

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

8 October 2012, World communion Sunday, Pentecost +19

Rev. Anneke Oppewal,

Genesis 1: 1-5, Psalm 8, John 1: 1-5

"In the beginning God created"



In the next couple of weeks we will be reading from the book of Genesis, the first book of our Bible. The reason why this book finds its place at the beginning is first of all simply because of the hebrew word the book starts with: Bereshit, which means "In the beginning", or "beginnings" or even more accurately "for starters".

The word that is used refers to "beginnings" more in a philosophical way than in a historical sense. It does not refer to a certain point in time where "things began", but rather seeks to make a statement about the foundation, the first principles of how the reader of the book should see the world and its relationship with God. The book in that sense is not about "the" beginning, but about "beginnings". And not just about any beginnings, but the beginnings of God's relationship with the world and its inhabitants, particularly, but not exclusively, humanity.

It is a beautiful book where every word, every letter, every dot and comma has been considered carefully to tell a story of foundations, of the first principles of creation and the relationships that are important in it. It is a statement of faith, a creed, carefully composed in conversation with the world around it, probably written by priests in the late exilic or post-exilic period, around the 5th century BCE.

It was a time of rebuilding and redefining identity that had been eroded and threatened by exile. Statements needed to be made and clarity created about the beliefs of Israel in the context of the world around her. So the priests set to work and, in constant conversation with other religious beliefs surrounding them, they came up with their take on how heaven and earth fit together.

In the beginning, they say, for starters, God created the heavens and the earth. A controversial statement. Not because scientists at the time had any knowledge or understanding of the big bang and would have doubted the way Genesis 1 describes the beginnings of Creation, but because, at the time, a different narrative was prevalent amongst Israel's neighbours. According to that story, that myth, there was no beginning. There just was the world of the divine, of the gods, of the light and the world of darkness, the void, existing alongside each other embroiled in a constant and eternal tug of war. With the world as the battle ground and man either a spark fallen from the divine world trapped in matter, or a half-breed of divine light and material darkness, struggling alongside the gods to resist the darkness and create order out of chaos.

The story Genesis tells is different, right from the word go, (or from the beginning, Bereshit). According to the story of Genesis there is a beginning. A beginning with God. All that is, all creation, both light and darkness find their origin in God and from there on, the rest can only be told inside that first founding principle: The world, the heavens and the earth, the darkness and the light find their origin in God and are God's creation.

Where the gods in the world around Israel are struggling from the beginning to wrest creation from the darkness, the land from the sea monsters, the world from the void, and find themselves and what they create forever under threat and in conflict with the forces of

darkness, Israel confesses that the origin of Creation is with one God who brings everything into being, and without whom nothing exists that exists. And for starters that “everything” is good. The source it comes from is good and rather than from conflict it emanates from a divine desire to create something good, something beautiful, culminating in the creation of an “over and against” mirroring the creator, entering into relationship with him.

This is a statement of faith. It confesses that nothing in heaven or earth exists, or has come into existence separate from God. A statement that puts the darkness, the void into perspective: They may be scary, but in the end they are still creatures with a limited scope and limited power.

In the beginning it is *God* who creates heaven and earth and all that is in it. All that is has come from God, and there is nothing that exists outside God. At the beginning there was God, nothing else.

According to the Rabbis, the message of the story, is summed up in the first letter of the first word of the book. The Hebrew letter Beth which you find printed on the front of your order of service. The name given to that letter, Beth, means house, or home and is encountered at various other key places in scripture. One of the best known of course Beth Lehem, Bethlehem, the house of bread.

The story, begins literally with a reference to house and home. In the beginning there is home. Before creation starts God is at home, and from that home everything is created. The world does not come from some random place, does not emerge from chaos and darkness, the world emanates from a home, a place synonymous with safety, protection, care, warmth and family.

Again this is very different from how the world around Israel imagined this to be. Here the world emerges from darkness and chaos, from violent conflict and a deep void.

In Genesis the void is there, and the chaos, *tohuwabohu*, a world without form and void, but rather than a chasm full of darkness of violence and conflict this is a void waiting for formation, full of things ready to be brought into existence. See, God only needs to speak for them to take shape and contribute to what, in a couple of verses time, will be deemed very good.

God *creates* heaven and earth.

The letter Beth tells us something else as well. There is no going back beyond this home, this house from which creation is believed to have come from. Whatever was before God, before God was, is outside the scope of this story. What is important is that, as far as faith is concerned, the story begins with God at home, calling into being all that is. The shape of the letter Beth physically expresses that. Hebrew is written right to left, and when you look at it like that you'll see the letter is closed on that side indicating that as far as telling the story goes, we don't need to go beyond this point.

The letter is open towards the other side, the side from where the story will further develop, the story about how the home of God opens itself into a home for God's creation. With the confidence that this home has the source of creation protecting it from behind, that there is nothing beyond it to worry about. A home with firm foundations and a roof to keep out the cold that is in principle, for starters, to begin with, good. Very good.

Some five centuries later, when writing about Jesus of Nazareth, the writer of the gospel of John takes this creed, this statement of faith and trust in a positive source for all that is, to the next level. Where Genesis 1 remains fairly general in what emerges from this source, from this home, from the divine bringing creation into being, John 1 puts, quite literally, flesh and bones on the God who is believed to be at the beginning of everything.

The source, the force that brings about creation says John, is to be identified with what we have seen come to life in Jesus Christ. The God who created the world, our home, was, from the beginning, the same God revealed in Jesus Christ. Creation from the beginning not just a random project of beauty, but something which carried the features of Christ inherently inside it. The goodness mentioned in Genesis 1 not just any pleasant peacefulness, but the goodness of life as Jesus lived it. Righteous, loving, full of light and life, peace and wholeness. The God we believe is the founding principle of all that is, is a God who chooses light over darkness, order over chaos, form over void, beauty over devastation, relationship over self sufficiency.

God creates. Not because God is challenged by the forces of conflict and chaos, but because God from the beginning is not and does not want to be alone. In the beginning the word was with God. That which Christ is, was, from the start part of Creation, sown into every fibre of its being.

God creates a home, a place to live, a place suited where family and community can be at home, a place where people are created to mirror what God is in God self, a being in relationship, full of positive energy, that brings about things that are good. Very good. A place where people are called to join into relationship, with God and with each other and become partners in the continuing unfolding of that story of a creation that is at home with God, finds shelter in God's goodness and intentions, and helps form and is formed by God's word continuing to bring life to birth.