

**Brackenhurst: 26 October 2008 07h45 & 09h30**  
**From Eden to Bethlehem: Creation**

**Call to Worship: Job 38:4-7**

Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?

Tell me if you understand.

Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!

Who stretched a measuring line across it?

On what were its footings set,

or who laid its cornerstone —

while the morning stars sang together

and all the angels shouted for joy?

- Hymn 329 — All creatures of our God and King

**Opening Prayer**

So Lord God, as we draw together in your presence this morning in our praise we recognise your creating presence.

A presence that has created the world and universe in which we live

A presence that has created those whom we love, and those we struggle with

A presence that has created each one of us, just as we are.

We ask this morning as we worship you that you would remind us that you created everything, and that which you created, you created good, and that you made us in your image.

That you would remind us that we were created by your spoken Word who came to be among us as the living word

And that this living word has reconciled our broken image to the image which you created us in.

We pray this in the name of the Word, even Jesus Christ.

Amen

**Welcome & Notices**

**Prayer of Adoration and Confession**

- Hymn 25 — He's got the Whole World

**Having the whole world in our hands we entrust to him our lives and finances as the stewards take up our gifts, our tithes and offerings**

**Offering**

**Prayer and scripture**

## **Scripture:**

Gen 1:1-3, 24-31a

Col 1:15-20

John 1:1-5

- Hymn 635 — Morning has broken

## **Message**

### **INTRODUCTION**

- I had just started my journey into ministry, was a local preacher and beginning to delve into the mysteries that are scripture.
  - And as I began to understand Genesis I remember having a conversation with a girlfriend's father.
    - \* He said to me, "Neil, when I read the Bible I'm only concerned about two things: How things began, and how things are going to end."
- And I think for many people that is where so much Bible study energy is focused.
  - How did things begin? And did God create in seven days, or did we arrive here as a result of millions of years of evolution. Evolution or Creationism?
    - \* What happened? Where did we come from?
  - And how will things end?
    - \* People love talking about the end times and the destruction that God is going to bring upon the earth, and when the end times are going to be, and who's going to be saved, and what about the rapture?
- I'm not so concerned about those things myself, I don't think that they're that important.
  - What is more important, I believe, is how we live today, and how we confront and deal with today the different challenges that life throws at us.
- As I said a couple of weeks ago
  - Salvation is about how we are saved today, not about pie in the sky when we die
- And last week
  - The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand
- And it is those incredibly powerful words that stand as the opening words of Genesis and John's gospel about the creation
  - That speak into how we live today.
- In Genesis "In the beginning God created"
  - and in John "In the beginning was the Word"
    - \* The Word that is spoken to create and to bring into being

- Now as Methodists by and large our theology is towards the liberal, historical-critical side of understanding scripture, rather than a conservative fundamentalist understanding
  - And so we don't believe in a literal six day creation and rest
- But we do believe that the first creation story that we read just now is a powerful hymn, a powerful affirmation of God's creating power
  - In the midst of disaster — in fact scholars believe that this account of creation was probably written by the priests while the Jewish people were in exile in Babylon and is a response not only to the creation epics of the Babylonians,
    - \* but also as a response to the confusion that the Jews would have been experienced as exiles in a foreign land; as a people having lost everything that was important to them
- The earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep
  - And yet over this chaos the Spirit of God hovers
    - \* And by his spoken Word brings peace and order
- I think, if we are honest, in South Africa today we are very often living lives that are chaotic
  - formless, empty, dark
- Many times we feel like exiles in our own country — we're not sure where to fit in any more
  - We're tempted to leave, and yet somehow feel that perhaps we would feel even more out of place in a foreign land.
- It is in times like these that we can turn to the this doctrine of creation and hear once again that we have been created lovingly by God for his purposes
  - That his Word continues to speak into our lives today
- And that through his creation of us, and our acceptance of the word we can live as people who are reconciled with God and each other

### **(1) Created in God's Image**

- The first thing that I want to recognise about the doctrine of creation this morning, and there are many things that we could look at
  - Is that we are created in God's image
- That is fundamental to who we are as Christ followers
  - Too often, though, I think that we create God in our image.
- We create a God who expresses our hates, our prejudices, our pettiness, and we become angry when God doesn't behave in the way that we want him to.
  - But what does it mean to say that we are created in God's image?

- Well, the image of God in which humanity was and is made can be discussed and explained in detail.
  - But James Packer says something helpful.
- He suggests that there is general agreement that it has to do with dignity, destiny, and freedom.
  - Dignity, Destiny and Freedom
- The assertion that man is made in God's image shows each person his true dignity and worth. As God's image-bearers, we all merit infinite respect.
  - So often in life the things that happen to us, and that we do to others strip that respect away from people.
- During apartheid, the dignity of non-whites was systematically stripped.
  - They were told that they could not be educated, and should take up a spade and take their place in society
    - \* That is not treating people with dignity that one would if we truly believed that everyone was created in the image of God
- And today in South Africa we still find that people are not treated with dignity, and we ourselves lose our identities
  - We don't know who we are any more, we don't know where our place is in society
    - \* we are told that we don't have anything to offer, and if we don't like it we should leave.
- As white South Africans who are we and where do we fit in?
- Being created in God's image also points to each one's true destiny.
  - We are designed in such a way that our nature can only be fulfilled in a relationship of responsive Godlikeness.
    - \* Because we are created in the image of God, it is only when we begin to live out the qualities of God such as love and creativity and justice and fairness
  - That we will truly understand what it means to live fully.
- Then thirdly the assertion that we are created in the image of God confirms the genuineness of each person's freedom.
  - We know through experience that we have freedom to make real choices between alternatives and could have chosen differently.
    - \* Self-determining freedom of choice is what sets God and his rational creatures apart from, say, birds and bees, as moral beings<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> These three points from James Packer, Your Father Loves You, Harold Shaw Publishers, 1986.

- These three assertions are expressed by Bishop John Shelby Spong as he says that the purpose of life is to live fully, love wastefully and to become all that we can be.
- And so we are created in God's image with dignity, destiny and freedom
  - A powerful message to people who are trapped as an outcast people in Exile in Babylon
    - \* And perhaps a helpful one for us too as we consider our own situation in South Africa, although I know that sometimes it is more tempting to say — whether we are rich or poor — that we have no dignity, no destiny and no freedom.
- We are created in God's image
  - We are created good!

## **(2) Created by the Word**

- We are told in John's Gospel about the creation of the World
  - Not the story that we heard from Genesis, but rather how God spoke things into being.
- In Genesis we read that God said, and there was
  - That which is spoken becomes reality; God speaks a Word into the chaos that reigned and order began to be created.
- In John's gospel we discover that the Word, the spoken Word, was with God, and indeed was God.
  - God was expressed in creation through a Word that cannot be disassociated from him.
  - Much as we may say something, a word of gossip or command, and that word cannot be divorced from us.
    - \* Did you hear what Neil said...
- And just as your words and my words have the power to build up or to destroy, so God's word has even more.
  - And so through this Word all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life.
- What a wonderful statement!
  - And yet it gets even more amazing, because this word of life, The Word, became flesh and made his dwelling among us.
    - \* The spoken Word becomes the Living Word
- This is almost too much to comprehend!

- The very word which was spoken to bring order into the formlessness and chaos of creation comes to dwell amongst us to bring order into the lives of broken people
  - \* To bring with him the dignity, destiny and freedom that creation is heir to
  - \* To speak that dignity, destiny and freedom into the lives of those he meets.
- Now remember, the first creation story was told to a hopeless people far from their home in Exile
  - Now Jesus comes and is born into a community that is in Exile in its own country as God seeks to free the Jews from the oppression of Rome
    - \* Not by violent revolution
  - But rather through a new way of life — a way of living in which he demonstrates the image of God made flesh
- A way of life in which he says, Love you enemies; pray for those who persecute you.
  - A way of life in which he says stop building up your wealth at the cost of others
  - A way of life in which the dignity, destiny and freedom of every person is celebrated, and those who try to strip others of dignity, destiny and freedom
    - \* Who try to destroy the image of God in others — is condemned
- And isn't it amazing that some of those who are best at destroying the dignity of others are the religious people?
  - The leaders who bring a naked women to Jesus for judgement?
  - Who steal from the widows and poor
  - Who exclude people based on their status, their illness, or their lack of wholeness?
    - \* And neglect the most important matters of the law — justice and mercy and faithfulness (Matt 23:23)
- It is as the Word, through whom all things were created, continues to speak that people rediscover the image of God in their lives
  - “Is there no one left to condemn you?”
  - “Your faith has made you well”
  - “Get up, take up your mat and walk”
- We are created, and re-created by the Word who continues to dwell among us today

### **(3) Reconciled in Christ**

- And so we've seen already this morning that we are created in God's image
  - And we've seen that we are created by the Word who gives us life and who dwells among us
- But I'm sure you'll agree that we don't behave as though we were created in God's image
  - People are evil and nasty and hurtful, we don't see or experience very much dignity, destiny and freedom in any aspect of creation.
- To experience these things we need to turn again to Christ
- Paul, as he writes to the Colossians quotes the words of an early Christian hymn in which Christ is described as the one who reconciles all things in heaven and on earth
  - If we are to experience humanity in the image of God, created by the word, we are to turn to Christ
    - \* We have to recognise the centrality and supremacy of Jesus in our lives and in our world.
- This hymn reminds us of three things about Jesus
  - Firstly that Jesus is the image of the invisible God
    - \* the more we look at Jesus. the more we realise that the true God is the God of utter self-giving love.
    - \* In response to that gratitude is the first and most appropriate reaction.
  - Secondly It is Jesus who holds the old and the new together
    - \* It is Jesus who holds together the way in which things were created, and the ideal of the way things ought to be in spite of the fall inbetween.
  - And thirdly Jesus is the blueprint for the genuine humanness in the image of God which is on offer through the gospel
    - \* If we want to know what God intended when he create us in his image we need look no further than Christ
    - \* Jesus is the one in whom we are called to discover what being human means in practice.
- So it is Christ and all that he is and represents who brings together the image of God through his word.

### **CONCLUSION**

- Let me try to close off this very challenging doctrine of creation
  - God has created in his image through his Word which was born on earth 2000 years ago and who spoke words of dignity, destiny and freedom then

- \* And who continues to do so today.
- When we look around us we do not see much that seems to reflect God's image, we do not see dignity, destiny and freedom
  - We do not see order being created out of chaos.
- Rather we see disorder and hurt and abuse and destruction
  - We see crumbling international financial systems, we see a world which is filled with war and fighting, we see a planet that is fast being depleted of its natural resources.
- God created good, God created in abundance — what has gone wrong, and how do we fix it?
  - Well, God created us stewards of our own life, of the lives of others, and of the planet.
    - \* God gave enough for all, but through our greed, through our desire to be number one, to have more than our neighbour, through our selfishness
    - through our lack of affording dignity and destiny to those around us so that we can climb the ladder of success
      - \* We have placed ourselves in this predicament
- Yet it is Christ who comes to our rescue
  - When we turn again to him he will offer us reconciliation with him and God, with others, and with our environment.
- In our struggles to find dignity in South Africa
  - Whether white or black
    - \* We have to turn to Christ and see how he responds to others, and learn from him how to treat each other with dignity.
- As we wonder at the destiny of our planet and our country we turn to Christ and celebrate the reconciliation that he offers
  - Reconciliation with each other, reconciliation with nature
    - \* That we come to learn that the world — and South Africa — does indeed have a place for everybody
- And as we discover the power of the Word — the spoken word, the word spoken not just by God
  - But the word spoken by us
    - \* the word that has the power to create and destroy
    - \* to humiliate or bring dignity
    - \* The word to hold captive, or to set people free
- As we discover that word, and as we discover the awesome power that being created in the image of God has
  - That we will learn to re-create the world

- And to recreate it as a place where everybody and everything has dignity, destiny and freedom.
  - That everybody is able to live fully, love wastefully and to become all they were created to be
- As we begin our Christmas journey by reflect on our creation; and our recreation in Christ
  - I pray that Christmas time will become, once again, a place of reflection on our role in the Jesus story.
- May it be so for you, even as it is for me.
  - Amen

**Prayer of Response and Intercession**  
**The Lord's Prayer**

- Hymn — How Great Thou Art

**Benediction**  
**Doxology**