Wind and Air
and every kind of weather
by which you, Lord,
uphold life in all your creatures.

Be praised, my Lord, for Sister Water,
who is very useful to us,
and humble and precious and pure.

Be praised, my Lord, for Brother Fire,
through whom you give us light in the darkness:
he is bright and lively and strong.

Be praised, my Lord,
for Sister Earth, our Mother,
who nourishes us and sustains us,
bringing forth
fruits and vegetables of many kinds
and flowers of many colours.

Be praised, my Lord,
for those who forgive for love of you;
and for those
who bear sickness and weakness
in peace and patience
- you will grant them a crown.

Be praised, my Lord, for our Sister Death,
whom we must all face.

I praise and bless you, Lord,
and I give thanks to you,
and I will serve you in all humility.