

XB

St. Mary's RCIA

God, Our Loving Creator

Wednesday, October 3, 2018

There are almost 1200 chapters that make up the Bible. But it is the **first two chapters** of the Bible (chapters 1 and 2 of the book of Genesis) that are almost certainly the two most hotly-debated chapters in the entire Bible, especially in the last 150 years or so.

Especially since the time of the biologist Charles Darwin back in the mid-1800s, Christians have been engaged in heated arguments about the meaning of those verses, and especially how (or if) they could be squared with the findings of modern science, leading to the dichotomy that we constantly hear about, that “science and religion are opposed to each other,” seeing each other as enemies and fundamentally irreconcilable. It's not true, but I'm sure you hear it all the time, just as I do.

That tension led to the development of a whole branch of Protestant Christianity that came to be known as “fundamentalism,” because it was rooted in a series of booklets, called “The Fundamentals,” that were printed and widely circulated in the early 20th century, arguing that a literal interpretation of the Bible—and especially of the creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2—was a “fundamental” of Christian belief. Because of that, what had always been a somewhat uncomfortable relationship between Christian faith and science tended to turn into a war and, for some Christians, has largely remained a war ever since.

But, although many people assume that ALL Christians are fundamentally hostile to science and its findings, it's important to know that that is NOT the Catholic approach, as I want to explain a bit tonight.

One of the first lines in the Creeds says that Christians “believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, of all things, visible and invisible”. Each one of those phrases is important for us as Christians, both in terms of how we think about GOD, and how we think about our own role as religious people in 2018.

Christians, like Jews before us, and like Muslims also, believe that everything that exists ultimately flows from God ... but comes from God in a unique way. The Hebrew verb that the Bible uses for God's creating is *bara'*, and it is never used of anyone except God. In that sense, we believe that ONLY God creates in an absolute sense, from nothing ... we humans, and other animals, may MAKE things, but we are always doing it from pre-existing materials or ingredients. We do not “create” in the same way that God does—and yet, in important ways, the work we do is an imitation of, and a participation

in, God's creative work ... so we are, in a very real way, "co-creators" with God, sharers in His work. Every invention, every building, every new thing that we make is a cooperation with God's work of creation.

And it's important to realize that we don't believe that creation is a one-time event entirely in the past. We certainly believe that it **BEGAN** in the past, but we also believe that it is an ongoing, present process ... God is **STILL** creating, each and every day, and it is only because of God that everything continues to exist from moment to moment. Creation is an ongoing reality that we are part of at every moment.

It's no coincidence that the creation stories form the first chapters of the Bible, because they reach back long before recorded history, and try to explain to us the origins of the cosmos and all of its creatures (the name that we give to the first book of the Bible, "Genesis," is a Greek word meaning "origin" or "coming-into-being"). But before we delve too far into the creation stories, the most important thing for us to look at is the Bible that Genesis kicks off.

All Christians accept a Bible that is made up of the **Old** Testament (which we largely share with Judaism) and the **New** Testament (which is unique to Christianity). Most of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew, and all of the New Testament was written in Greek. Everyone agrees that the New Testament has 27 books in it ... the problem comes when we look at the OLD Testament. That's where things get a wee bit muddy.

2000 years ago, the Bible was not yet as formalized as it is today, and there were two slightly different lists circulating, of books that were considered inspired. One of the lists, in Hebrew, included books that today we would count as 39. One of the lists, in Greek, included all of those books, **plus 7 others**, and longer versions of the books of Daniel and Esther. Since the bulk of the world's Jews at that time lived in the Greek-speaking world, the longer, Greek list tended to be more widely accepted outside of the Land of Israel itself, and it was accepted very early on, as Christianity became a predominantly Greek-speaking phenomenon, because it was the Bible the Greek world as familiar with. Taken together, that yields a Christian Bible of 73 books.

Some of those books continued to be debated for centuries, and were called "deuterocanonical," meaning "part of the second list of books" or "accepted at a later stage". In the end, the Jewish community chose **NOT** to include those books in their own sacred scriptures, but the Christians generally did, and that decision was largely accepted throughout the Christian world. During the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s, some of the leading Reformers rejected theological ideas that the Catholic Church defended by pointing to some of those books. As a result, many Reformers ended up *rejecting* the deuterocanonical books as part of the Bible (or saying that they could be read for interest, but were not binding in terms of doctrines). For them, that

yielded a Christian Bible of 66 books. And that difference has continued to this very day ... there are “Protestant” Bibles and there are “Catholic” Bibles (and several Eastern Orthodox churches accept even a few books more than we do!) ... so *the denomination you belong to* will determine how big your Old Testament is, although some of those arguments have softened considerably in the last couple of generations. Most Christians tend not to be overly doctrinaire about that question, but it still matters when you go to Chapters to buy a Bible!

(HANDOUT with comparative canon lists)

And when you delve into those books—73, as we say in our Catholic community—what you quickly discover is that there are a wide range of different types of literature bound in a single cover ... history and poetry, laws and genealogies, suggestions on living a successful life and guidelines for proper worship, ancient legends and even some pieces that were probably originally intended to be a bit humorous. It’s important to remember that our Bible represents more than 1000 years of material that we believe was written, edited, compiled and collected in a long, complex process that we believe was ultimately guided by God’s Holy Spirit. We call it “inspired” because the Latin word “inspiratus” means “something that God has breathed His breath into”. For us, the Bible has a unique character that makes it unlike any other literature, ancient or modern. But “inspired” doesn’t always translate into “inspiring” ... some parts of the Bible can be gory, sexist, and seemingly UNinspiring ... some can boring, tedious or repetitious, or relevant to their own particular time, and seemingly LESS relevant to us today. And yet we believe that, in some mysterious way, God continues to speak to us in and through these 73 particular books, some of which (like Isaiah) are very long, and some of which (like the prophet Obadiah) are very, very short. Part of the beauty of divine inspiration, we believe, is that God works THROUGH THE PERSONALITY and gifts of the human writer, so that we can see their own unique style and interpretation shining through ... and yet all of it is also, simultaneously, God’s Word, in a way similar to how we think about, and speak about, the divine and the human being united in Jesus ... If you’ve been to a Catholic Mass, you know that we process the book of the Scriptures into Mass, place it on a special reading-stand or the altar, kiss it and, on more formal occasions, incense it. The Bible holds a profoundly special, central place in Catholic life, even though many Catholics for many years were hesitant to read the Bible on their own, and we are still working together to encourage people to do that.

Part of the mystery of inspiration is that not everything in the Bible is necessarily *original*. There are some parts that have probably been “borrowed” from other neighbouring ancient cultures, and were then given a new meaning, first by the Jewish people, and later by the Christians. And the creation stories in Genesis are very much like that ... we need to remember that as we read and interpret them. We need to

remember that they are essentially symbolic, poetic ancient stories, meant to express key theological messages, and THAT is what we need to be listening for as we read them and pray with them.

For many decades in the 6th century BC, a large part of the Jewish people was sent into exile in Babylonia (modern-day Iran and Iraq). And while they were there, the Jews heard the Babylonian creation stories, called the Enuma Elish, about how creation had resulted from a violent cosmic war among the different gods, which had ended with the bodies of some of the defeated gods being torn apart to make the earth and the heavens ... their blood formed the oceans and rivers. According to that version, human beings were created as slaves to the gods, to do their bidding. It was a very bloody, gory, violent explanation ... and to the Jews, it was completely wrong, and ran counter to their own understanding of who God was, and what He was like. Most scholars believe that what Genesis chapter 1 represents is their ancient attempt, as Jews, to take the Babylonian creation myth and completely re-work and re-shape it in line with what they knew about God. So ... in our Bible, there are not *many* gods, but *only one*. Instead of a violent battle for supremacy, we have a God who merely speaks a commandment, and the world is created ... instantly, peacefully, in total obedience. Instead of the gods enslaving people as their servants, living in misery, the Bible says that God created the most beautiful paradise for them ... a garden with everything they could ever need, where they would live in peace and joy, in a relationship of intimacy with God. Humanity shared in God's work, giving names to all God's creatures. And men and women were created for each other, as supports to each other, and to enrich each other's lives. The overall pattern and structure of the story certainly **seems** to be based on the Babylonian version, but it has been so totally turned around that it is actually a critique and a rejection of the Babylonian story, intended to communicate very different truths. Through the language of poetry and symbolism, creation progresses calmly, methodically, systematically, as God brings order to the original chaos, and creates a harmonious cosmos in which everything has its place. Everything is beautiful, wholesome, peaceful ... over and over again, God says "And God saw what he had created, and it was good". On the sixth day, after creating humanity as the crowning achievement of creation, God says that "it was VERY good". So we believe that humanity has a special role, and responsibility, in the larger picture of creation.

When we realize that this is fundamentally a symbolic and poetic reinterpretation of an ancient Babylonian story, we realize that we don't have to get caught up in all of the mental tangles that result when we try to read this chapter as history and science ... because we know that that wasn't the original authors' purpose. There are many deep truths here, about God, about the universe, among human beings and their place in the cosmos ... but the purpose of Genesis 1 is NOT to teach us science ... so we don't have

to “shoehorn” it into a scientific framework ... because it isn’t about science, but about MEANING. It is an effort to underscore certain key themes that are essential to the Jewish and Christian worldview ... but it doesn’t intend to get into the realm of atoms and black holes and DNA (which is why the Catholic Church hasn’t gotten involved in the whole “creation vs. evolution” debate; see *Catholic Update* issue on this). When we understand the TYPE of literature we’re dealing with in the Bible, it becomes easier to know how to read and interpret it ... what kinds of questions it is trying to answer, and what it is NOT trying to do. Probably the most common problems in Biblical interpretation result from failing to understand the TYPE of literature we’re reading before we start to interpret it ... applying the wrong rules, and arriving at the wrong conclusions. So “What type of literature is this?” always has to be our first question when we open up the Bible to read it.

It’s worth noticing that there isn’t just ONE Creation account ... there are TWO ... Genesis Chapter 2 contains a slightly *different* story, which portrays a God who is much more intimately connected to creation, who is more like a potter shaping humanity from the clay, rather than the majestic, regal and somewhat “distant” God that we encounter in chapter 1. Chapter 2 uses a different Hebrew name for God, which is one of the clues that scholars point to, to remind us that different stories, from different human authors and different periods, were woven together in the Bible, to produce the books as they stand today.

The Genesis stories make several things clear: (1) that everything that exists, from the largest to the smallest, flows from God ... nothing exists apart from Him; (2) God takes pleasure in His creations, and clearly loves them and wants the best for them; (3) from the beginning, creation is meant to exist in a harmonious relationship ... human beings with each other, human beings with God, human beings with the rest of creation; (4) human beings occupy a special place in creation, as the culmination of God’s creative activity; (5) humanity reflects the image and likeness of God, and that image is equal in both women and men; (6) human beings are endowed with free choice ... God has not created them as robots, but allows them the gift of choosing, and the possibility of choosing **WRONGLY**.

And then comes Chapter 3 of Genesis—the fall. Again, we need to remember that this is not intended to be history in our modern sense of the term: it is a symbolic story meant to explain how this beautiful, harmonious, well-ordered world came to be so messed up. The story uses symbols: a tree which represents the knowledge of good and evil; a snake, who represents voices that lead human beings avoid from God, and to make harmful, wrong choices; a fruit, which represents the desirability of knowledge and control. And it shows how quickly things spiral out of control: the serpent tempts

Eve to try the fruit of the tree, which seems so attractive and desirable; she does, and she shares it with Adam; immediately they see reality differently, and their original nakedness becomes a source of shame for them. They hide themselves from God, afraid to come face-to-face with Him and, when God asks what happened, they begin to blame each other. Adam blames Eve, and Eve blames the serpent ... the original harmony has been broken, everyone is scapegoating everyone else, and our first ancestors are eventually driven out of the beautiful garden, into a world that is harsh and hostile, where their lives become painful and difficult. Their refusal to trust God, and their desire to be God's equals, leads to disaster ... and, according to the tradition, *that* is at the root of everything else that is wrong with society today ... that "original sin," that marred the beauty of God's creation, and that has scarred us, so that we so easily tend to choose OTHER THAN what God wants ... we so often lean in the direction of sin, rebellion, violence and selfishness. We know that it's a struggle every day, to choose goodness and generosity and kindness and faith, when other temptations try to lead us in other directions.

The Bible suggests that that original bad decision is responsible for much of what is wrong with our world. But it also suggests that, among all the things God has created—things both visible and invisible—there are angels—spiritual, invisible personal beings—who were created to serve God, and to accompany, protect and guide human beings. Yesterday, we celebrated the Guardian Angels, the beings that God has assigned to watch over each one of us on our journey, and last week we celebrate three of the greatest angels, the archangels, Gabriel, Michael and Raphael, who are God's personal messengers and instruments to do His will.

But we also believe that some of those angels, like our first human ancestors, rebelled against God and refused to accept God's sovereignty, and were cast out of heaven. Some ancient traditions say that they rejected God's plans to create human beings, because they realize that human beings had the potential to wreck all of God's beautiful creation. In religious terms, we speak of them as evil spirits or demons, and we believe that the chief among them, the Devil or Satan, has never stopped seeking ways to undermine or destroy God's work, to lead human beings astray and to undo the goodness of God's creation. But we are also very clear that, although they can mislead us, they are not in any sense God's equals. God is supreme, and they are not any REAL competition for God ... as long as we keep our eyes focused on God, trying to live according to God's commandments, and asking God's strength and guidance in our lives. They would like us to think that they are more important than they really are!

I think that there are two very important points for us to remember in this context: firstly, that God, who creates everything, creates OUT OF LOVE, and ONLY out of love. Strictly speaking, God had no need of anything outside of Himself; God was

perfect and complete, in and of Himself... and yet God chose to create creatures that He could love and care about and share a relationship with, because GOD IS LOVE, as the Bible reminds us in various places. God's very nature is loving, and the very fact of creation is because God loves us, and all of His creatures, and wants a relationship with us. God is not "aloof" from creation, as some philosophers suggest, but is intimately involved with us, and with the direction of human history. Unlike the ancient Babylonian story, we are NOT slaves subjected to the whims of brutal divine beings. We are not "playthings of the gods". We are beloved children of the Creator of the world—His image in the world—and that gives us, and every human being, an incredible value and dignity that can never be diminished or destroyed. We are LOVED by God, and invited by Him to be His partners in perfecting the world and shaping it according to His original plan. Every human being, without distinction of gender or race or religion or economic status or sexual identity or political views, has infinite value that nothing can ever alter or take away. And that provides us with the foundations for our Catholic pro-life vision, and our Catholic social justice tradition, which defends life at every stage from conception to natural death, and that stands up for those who are marginalized, ignored, oppressed or struggling in any way. All of that is because we are God's creatures. And it means we must have a profound respect and care for each other. It rejects racism, sexism, and every kind of discrimination between people. Because we have been created by a loving God, we have obligations to be loving toward others, to reflect God's love in our words, actions and relationships.

The second point, I think, is that we need to be reminded of our role as the stewards and caretakers of creation. Genesis makes it clear that human beings have a special responsibility to the environment around us ... to look at it with wonder and admiration and praise, as a sign of God's love and goodness, but also to care for it, protect it, and use it wisely ... to understand that it belongs, NOT just to us, but to ALL people, and to ALL of God's creatures. It means that we must take seriously as Christians issues like pollution and recycling, protection and conservation of our water supply, the rampant destruction of the natural habitat of animals and birds for purposes of unbridled economic greed, which often destroy species forever--species that we believe are each a unique message from God that can never be replaced. It means that we cannot be neutral to corporate and government actions that do irreparable damage to our world, and that we must think seriously about our own footprint here on earth ... how each one of us uses (and sometimes abuses) the limited resources of our planet. In May of 2015, Pope Francis issued a powerful letter on our care for the environment, called "Laudato Si'", which I would encourage you to take a look at. In that letter, he said: "Nature is a magnificent book in which God speaks to us and grants us a glimpse of his infinite beauty and goodness ... Rather than a problem to be solved, the world is a joyful

mystery to be contemplated with gladness and praise”. Especially in our own time, we need to reflect on the meaning of the created world, and understand our own place in it, as individuals and as a species.

I think there are two other important consequences of our understanding of Creation.

Firstly, that we are *creatures*, which calls us to be more humble and aware of our own limitations and smallness in the great scheme of things. Being a creature means recognizing our relationship to the Creator, and accepting that the world doesn't revolve around us--either as individuals or as a species. It means that we need to understand our own place in this massive, beautiful world ... to celebrate it, but also to acknowledge that we are only part of the picture. It's no coincidence that both Judaism and Christianity both emphasize *humility* as one of the key virtues in a healthy spirituality.

The second thing is that, because we are all creatures, there is no room for racism, discrimination or distinctions based on things like gender, race, sexual orientation, or economic status. An ancient Jewish author said that God created all of humanity from a single set of parents, so that no one could say “My father was more important than your father”. Our understanding of creation emphasizes the equal dignity and value of every human being--and reminds me that we are all ultimately related and linked to each other. It calls us to respect each other, and to treat each other with compassion and care.

Tomorrow the Church will be celebrating St. Francis of Assisi, who is arguably the best-known and most popular saint in the Catholic Church. Among the many things St. Francis is famous for is his love for all of God's creatures---for the birds and the wild animals, for the clouds and the rivers. One of his most famous prayers provided the title for Pope Francis' document on the environment, and is the text for one of the most famous Christian hymns, “All Creatures of our God and King”: (See handout with this prayer)

Francis of Assisi was someone who understood his connectedness to all of the rest of creation, and who spoke of the elements in nature with tenderness, as his brothers and sisters and mother. I think he can be a wonderful example for us as Christians, as we all grow in our awareness of Creation, of God as our loving Creator, and as those who are invited to be part of God's creation on a daily basis, by creating hand-in-hand with God, and helping creation to be what God intended it to be.

