

Second Sunday before Lent 2019 (24.02.19)

Genesis 2: 4 – 9, 15 – 25; Luke 8: 22 – 25

They say that a picture paints a thousand words – whoever they may be! Well, a little bit of Googling suggests that all sorts of people have said it, but the person to whom it is most often attributed is Frederick R. Barnard in an article in 1927 in an advertising trade journal in which he was promoting the use of images in advertisements that appeared on the sides of streetcars. Never say you don't learn things in sermons at the Priory!

But, a picture paints a thousand words. And that's what this morning's first reading is: a picture. It's a picture that is, itself of course, made out of words. It's not a painting, but a word picture. And it says more than a thousand words could about God being the creator of the world. It does *not* seek to describe *how* the world was created. It doesn't compete with all that scientific discovery can tell us about the possible

processes which led to the formation and evolution of the world as we know it. And neither does it compete with or contradict the other account of creation in the Bible: the account that comes just before what we've read from chapter 2 of Genesis, the account in chapter 1. That account serves a different purpose. That account's not a picture: it's a poem. It can be recited. It can be sung. It can be declaimed in worship. When you hear it set to music by Aaron Copeland you catch its repetitive rhythmic punch and you can just imagine it being chanted in ancient ritual: and God said Let there be [whatever] and there was evening and there was morning, the next day; and God said Let there be [something else] and there was evening and there was morning, the next day; and God said . . . and it was good, and it was good; and there was evening and there was morning, the next day. It's dynamic; it's declaratory; it works as a piece of worship.

This second account of creation, the account in chapter two, is just different: it has a different format

and it serves a different purpose. It's a picture of the way God creates the world to be: a picture of the summons of God calling us to be his creatures and to live in his world on his terms¹.

Which is all very well, except that we know that storms exist. It's just pious twaddle to suggest that if we live on God's terms we shall find everything is idyllic. Storms exist for the pious and the sceptic alike. There are literal, meteorological storms. It's only a fortnight since we gathered to commemorate the Great Gale of 1871, so awful that we keep alive its memory 148 years on. There are economic and political storms. And of course there are the personal storms of our own inner lives, be they storms of bereavement, brokenness, guilt, anxiety or whatever. There is plenty rightly and understandably to make us fear.

And yet, when the disciples are fearful in the storm on the lake in our Gospel reading, Jesus rebukes them. He's not kind and cuddly or sympathetic and comforting. He confronts them and he challenges them and he tells it like it is. He asks them "Where is your faith?" Fearfulness, faint-heartedness are symptoms of a lack of faith. What Jesus is doing is calling into question the integrity of their discipleship.

And we're told that their response is that they were "afraid and amazed." But this doesn't compound the fear for which Jesus has just rebuked them. It's a different sort of fear. This is the sort of fear that the Book of Proverbs tells us is the beginning of wisdom. This is the beginning of them working out their faith. This is the beginning of them becoming mature disciples. It doesn't begin with them being overwhelmed by some joyous experience. It begins with them being challenged; and it begins with them questioning; and it begins with them asking themselves who this Jesus is; and what it means for

¹ See Brueggemann "Genesis" in Interpretation: a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching p.44

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them to accept that he is the Lord of all creation; and to live on his terms rather than being held captive by their fears.

We hear this no-nonsense, hard-hitting call just two Sundays before Lent begins. We hear it as a challenge to us to consider how we are going to spend Lent; to work out what each of us is going to do so that the six weeks or so that begin in just over a week's time are a period of fearful hard work to increase the wisdom of our discipleship.

It may be that Lent is a time to give up chocolate or biscuits. And it may be that by doing so we are reminded of our dependence on God every time we instinctively feel like having a biscuit and have to remind ourselves we're not doing so. I'm not knocking giving up biscuits or whatever. But it *may* be that what we are being called to lay down is something more profound, something more radically at the heart of our spirituality and our mode of living. It may be

that we are being called to lay down our fears, both within and without, and to dare to live in the clam of the stilled storm and the innocence of the picture of Eden.

Of course we cannot do this because someone says from the pulpit that we should. We can't do it because we decide it's a good idea. It can only happen if there's a miracle. Even the disciples didn't really believe in them: that's why Jesus challenged the integrity of their faith. Lent will be a time for us to work out whether we do.

Amen.