

The Swiss Church in London
Sermon, 20 February 2019 – The Creation of the World

True or not?

Many people who read the first few pages of the Bible decide to close it again and turn away from this book and from religion all together. The Bible says that the earth was created in seven days. We know that this is not correct. We know that the creation of the universe took billions of years, the current estimation is 15 billion years, and that the evolution on earth was a lengthy process too, about 4-5 billion years; this knowledge also puts a question mark to the theory that a creator God made all this. So it is easy to jump to the conclusion that the Bible is a book of wrong facts. We often feel we have to take sides: Bible or Science – which in my view completely misses the point. No wonder the story of the creation became one of the main reasons why people turn away from religion!

Today we want to think about these questions in a constructive way. I believe that science and religion have a lot to learn from each other and that they can each cover aspects of the big questions of life that the other can't.

Two books

There were probably more copies of this book (Stephen Hawking, Brief Answers to the Big Questions) under the Christmas trees last month than there were Bibles. In his book Stephen Hawking explains in an understandable language what the universe is made of and how it came into being. Thanks to extent research over the past centuries and decades we began to understand that life on planet earth developed over a timespan of billions of years, contrary to the seven days that the Bible suggests. We began to understand that all life on this planet, including us humans, took form in an act of evolution which seems to sharply contradict what the Bible tells us.

So what does the vicar think? Bible, or Stephen Hawking?

I have no doubt that what Stephen Hawking writes in his book is true and comes closest to what we know today about the universe. I am fascinated by what has been discovered in the past decades, the Bing Bang theory, the discovery of black holes, the relativity of time and quantum theory. We can now look up into the night sky and have some sort of understanding of what is out there, or what was out there, and how it all started. It is mind blowing, it is wonderful, it is fascinating, and it is also intimidating.

And yet, I still open the Bible on its first pages. I still think that the story of the Seven Day creation of the world is valuable, beautiful and poetic. To accept the newest scientific research as factual does not mean that we have to reject the Bible. If we approach these texts from different perspectives and respect them in their own right we can make them fruitful for our lives each in their own way.

A deeper understanding for the biblical context...

The concept of truth changes as humanity develops and gains in wisdom. Thousands of years ago, when the story of the Seven Day creation was told, people did not have the same insight as us today. Yet they did have the same questions. Like us, they wanted to know who we are, where we come from and why we exist. The thirst for knowledge unites us with our ancestors. It is perfectly normal that our answers are changing as we develop more accurate ways to observe and research the foundations of our existence.

Interestingly the Bible itself contains two different version of the beginning of the world, as we have just heard in the readings. One version tells us that the earth was made in seven days, the other that it was made in one day. Also, the creation of the first people is told in two versions. Depending on which version we read it can have quite a significant impact on how we see the relationship between women and men. According to the first story, humans were created in the image of God, as male and female. According to the second story the man was created first, and the woman then carved out of his rib to be his companion. But this is only as a side note...

As we gain deeper scientific understanding of the world, our knowledge of biblical texts and their context seems to decrease. If we want to further the dialogue between science and religion, it is crucial that we try to understand the Bible too. So let us examine the context of the biblical story of the creation of the world a bit more closely.

The Book of Genesis is part of a collection of five books which are called the Pentateuch, which means 'the five-parted book'. These five books (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) at the very beginning of the Bible are part of a bigger framework given to explain the origins and the purpose of the people of Israel and its relationship with God. It sets the foundation for the Kingdom of Israel, a foundation they needed in order to survive politically and to establish their own identity. For us Christians, the story of the people of Israel leads all the way to Jesus Christ who we believe is the Son of God. And it leads all the way to us, followers of Jesus Christ, and our church communities.

The story of the creation of the world is part of a wider narrative that tells us who we are and where we come from. We are part of a stunningly beautiful creation, a truly divine creation. We are part of the rhythm of day and night. We are part of this massive universe that contains stars and the moon and the life-giving sun. We share the land and the waters with many other creatures, birds and fish and animals. The story of the creation reminds us of this simple truth: that we are a part of something bigger. Even though we know today that the world was not created in seven days, it is still true that we depend on the creation that nurtures us, and this reminder is today more necessary than ever.

Besides this theological message, there was another good reason, a more political reason, why it was important to create a wider narrative framework for the people of Israel. As we know, the Israelites were historically never a very powerful people, even though the bible suggests otherwise. There were much bigger powers in the region: the Empire of Babylon, of Persia, the Assyrians. They were a constant threat for Israel. At some point the Israelites were deported to Babylon where they spent generations in exile. The people of Israel might have been extinguished at this point, were it not for their strong

will to keep their heritage and faith alive. It was an act of self-protection to backdate their own history and set it in a universal context.

We don't know when exactly the story of the Seven Day creation was written and also the composition of the Pentateuch as a whole is guess-work, but we know it is closely related to the experience of the Babylonian exile, so perhaps around 450-400 BC. It is one of the reasons why the people of Israel survived in a very hostile political and geographic setting surrounded by powerful nations.

Both the scientific and the biblical approach have one thing in common: they set our existence in a wider context. We are part of something bigger. A thought perhaps that makes us walk this earth more humbly and with more respect for what is around us.

Is there a God?

The biblical version of the creation of the world suggests that there is a Creator God who made all this. However, as our knowledge of the becoming of the universe advances, a Creator God is more difficult to imagine and does not really fit in with what we know. Our understanding of God is changing too.

Stephen Hawking asked exactly this question: "Is there a God?" For himself he answers the question as follows: "The simplest explanation is that there is no God. No one created the universe and no one directs our fate. But there's a sense in which we live on, in our influence that we pass on. We have this one life to appreciate the grand design of the universe, and for that I am extremely grateful." But then he also says: "If you like, you can call the law of science 'God', but it wouldn't be a personal God that you would meet and put questions to."

It is an approach that many people feel more familiar with today: that God is not, or not just, a personal God, although the image of a personal God is at times very comforting too, but that God is more than that, an energy, the spirit that unites us, unconditional love...

Science has not only given us new and exciting answers about the beginning of the universe and our planet. It also challenges our image of God, away from a Creator God to a more holistic image of God. And for that we should be extremely grateful.

Amen

Reading 1: Genesis 1 (*abbreviated version*)

The first version of the creation

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

And God said, “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

And God said, “Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

And God said, “Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night.” God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

And God said, “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.” God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves. And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.” Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

Reading 2: Genesis 2:5-9.21-22
The second version of the creation

In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground— then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.