

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

The Reverend Andrew Sempell

Rector of St James

Christmas Day

25th December 2020

Readings: Isaiah 52: 7-10; Psalm 98; Hebrews 1: 1-4; John 1: 1-14.

'Opening the Gate'

Cast Out

The book Genesis describes that when God created,

'...the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "let there be light"; and there was light.'

(Genesis 1: 2-3)

In this poetic way, the writers of the Bible reach back into the unknown to bring into existence an explanation for why things are as they are. This is not science but rather an allegorical way of knowing, which religion does best. It is not so much about how things work, but rather about why they are the way they are and the relationships we have with them.

The creation stories are complex because many voices and hands were involved in their production over a long period of time. But they are enduring because they speak to the heart rather than the head. The second creation narrative (Genesis 2; 4b-24) begins in a garden called Eden. It describes God, humanity, and nature living in harmony and close relationship with each other; but it does not stay that way.

The man and the woman ate of the forbidden fruit of the 'knowledge of good and evil' and thereby gained moral consciousness, becoming godlike. The consequence of this action was that the man and the woman were cast out of the garden, lest they ate of the tree of 'eternal life' and became like God himself. Instead, they were doomed to live a life of hardship, while retaining their moral consciousness.

The story that follows is about the murder of Abel by his brother Cain – the first great act of violence, which was to become the ongoing feature of human brokenness and sin down through history. Be it either religious or secular violence, brutality became a feature of human behaviour culminating with the crucifixion of Jesus, as described in the gospels.

Rattling the Cage

The Gospel of John is a response to the story of creation and the violence inherent in humanity. In this respect, John retold the Creation Story in the Prologue to the Gospel, as just read for us:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it....

...And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”

(John 1: 1-5, 14)

John the Evangelist retold the story of the people of God for his own times. In other words, he spoke into his own culture - a Judaism that was then heavily influenced by Greek culture. This is one reason that it is especially mythic in style, which can be seen through the use of the term ‘Word’ (or *logos* in Greek). Indeed, the words ‘narrative’ or ‘story’ could also be used in translation.

In this way John reshaped the Genesis stories by shifting the focus from God the Creator to God the Christ, the chosen one who was God himself living in the world as a human being. This was a radical retelling of the story of God’s people, which effectively said, ‘you have heard the old story in the Scriptures, but things have moved on and here is the new story which is about these new times in which we live’. That is God is to be found not in the old world of the Temple and its rituals, but in humanity through the Christ who brings grace and truth.

With the Temple destroyed in 70AD and the people of Jerusalem scattered across the Mediterranean world, John’s message was partly one of renewal for a broken religion, but it was also about universal salvation, which certainly rattled the cage of Judaism.

Opening the Gate

For John, Jesus was therefore the one who reversed the effect of human brokenness and sin that caused Adam and Eve to be cast out of the Garden of Eden. John’s description of the sacrifice of Christ argued that the human condition had changed, and that people were metaphorically allowed back into the Garden of Eden, there to participate with God in the goodness of creation. In other words, the gate of Eden that was once closed to humanity has been reopened and we are therefore invited to return.

The celebration of the birth of Jesus is therefore an opportunity for us to ponder a life of meaning and purpose that transcends the broken world in which we live. It is a celebration that starts with the mystery of the baby lying in the manger, in all the vulnerability and ambiguity of what that might mean, and it ends with a triumph over negativity and fear – just what we need in these times of COVID-19, economic and political uncertainty, and natural disasters.

The Nativity is about a new beginning, and while there is beauty in the story, seen today in the crib scenes packed with animals, shepherds, and wise men, yet it is also a disturbing story of poverty, marginalisation, fear, asylum, abuse of power, death of innocent children, and political turmoil. Unsurprisingly, creative and life-changing events, such as birth, often have tense and chaotic beginnings before finding order and stability.

With the birth of a baby comes numerous expectations about the child and gives rise to a set of possibilities and futures that will develop through life. Moreover, a birth is never an individual or isolated event for it involves parents, a family, and the wider community as all participate in the development of the growing child.

In a similar way, the story of Jesus from his birth to death and beyond to resurrection and new life is one that encapsulates the creative processes of God, including movement from chaos to order, as well as revealing the redemptive and restorative activities of God in the world. The gate to paradise is therefore open, and we are invited to enter spiritually into the garden.

Contemplating the Mystery

The symbolic language of faith has a capacity to express mystery in a way that ordinary written and spoken words cannot do. Indeed, symbolism tends to bypass the divisive activities of definition and conflict over the value of ideas and associated claims to absolute truth. Like the parables of Jesus, symbolism upends the so-called ‘natural order’ and provides an opportunity for our eyes to be opened to see something new.

Worship is the symbolic recognition of God’s presence in the world, including that spiritual presence in one another. It is here that we approach the mystery of God, conveyed in the great narrative of God’s people down through time. We come to worship as equals, and it reminds us that we are to treat one another as if each were Christ him or herself. We are brothers and sisters in Christ because the spirit of God is present within humanity and therefore in each one of us.

It is for this reason that the church must not exclude people or behave like a religious club. Instead, it has a responsibility to show hospitality and reach out and seek justice for the poor, the marginalised, the persecuted, the sick, and the refugee. This is because each person carries the image of God – a new idea at the time of Jesus, but one presented in a powerful way through the Gospel of John.