

The Cathedral of Creation (Gen 1:1—2:3; Rom 8:18–25)

Genesis 1 is among the most famous texts in the history of literature, and its influence on Western thought, and art, and music is *incalculable*. I'm looking at a stunning stained-glass window devoted to displaying and interpreting it as I speak to you now. And Genesis 1 is indeed great literature, packed full of important images and ideas. I want to pick up on a couple of them. First, notice the refrain that we heard repeated throughout the passage, "... and God saw that it was good." Clearly the author of this text wants us to be in no doubt that God's world is *fit for purpose*. It has value, worth, beauty.

In the eyes of many today, the world has no *inherent* value or meaning at all. Any meaning that it has is a meaning *we* give to it. Its goodness, in other words, is in the eyes of the beholders. Of course, the problem here is that this puts the world at the mercy of our human dispositions towards it. If we *choose* to value it then it *has* value. If we don't, then it doesn't. Genesis has a different vision: the world isn't good because *we* think it's good. It's good because the good *God* made it good. And because we do not *make* the world to be valuable, *we* can't *strip* it of its value. All we can do is to *recognize* its goodness . . . or, as is often the case, *fail* to do so.

That notion of the goodness of creation underpins the way that the Bible approaches the cosmos. We see that in the reading from Paul's letter to the Romans. There Paul speaks of the way in which the whole creation has been suffering in captivity, longing for liberation. In our day, that language resonates powerfully. But Paul's message here is one of *hope*. Creation, though it is lamenting now, will be *set free* by God. It will share in Jesus' resurrection life. In a nutshell, Genesis 1 teaches us that *God does not create trash*. And Romans 8 teaches us that *God does not trash what he creates*. In the end, God will bring the whole universe to the destiny for which it was created.

But *what is that destiny?* There's no one simple answer to that, and God plays his cards close to his chest. However, one theme that comes out in the Bible, and various scholars think is alluded to in Genesis 1, is that creation is made to be a temple, a palace for God to inhabit. Let's think about that.

The ancient world was awash with temples—holy houses in which deities were thought to dwell. And to ancient people these temples were microcosms of the whole universe, symbolic models of the cosmos. The Israelite temple in Jerusalem was seen in exactly this way. It was thought of as a small representation of the whole created order, and at its heart lived the Holy One of Israel. And just as the temple was a symbolic picture of the cosmos, so the cosmos was thought of as a temple. The universe is the LORD's house, full of God's glory.

Medieval cathedral architects and builders thought in somewhat similar ways. Now I don't want to reduce the multiple layers of meaning in a cathedral to one—these buildings have more layers than an onion—but for our purposes today, it's helpful to draw attention to one fascinating aspect of this place. The medieval cathedral isn't just a beautiful building—*it's a symbolic representation of the cosmos*. Not some crude attempt at a realistic scale model or map. Medieval people weren't stupid. They knew that the world didn't *literally* look like this. No. A cathedral is way of bringing out some aspects of the *meaning* of the world and shaping those who worship within its walls so that when they go out "to love and serve the Lord," they perceive the world around them in Christian ways.

Consider: we have three levels: ground level, the space we inhabit. Beneath is the crypt, where the dead bodies are placed. Above is the vault of the heavens, far beyond our reach. As you move closer to the High Altar the heavens are opened and you can see hosts of angels, saints, and martyrs in glory. One of the most striking aspects of a gothic cathedral is the way that your eyes are drawn up to the heavens by all the vertical lines. You can't help but look up.

The cathedral is orientated heavenward, but not to encourage escape from the earthly realm. In our worship we don't try to climb up to the ceiling. Rather, in this space, there is an open interaction between the earthly and heavenly; the heavenly infuses the earthly with the divine light, bringing life and blessing.

And this cosmic cathedral is full of representations of the living world: there are plants and animals all over the place, in glass, wood, stone, and metal. A quick scout around last Saturday and we came up with a long list. To mention just a few: dogs, deer, boars, goats, donkeys, snakes, monkeys, scorpion, crabs, fish (including flying fish), and the ever-popular lions; owls, swans, pelicans (of course), eagles (naturally), and that's not to mention the infamous pink giraffe; plus a few lovely mythic beasts: a winged horse, a centaur, mermen, and dragons everywhere. There are trees, and herbs, and flowers, and a wide assortment of leaves. As we gather here to worship the Creator, this building reminds us that *we don't worship alone*. We worship as creatures, alongside other creatures, all of whom have their place in God's house.

The fabric of the cathedral is itself very earthy—and rightly so. Wood, stone, metals, glass, and don't forget the very powerful use of sunlight. And all these elements have their own stories. That pew you are sitting on was made from a tree—a living creature with a story and an ancestry, very possibly with descendants still living today. Back there, we have Cotswold limestone, around 195 million years old; and that's a wee bairn compared to the Carboniferous green sandstone next to it, which is about 345 million years old. There's a *spirituality* to stones—ask a stonemason. And in a cathedral these stones are shaped into an edifice in which they serve to bring praise to their Creator. But in an important sense, that's merely to reveal to us something of the meaning of *all* stones—there is a God-ward orientation to the whole creation. *Every* stone declares the praise of God in its own, rocky way—by being what God made it to be. The cathedral teaches us that the material stuff of the world directs us to its transcendent Source.

Then there's maths. The geometry of the cathedral is full of meaning. In the Middle Ages, geometry was believed to reveal some of the hidden order of creation. The proportions of the cathedral are very carefully worked out to achieve a divinely beautiful balance and proportion that brings out an aspect of the cosmos. It says, *“Although it may not always be immediately obvious in your day-to-day life, you actually inhabit an ordered and unified world that manifests divine reason.”* The music too—and never forget that for a worshipper in a medieval cathedral, as today, the music was *central* to their experience of worship—the music too presented the same mathematical patterns as the architecture, the same ratios and proportions in the musical scales, harmonies, and the intervals between notes as those that informed the building. So, in subtle multi-sensory ways, worshippers were inbibing Christian ways to understand and to inhabit the world. The cathedral taught them: the cosmos is divinely ordered and beautiful.

Perhaps you think this is too 'tame'—it seems to have no place for all the pain and suffering of creation; the groaning and lamenting that St Paul spoke of. Is our cathedral too beautiful? Notice, however, that the entire building forms the shape of *a cross*. This cosmic cathedral is not free of the memory of pain, injustice, and death at all. However, it frames that suffering in the context of the story of Jesus. In doing so, it places God's presence right at the centre of the pain—in the Crucified Christ. In the cathedral's cosmos, God stands *with* creation, *as a creature*, in its most God-forsaken moments—and in Christ God holds out the hope of cosmic resurrection on the other side of death. There *is* death here, but it is enfolded within the hope of life.

In a way, our cathedral is in part an interpretation of Genesis 1 and Romans 8, preaching my sermon for me. So what does the cathedral say to us about living in God's world? It says, this is God's house, not our house. We are guests, alongside non-human guests, and while we're invited to make ourselves at home, we are *not* invited to trash the joint. We inhabit the world as we inhabit the cathedral—with *awe* and *wonder* and *love* and *service* and *worship*. And we learn that just as God's presence fills the cathedral, so it fills the cathedral of the cosmos. Here is William Wordsworth:

I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the lights of setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

From a biblical perspective, creation is not to be confused with the Creator. The world is not divine, ... *but it is sacred*. It is saturated with holiness.

So when we go from here today, let us go with refreshed eyes and ears and a heart newly attuned to see and hear and touch and taste and smell the glory of God in the world around us. I close with the words of Macrina Wiederkehr: "You live in a world of theophanies, [of divine manifestations]. Holiness comes wrapped in the ordinary. There are burning bushes all around you. Every tree is full of angels." Amen.