

## CREATION

Right at the beginning of the creed we profess that we “believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth”. In this morning’s reflection therefore I would like to deal with the topic of creation.

We believe that God created everything out of nothing. That doesn’t mean that nothingness is some sort of vacant space that God used. Nothingness in the sense in which we are using it here is quite impossible to picture. Most people think of it as endlessly empty space with nothing in it. But space is not empty and even if it were it would still be something, not nothing. Nor is the nothingness we are talking about here the same thing that scientists talk about when they postulate a big bang or some other beginning of the universe out of ‘nothing’(often commenting that therefore there is no need for a god). For them nothingness seems to me to mean no more than the absence of anything that could be measured. The nothingness we are talking about here is so total that there is nothing that we can say about it.

But we can say quite a lot about what it means for us to have been made out of nothing.

The *first* thing we can mention is that creation is not something that God has done in the past and now sits back and watches how it develops. No, whatever power God used to call the universe into existence has to continue streaming out of God to keep it in existence. This means that you and I exist simply because God holds us and every atom of our being in existence. We are nothing more than the shape of the ripple we can see on flowing water. Take away the water and the ripple simply ceases to exist.

This in turn means that God is always present to every particle of energy in the universe, including the bundle of particles that are us. It is not God’s personal presence to us but it is the foundation of such a presence. This is a sanctifying presence. It is called in traditional church language “sanctifying grace”: sanctifying because it clothes us with God’s own holiness; and “grace” because it is a gift to us over and above our existence as human beings. God could have made us and said: well, enjoy your life as human beings on this

beautiful planet that I've made for you. You can be very happy there. We then would have had a purely natural life, limited by space and time, loving with purely natural powers, etc. But God's love is such that he wanted us to share as completely as possible in *his* world with the ecstatic sort of love that existed there. It is a world so different from ours, so beyond our capacities that God has to do something more than simply create us. God has to live within us, enable us to enter into a love relationship with Father, Son and Spirit and give us the power to love and relate to our neighbour as a fellow child of God. Since all this is beyond our natural powers it is referred to as Super-natural Grace.

*Secondly* if God created the world out of nothing then everything is totally dependent on God. Even our evil actions are possible only because God keeps us in existence and leaves us with the freedom to make our own choices good or bad. It is a terrible thought that God and the divine creative power are forced into being intimately involved in our sinfulness.

*Thirdly*, if God created the world out of nothing then nothing is inherently evil. As Genesis notes, everything God made was good. This means that as Christians we must fight against the idea that spiritual pleasures are inherently good while bodily ones are always tainted with some degree of sinfulness. This was especially the case with the attitude people had towards sexuality.

*Fourthly*, if God created the world out of nothing, then *everything* is a miracle. For what we call miracles are also created ultimately out of nothing. They are simply from our point of view very *unusual* manifestations of God's creative power. They act as reminders of God's constant presence throughout the universe.

*Fifthly*, if God created the world out of nothing, then there must be a reason for it. Throughout the scriptures and down the ages Christians appealed to the complexity and marvellous interrelatedness of everything within the universe to argue that it all pointed to a designer – God – who created the world for a reason. This particular argument took a tremendous battering as the full implications of Darwin's theory of evolution dawned on people. It was argued by many evolutionists that, given enough time, the complexity that we

marvel at could be the result of millions of random interactions which eventually began to produce the sort of world we live in.

Unfortunately, one of the results of the theory of evolution was that a new and much more acrimonious debate opened up between Christians and scientists. At the heart of the debate, was the question: is Genesis' seven day account of creation literally true or not. Research provided evidence that the world existed long before humanity appeared on it. Many Christians lost their faith. Others retreated into a sort of intellectual ghetto with the fundamental position that if the Bible said seven days that must be the unshakeable truth . Others accepted the evidence and saw no reason why it could not harmonise with our belief that God is the creator of the universe and had a purpose in doing so. This was the position taken by Pope John Paul the second. It is the position taken by most Catholic theologians, including myself. The mere fact that there are two creation stories at the beginning of Genesis, differing markedly from each other, indicates that what is being said in each of them teaches us some important religious truths - but does so in the form of stories that need not be taken literally.

Darwin's discovery of how evolution works has enriched my own faith life. The fact that God built randomness into creation meant giving it the structures required for the development of human freedom. Moreover, just as an Apple is still God's creation even though it evolved from a tiny seed to a fully fledged Apple, so too is the whole universe God's creation even though the way we see it now is the result of millions of years of evolutionary development.

The randomness that God has given to creation does not mean that there is no purpose in creation. Not at all. It just gives us a broader idea of how such purpose operates and develops within an evolutionary framework which has its own constraints, known as the laws of physics. So far the evidence is that these laws did not evolve but came into being at the moment of the creation of the universe – straight therefore from the hand of God.

From a faith perspective, the emergence of human life – i.e., the emergence of a material organism that could think and love and inter-relate on a personal level – was part of God's creative plan. Maybe evolution could have taken a different turn as regards the shape of our bodies. Maybe we may all have ended up looking like gigantic ants. But our physical shape is, from a faith point of view, secondary. What is crucial is that matter reached that point of evolution where self-consciousness emerged and with it the ability to relate freely to others.

I noted that from a *faith* perspective, the emergence of human life was part of God's plan. However, there are not a few scientists who believe that even the evidence of physics itself points to the conclusion that everything was designed precisely so that human life would emerge. The grounds for this assertion are that if these laws were even only very slightly different, it would have been utterly impossible for human life to have emerged.

A Christian obviously finds such discussions fascinating since scientists are being compelled by their findings to at least broach the question *scientifically* as to whether or not the emergence of human life was the built-in purpose of the laws of physics! However, the Christian's faith that human life was indeed part of God's design is based on God's own revelation to us of the purpose of our existence, and not on scientific evidence.

You may have seen the BBC commercial that's been doing the email rounds. It's a collection of stunning photographs of the earth, mountains, fields, forests, animals, sky et cetera. It ends with David Attenborough singing the last line of the song 'what a wonderful world'. For exactly the same reason I would say what a wonderful God!

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