



28 April 2013
The Fourth Sunday after Easter
Choral Evensong
Genesis 1 v. 1– 2 v. 3
John 1 vv. 1–14

The Word and Creation

By The Rev'd Annabel Shilson-Thomas
Associate Vicar, Great St Mary's, Cambridge

THE SUMMER DAY

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean-
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

The poem I have just read by American Poet, Mary Oliver, begins and ends with a question – indeed is full of questions. Who made the world? Who made the swan, and the black bear? Who made the grasshopper? They are questions asked in response to the wonders seen and experienced in creation. Questions asked by someone who has stopped, who has looked, who has wondered. Wondered at the beauty, the magnificence, the intricacy of creation and marvelled at the mind behind it. Whose imagination is this? Whose imagination brought this into being?

Mary Oliver doesn't come up with the easy answer, the conventional one, the one we might expect — God; an answer that effectively would distance us from the creation of which we are a part. Instead, she goes down a more demanding route, a route that asks something of us. She puts into words what her mind observes, and offers us not only her gift of words, but her gift of observation, of attention. 'I don't exactly know what prayer is. I do know how to pay attention...' Her response to creation is to pay attention, attention which connects her with the world she inhabits, with the world to which she is inextricably linked – to the world with which we are all linked and which draws us into the mind of the creator. She translates her observations into words that communicate the breathtaking beauty and complexity of the simplest of creatures; words that create communication; words that communicate creation.

Creation and communication go together. The creation is an expression of God's imagination, God's outpouring of God's self, God's Word.

The contents of this paper are the views and expressions of the author.

The contents may not be used without the permission of the author, more information can be obtained from chapel@joh.cam.ac.uk

© Annabel Shilson-Thomas



28 April 2013
The Fourth Sunday after Easter
Choral Evensong
Genesis 1 v. 1– 2 v. 3
John 1 vv. 1–14

'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' is probably one of the best known sentences in the Bible. Introducing the prologue to St John's Gospel, it reverberates round chapels and churches every Christmas not only proclaiming God the Creator, but God the Redeemer and Sustainer. Christ is the Word through which the world was created. A hymn found in the letter to the Colossians, a letter possibly written by Paul, but probably by an earlier follower, in about AD50, is thought to be the earliest known hymn of the early Church, expresses Christ's pre-existence like this:

He is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn over all creation.
For by Him all things were created
that are in heaven and that are on earth,
visible and invisible,
whether thrones or dominions,
or principalities or powers.
All things were created through Him and for Him.

John, writing some 40 to 50 years later, takes us back to the creation story in Genesis, where God speaks the world into being. In the darkness, God's Spirit moves over the face of the waters and God's voice is heard. "Let there be light" and there was light and the light was good. On the days that followed, the created order unfolds, culminating in the sixth day, with God saying "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness;"

"Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness;" What, we might wonder, does this mean? That we look like God; that we physically resemble God. I think not. Rather, I think it tells us something about our creative imagination; that God gives us the ability to imagine, to wonder, to speak and to create; we are made for creative communication with God's self, with each other and the created world. We are able to imagine another world and to communicate through speech. How else was someone like writer and artist William Blake able to lift himself out of the smog and grime of 18th century London, where he lived all his life, to write poetry like this:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.

Does not his creative imagination, does not our creative imagination, reflect God's imagination? Does not the human capacity for creative communication reflect the creative communication intrinsic to the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of all? The very notion of the Trinity implies that communication and creativity sit at the heart of God. For the relationship between the three persons of the trinity - Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, Father, Son and Holy Spirit - models movement, mutuality and exchange that is the essence of communication. But what is important here is reciprocity and balance, the natural ebb and flow of communication between the three persons, the mutual giving and receiving that makes them one.

Balance. Balance between giving and receiving, being and doing, speaking and listening, is all important in relationships, is important not only in the way we relate to God and each other but in the way we relate to the created world, too. When we fail to give the created world due attention, when we take from it more than it can bear, when we fail to listen to the groans of creation, we fail to listen to God.

The contents of this paper are the views and expressions of the author.

The contents may not be used without the permission of the author, more information can be obtained from chapel@joh.cam.ac.uk

© Annabel Shilson-Thomas



28 April 2013
The Fourth Sunday after Easter
Choral Evensong
Genesis 1 v. 1– 2 v. 3
John 1 vv. 1–14

Significantly, the climax of the creation story in Genesis is not the creation of humankind, but the creation of the Sabbath, the day of rest and restoration. The seventh day is not an afterthought. A rest day to stop, to look, to listen and to give thanks is integral to creation. Like our creator, in whose image we are made, humanity needs time to rest, to re-charge, to remember, to remember who we are and what we are, and to literally re-member, to re-connect, to re-connect with our maker and the world around us. Rest time is blessed time, is hallowed time, as the creation story tells us and which Mary Oliver reminds us:

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed....

When we cease to pay attention, we become disconnected from our surroundings. Lines of communication close down. We no longer remember the threads that weave us together. We fail to see and to hear what creation is telling us, or to be inspired by what it communicates. Our imagination shrivels and our senses are dulled.

To a great extent, global warming and its consequences – changing weather patterns, floods and droughts, migration and conflict - comes as a result of failing to listen to creation. We have failed to recognise creation as an expression of divine self-giving. Instead, as the second, older creation story in Genesis 2 and 3 – the story of Adam and Eve, the story of humanity – reminds us, we have listened to our own voice, the voice of greed – ‘I want.’ is our message. As soon as Adam and Eve begin to doubt God's provision, they want more. They fear scarcity in the face of abundance. In effect, they doubt God's loving generosity. They doubt God's word, forgetting that they are the creature and God, the creator; that is until they are reminded that they are ‘but dust and to dust they shall return’. In their beginning is their end. In our beginning is our end. But the incarnation tells us something more. Remember these words in the Book of Revelation, a book of creative imagination if ever there was one: Behold I am making all things new. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.’

The poet TS Eliot, master of the spoken word, explores this theme of beginnings and endings in The Four Quartets, where words support each other to make an end and a beginning:

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.

.....Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning,
Every poem an epitaph. And any action
Is a step to the block, to the fire, down the sea's throat
Or to an illegible stone: and that is where we start.



28 April 2013
The Fourth Sunday after Easter
Choral Evensong
Genesis 1 v. 1– 2 v. 3
John 1 vv. 1–14

In this extract from 'Little Gidding', Eliot, in effect, describes the paradox of life and the symbiotic nature of creation, where everything is dependent on and supportive of the other. He also articulates what is hidden within the prologue of John 1. That self-giving unto death is implicit in the creative act. In East Coker he describes it thus:

Words move, music moves
Only in time; but that which is only living
Can only die. Words, after speech, reach
Into the silence.

But, as he goes on to say, this is not the end of the story. Love, which is timeless, is the cause and end of all movement. Self-giving love is the cause of creation and love's self-giving by its very nature moves towards death. Death and resurrection belong together.

Implicit in Eliot's thinking is the tension between that which we desire, which is eternal, and the limitations imposed upon us by our humanity. In Christian thinking this tension has led to both a positive and negative appreciation of creation as a way of drawing closer to our creator. For some the creation actively reminds them of God's presence. Take St Francis, for example, for whom the creation is a constant reminder of God's intimacy with this creation:

Be praised, my Lord, through all your creatures,
especially through my lord Brother Sun,
who brings the day; and you give light through him.
And he is beautiful and radiant in all his splendour!
Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness

Or the Victorian poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, whose evocative descriptions of the natural world brim-over with praise for the creator:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God,
It will flame out like shining form shook foil,
It gathers to a greatness like the ooze of oil crushed.

For others, however, the beauty and magnificence of the creation serves as a reminder of God's absence. They are driven mad with desire to know the mind behind the creation. And so while words are a vehicle for describing creation's beauty, they are also a vehicle for describing longing for the eternal God who remains forever beyond our grasp. The sixteenth century mystic, St John of the Cross, heavily influenced by the Song of Songs, writes this:

Reveal your presence,
and make the vision of your beauty be my death;
for the sickness of love
is not cured
except by your very presence and image.



28 April 2013
The Fourth Sunday after Easter
Choral Evensong
Genesis 1 v. 1– 2 v. 3
John 1 vv. 1–14

At the heart of the Christian faith lies the paradox of presence in absence - the paradox of the cross – God is most with us when God is most absent. Every time we share the gifts of creation, bread and wine, at the Eucharist, remembering the words Jesus uttered at the Last Supper, ‘This is my body’, ‘This is my blood’, we celebrate God’s presence in absence. But perhaps more importantly God’s ‘I am’ becomes ‘You are.’ ‘You are the body of Christ’. You are the body of Christ charged with being attentive and open to the world, attentive unto death.

I started with a poem by Mary Oliver and I shall finish with another. I hope it speaks for itself.

WHEN DEATH COMES

When death comes
like the hungry bear in autumn
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse

to buy me, and snaps his purse shut;
when death comes
like the measles-pox;

when death comes
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,

I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering;
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

And therefore I look upon everything
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,
and I consider eternity as another possibility,

and I think of each life as a flower, as common
as a field daisy, and as singular,

and each name a comfortable music in the mouth
tending as all music does, toward silence,

and each body a lion of courage, and something
precious to the earth.

When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was a bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

The contents of this paper are the views and expressions of the author.

The contents may not be used without the permission of the author, more information can be obtained from chapel@joh.cam.ac.uk

© Annabel Shilson-Thomas