

Sermon Given by

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“God reigns”

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***‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth’***

Those words from our second reading are the opening of the Bible and of Genesis, its first book.

I wonder if you have contemplated quite how important to us the ideas of beginnings are. Without trying very hard you will think of examples. Some of them are very homely and personal. For example, we always want to know when a couple first met.

My wife, Susu can remember exactly where she first saw me – on Staircase H in Ridley Hall in Cambridge – it was a bad first meeting, and I had to send a letter of apology to her! I can recall another staircase encounter with Susu: the first peck on the cheek I gave her at a night club in Cambridge. It was the last time I went to a night club!

But it’s not just in our own life stories that we find beginnings interesting. Have you followed the story of the Large Hadron Collider at all? It’s a scientific experiment that has really captured people’s imagination – there 570 feet under the Swiss/French border on the outskirts of Geneva is a massive circular tunnel with a circuit length of 17 miles which houses a particle accelerator.

You will perhaps know that it has been dogged by technical difficulties – one stoppage of a year, only ten days after it was switched on, for safety reasons; a more bizarre breakdown recently got blamed on a bit of crusty French bread getting stuck in the machinery.

What’s it all been about? It is a quest to recreate (hopefully in a safe environment) the moment which started the universe off – or rather the moment a billionth of a second after the Big Bang. Huge amounts of money have been spent – 10 billion dollars and counting. In addition there have been massive human resources: 10,000 scientists from 100 countries are involved.

It’s not my purpose to mock that endeavour – just to observe that beginnings are obviously hugely important to us, aren’t they? So the Bible’s opening sentence: ***‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth’*** is one which has always caught the attention.

We’re starting a new series today in which we are looking at the overall message of the Bible in six bites. And our aim is to synthesise the Bible’s teaching into six chapters on six themes.

The hope is that as we do so if you are not yet a Christian it will help you to reduce what the Christian faith is all about into its basic building blocks – and I hope that the outcome of that will be to help you make an informed decision to follow Jesus Christ for yourself.

Obviously, I'm aware that many if not most of us here are already Christians. Perhaps we might feel that the ground we'll be covering is very familiar. I make no apology for that at all. Apparently the legendary golfer, Jack Nicklaus used to return every year to his golfing coach and ask him, 'Teach me again how to play golf.' (because he knew he had to return to the fundamentals of the game if he was to keep playing good golf...). And I am hoping that however familiar we are with the basic building blocks of the Bible's teaching, revisiting them will give us confidence in our convictions and also as we seek to pass these truths on.

Three headings as we look at the idea of Creation.

### **The place of God in Creation**

I referred as I began to Genesis 1.1 *'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth'*. That's not just the Bible's equivalent of 'once upon a time'. The writer is making a crucial theological point there of huge importance to everyone.

Without the slightest hint of embarrassment, he takes us back to the point in time before any **thing** existed at all, when there was nothing at all but God.

It's a mind-boggling thought, isn't it – have you ever considered what it would be like to move back before creation, before the galaxies, before the cosmos: and there be just God himself.

Well the fact that in eternity there was God and God alone means that everything arises ultimately from his initiative – he started it all off, because he created the lot – the heavens and the earth. And as much as anything, the purpose of Genesis 1 is to cast an eye over every area of creation, every atom of creation and tell us God made it all, and he did a good job.

I'm just going to read the concluding verse and let that speak for the whole chapter. Genesis 1:31 ***And God saw all that he had made and it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning – the sixth day.***

I know that for many people the first chapters of Genesis throw up big questions about the relationship of Science and Christianity. To consider the bigger issue please do come to our guest meeting at which Bob White I speaking.

But as far as this chapter specifically is concerned, I want to encourage you to take it on its own terms. It's not **un**scientific, it's **non**-scientific; it's answering different questions to the scientist – not how we got our world, but who is responsible for it. Genesis 1 answers: 'God did it and he did it very well'.

Let me try and clarify what I mean by borrowing an illustration from a book we have on our bookstall by Ernest Lucas called **Can we believe Genesis today?**

Suppose a medical doctor were asked, 'Why did Captain Oats die on the way back from the South Pole with Captain Scott?' He could only give a definite answer if he had the body and conducted a post mortem.

Then he could report, using all the correct medical terms, that Oates died of extreme cold, frostbite and the other effects of exposure to the Antarctic conditions, which caused his body to stop functioning. A mechanistic 'How'-type answer.

Which would be true, but arguably misses the meaning behind his death in human and moral terms: 'Why did Captain Oates die on the way back from the South Pole with Captain Scott?' Another answer could go as follows: 'He died in an amazingly selfless act of sacrifice, to free his friends of the hindrance of a sick man, hoping that would mean they could then travel faster and get back safely before their supplies ran out'.

Do you see how that illustrates the difference between the how questions which science asks and seeks explanations for and the why questions, questions of meaning, which go beyond science.

Many of the difficulties people have with the apparent clash between the Bible and Science come because people don't understand the limitations of science. Because of the advances of science in the last couple of centuries, we've tended to assume that science gives us not just the truth but the whole truth.

But I've given you one example where that wouldn't fit. There is often more to what is going on than a scientific explanation. And Genesis is another example. It's not **un**scientific, it's simply **non**-scientific; it's asking different questions to the scientist and giving us therefore different answers.

OK says someone what are we to make of the fact that Genesis says that God did the work of creation in six twenty-four hour days. Did he or didn't he?

The question we have to ask is: what was the writer trying to do? C.S. Lewis has a very helpful comment in his introduction to Paradise Lost: 'the first qualification for judging any piece of workmanship from a corkscrew to a cathedral is to know what it was intended to do and how it is meant to be used.' Applying that to workmanship that is written, he means that you have to try and get inside the head of the writer and work out what he was trying to achieve in his writing. So you do not read a parking ticket the same way you read a love letter.

So what if the writer of Genesis wasn't trying to write a scientific account of Creation, or a historical account in the sense we mean by history – facts with dates and so on.

What if he's structured his account of creation to teach symbolical, figurative, theological history? What if those **how** questions which evolution predisposes us to have aren't his questions at all?

You have to ask 'What is he actually trying to say?' And the answer of the chapter is something like this. God made it all... God made it all through his word – (remember that refrain: And God said: and it was so. Six awesome sermons from the pulpit of heaven). God made it all; God made it all through his word and (let's hold on to this after the pictures we've seen this week of a world where something has gone seriously wrong) it was all good...

That's what we're meant to learn. And I personally think that leaves the question of evolution an open question. Or at least it's not one which Genesis one settles. The Christian cannot accept that evolution was a blind process that happened entirely on its own; but it isn't necessarily an anti-Christian position to believe evolution was the means by which God made the universe.

So much for the Place of God in the Universe: God reigns over all, because he made it all, by his word and he made it good.

As I said, if the question of science and Christianity is an issue for you then do come to the talk. But realise that the end result of the enquiry as far as the Bible is concerned is to fall down and worship God – the God who made everything and who made each of us; the God who gives us life and breath and everything else.

So where **do** you and I fit in. Well let's move on to Genesis Chapter 2 to look at **the Place of Humanity in Creation**.

Now as we move on to Genesis two again it's important not to impose our ways of writing literature onto the writer. You may have heard it said that there are two accounts of creation in Genesis – Genesis 1 and Genesis 2; but we have to give the author the credit of knowing that at one level they look different. It's sheer intellectual snobbery for us to assume that he didn't see that. Of course he was aware of it...

The two accounts are not to be seen as contradictory but complimentary. In Genesis 1, we survey the vast landscape; but it ends with the focus which will be developed in the second account of creation: mankind.

So in the Genesis 2 account the camera lens narrows; we zoom in on one part of the panorama – to focus on a specific place in God's world. And the creation of mankind.

I sometimes think that the scale of creation in Chapter one, with that throw away line in verse 16 (***He also made the stars***) dwarfs us.

Don't you feel the same as me: ***He also made the stars***!!! If our sun is a tiny pin-prick of light in one galaxy, the Milky Way, then you and I are travelling through space on a speck of inter-stellar dust. And we **could** feel utterly insignificant. But Genesis is saying we are extremely significant. We are placed here by God as the pinnacle of creation, the image of God.

That hugely important idea is referred to in chapter one, but we see more clearly what it looks like when it is unpacked in chapter 2. And we're going to look at 2 passages which will hopefully make plain the pattern of humanity's place in creation – this is a pattern which arises again and again in the Bible; but you find it first in Genesis 2.8-9 and Genesis 2.15-17.

**8 Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. 9 And the LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.**

**15 The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. 16 And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; 17 but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die."**

Here is the pattern: it's a phrase I'm borrowing from Graeme Goldsworthy which many people have found very helpful. God's people in God's place under God's rule.

The verses in Genesis 2 include each of those three elements. We meet **God's people** – the man and then the woman, living in face to face friendship with God.

They are in **God's place**, the delightful garden, in which they are put by God, a place whose rivers flow out to bring blessing to the world beyond.

I love the idea of bounty that those words express: the trees are **'pleasing to the eye and good for food'**. The garden was beautiful God didn't have to make it that way, but he did.

There's a moment in one of the Sherlock Holmes stories where he looks out of the window and sees a rose and the great detective remarks on that being a wonderful evidence of Divine Providence. That's right. If you have a mechanistic view of the universe, what good really is a rose? Why should God make this world so beautiful? He didn't have to, but he did.

I suppose from a purely physical point of view none of us needs more than some fuel rods to keep our metabolism going but in Creation God made things **'good for food'**. Is there any reason why eating should be a pleasure? Not really, but it is. It's a ravishing picture here: God's people in God's place...

And with one straightforward command, we see God's rule expressed over humanity. Let it be said, they have a huge area of freedom – all the trees look fantastic and they are permitted to eat from any of them – all except one; the tree of the knowledge of Good and evil.

There's some debate as to what that tree is all about - but the most convincing understanding of it is that the tree symbolised submission to the rule of God.

In not eating from it, Adam and Eve were saying effectively: 'God is our Maker and he knows best what's good and what's evil, he knows best what's right and wrong and therefore what he says goes'. Adam was saying: 'I'm not at liberty to re-write the rule book – because I'm not God... That's his decision not mine'.

Humanity is under God's rule, but they are over the world – that in fact is what it means to be the image of God – as human beings submit to God they are in a position to rule for God, as his image over all that he has made.

We have one final area to focus on and for this we are going to move outside Genesis into the New Testament.

**Christ's place in Creation.**

Colossians 1:15-17. ***15He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 16For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. 17He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.***

These are verses as the heading rightly tells us about Jesus Christ. He is the missing piece of the Jigsaw. These verses tell us that perhaps we could have included a capital J alongside the human figure in our acetate.

Because Jesus perfectly images God to the universe, in a way that the rest of the human race has repeatedly failed to.

You will be aware that the accounts of Jesus' life demonstrate all creation bowing to him repeatedly: two examples: how about the time when Jesus gave the local fishermen a fishing lesson: they'd been slaving away all night: nothing! Jesus tells them, where and when to let down the nets: and at that moment the fish are all there, on cue, saying - please serve me with chips and vinegar.

Or the time when as a wedding guest Jesus rescued an embarrassing situation by turning water into the day's finest wine: as someone put it - the very water saw its God and blushed.

These verses in Colossians explain why that is so: it is simply that creation was made for Jesus all along: ***he is before all things*** verse 17 – and all things are ***for him*** (v 16) – which makes it even more remarkable that Jesus, the Lord of Creation, was willing to die on the cross so we could be forgiven.

When it comes to giving presents I am not good at it: My standard practice is to buy for people what I would quite like myself. I almost find myself hoping that the ball and hammer toy I got for Rosie will not interest her, because I just love the feel when I hit that little wooden ball smack in the middle and it plops satisfyingly through the hole.

Whereas Susu, my wife, is good at giving gifts. She designs each gift specifically for the recipient and, lo and behold, the product suits the recipient – it corresponds to them.

It's not just here in Colossians but actually repeatedly the Bible says that Creation is designed by God the Father as a gift for Jesus Christ.

Remember the Bible doesn't focus on the ***how*** questions – how God made the world - so much as the ***why*** – God's purpose. It was made through Christ – and perhaps more significantly still it was made ***for*** him.

There is nothing haphazard about why we are here because God had a plan: what is here is what must be here; it is exactly as it is, because it fits someone who predates this world: all creation is for Jesus. He is the template against which our creation must fit, because it is for him.

So we began by saying that our study this morning is hugely significant because it has to do with our beginnings and that is true; but the Bible's doctrine of Creation also tells us where the whole universe is heading as well. Everything – including you and me – was made for Jesus.

So don't be surprised as we look at the remaining building blocks that Jesus Christ is central. And if you haven't yet given your life to Jesus Christ then by definition you are missing the point of existence... and you will always fall short of what you were made for **until you bow the knee to him.**

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Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)