

Sermon Darwin and Creation 22.11.09

Genesis 1:1 – 2:3 Revelation 1:4b-8 Julian Templeton *

A large book about Creation for children arrived from Turkey as a gift to the Church.

It was also an anti-evolution tract.

I threw the book away.

Why? Because a belief in Creation as the work of God and Evolution as a theory of the biological origin of life are *not* incompatible.

Genesis 1 is a story of creation written to convey *theological meaning* rather than scientific fact.

This is a story designed to say:

1. The origin of our universe and life is no accident; it was deliberately created by God
2. All that God created was good
3. Humans are created in the likeness of God and are given the responsibility of tending God's creation
4. God's six days of creating followed by one day of rest sets the pattern for human work, rest and worship
5. It is a theological critique of other creation stories current at the time that claimed that there were many gods out of whose conflict or union the world came into being

Genesis 1 is a story about *why* the world came into being and for what purpose.

It is not an early scientific account of *how* the world came into being.

And this is where Young Earth Creationists, I believe, are very much misguided in their attempts to impose upon this story an interpretation it was never intended to bear.

Young Earth Creationism is the belief that the Earth is about 6000 years old.

It was popularised by US civil engineer Henry Morris and theologian John Whitcomb who published a book in the 1960's called *The Genesis Flood*.

The fateful mistake of Young Earth Creationists was to treat the early chapters of Genesis as if they were texts that yielded knowledge

about how the earth came about in a way that rivalled scientific accounts.

This was only possible in the wake of a Fundamentalist and literalist understanding of the nature of Scripture, itself an early 20th century idea propagated in the USA.

The Young Earth Creationists, in their imposing of an alien framework on mythic stories, discarded many centuries of nuanced biblical interpretation by both Jewish and Christian scholars.

Early Jewish commentaries on Genesis favoured symbolic interpretations of the creation stories.

The great Jewish scholar from Alexandria, Philo, wrote in the first century AD that the image of God, Adam and Eve, and the Garden of Eden were intended to be understood symbolically rather than literally since they are "...modes of making ideas visible."

Writing in the third Century AD, the Christian theologian Origen was scornful of those who read the opening chapter of Genesis literally.

What man of intelligence, I ask, will consider that the first and second and the third day, in which there are said to be both morning and evening, existed without sun and moon and stars...

In the Genesis 1 creation story sun and moon and stars are not created until the fourth day.

This all strengthens the argument that the creation story in Genesis 1 is not, and does not pretend to be, what we today would understand as a scientific account.

Some scholars argue that this story was designed for use in worship. The words "...and there was evening and there was morning, the first day" may be a liturgical refrain that the congregation said, which is the way I invited you to read it earlier.

If, as I have argued, the creation stories in the Bible tell us *why* and not *how* God created the world, then what about the matter of *how* life-forms came into being on our planet?

On the basis of fossil evidence, I find the argument in favour of an evolutionary explanation of life compelling.

This is the theory that simple forms of life evolved into more complex forms of life by means of adaptation to their environment over millions of years.

Charles Darwin famously published this theory in his 1859 book *On the Origin of Species by means of Natural Selection*.

At the time many Christians and clergy embraced it as being compatible with a belief in a God who creates and sustains the universe.

For example, the Anglican priest and author of the children's story *The Water Babies*, Charles Kingsley wrote,

...it is just as noble a conception of the Deity to believe that He created a few original forms capable of self-development into other and needful forms, as to believe that He required a fresh act of creation [for each creature]

However, some Christians at the time, and some still today, believe that the theory of evolution and a Christian understanding of a God who creates are incompatible.

I think there are 3 main objections that some Christians have about the theory of evolution as they relate it to their belief in God. Evolution is:

1. too wasteful
2. too random
3. too painful

Let us consider the first objection: that **evolution is too wasteful** to be compatible with a belief in God who creates and sustains.

Cosmologists suggest that the universe *needs* to be vast as it is and as old as it is in order for elements such as carbon and oxygen, essential for life, to be formed into planets in order that a fraction of those will be the right distance from an energy source to form a liveable atmosphere.

But are those planets on which there is no life wasteful?

Or are they rather examples of the superabundance of God's creativity through natural processes?

Evolutionary biologists argue that complex life needs billions of years in order to evolve.

It has taken about 3.8 billion years, years of extraordinary fruitfulness and diversity, to make a human being.

Who are we to call that waste?

Why should millions of years of biological growth and variety be deemed wasteful?

Is a species a waste simply because it doesn't exist when we happen to be alive?

Is an organism a waste simply because it doesn't reproduce or reach a ripe old age?

Do we believe that God should behave like the manager of a modern industrial plant, doing everything with the utmost efficiency, using the minimum of resources in the shortest possible time?

The second objection is that **evolution is too random**.

While it is true that genetic diversity does indeed involve random mutations in DNA, natural selection acts as a filter ensuring that, on average, it is the fittest genomes that are passed on to subsequent generations.

Living organisms have a way of adapting to their environment in order to survive and thrive.

Therefore, evolution is not as random as is sometimes believed.

There are only so many ways of fighting, feeling, feeding and reproducing and species repeatedly find their way to them.

The diversity of species we have today, and previous species we know about from fossil records, reflect the diversities of habitats to which they gradually adapted.

Far from being random, a purpose can be deduced in their adaptation and evolution.

This is the purpose of being better-adapted to their environment and therefore being better able to flourish and thrive.

This can be argued to be consistent with the belief in God who has a purpose for the world he creates and sustains.

That purpose is described in the NT as 'life in all its fullness' which is a life in which creatures flourish in relationship with God.

The third objection is that **evolution is too painful**.

It is taken for granted by many believers that a God who loves and cares for his creatures would not wish to see them suffer pain.

And yet all species (including humans) survive by killing and eating other species, and this necessarily involves suffering and pain for the victim.

Surely this aspect of evolution, of 'nature red in tooth and claw', is not a route that a loving God would sanction?

In response, we should first consider that sentient biological life, as we know it, has some essential features.

Organisms cannot survive without sensing changes in their environment and in their own bodies, and part of that change may involve the feeling the sensation of pain.

If you think about it, pain has been and still is essential for our survival.

Without pain we would inadvertently burn our mouths on hot food and drink, walk on broken legs, and ignore disastrous infections.

The sensation of pain is the body's way of telling us that something has been damaged, injured or infected and that we need to rest or seek medical intervention in order to recover.

Pain is an essential warning indicator in a risky environment.

We who are cosseted in comfortable suburban homes are apt to forget that for the vast majority of creatures who have ever lived, and for many who live today, life was and is a struggle for survival amidst disease, hunger, the elements and warfare.

And let us also consider that if we were completely numb to all pain we would most likely also be numb to all pleasure.

Positively, we must say that the response to pain often motivates virtues of compassion, altruism and endurance; virtues without which we would all be poorer.

Though God, we assume, does not wish his creatures to suffer pain, he evidently allows it as an unavoidable part of biological life.

Yet in saying that God allows suffering we are not suggesting that God is indifferent to it.

Rather, we must say that God has become intimately involved in creaturely suffering and living in a man called Jesus from Nazareth. The writer CS Lewis was once asked by a correspondent in what form he thought the next evolutionary step for humanity might be. Lewis replied that a great evolutionary leap had already occurred in the man Jesus from Nazareth.

In saying this Lewis was fully aware that he was stealing some of Darwin's clothes and using evolution as a metaphor.

Jesus was truly human, he suffered pain; yet Jesus was also filled by the eternal and spiritual life that God gave him.

Jesus' response to suffering and pain was not to lash out and cause yet more suffering and pain, but to bear it, to take it into himself, and, with God's help, to transform it.

Jesus could do this because he was a human creature full of God's own life.

That, in Lewis's terms, is why Jesus is the great evolutionary leap. In the Revelation of John, from which came our first reading, Jesus Christ is described as he "...who loves us and has set us from our sins with his blood..." (1:5b).

Now, when we speak about sin we have moved beyond the competence of evolutionary theory and into theology.

The NT writers make the startling theological claim that Jesus is God's own Son who, in his life, death and resurrection, has taken upon himself our full humanity in order to redeem us from sin and put the eternal life of God into those who trust him.

And this massive evolutionary leap that Jesus represents has implications not only for humans but also for the whole creation.

In Jesus' resurrection a transformation of the whole creation is promised, when creation will "...be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God."

(Romans 8:21)

The good news of the gospel is that we anticipate that evolutionary leap whenever we trust in God, love the unloved, forgive the penitent, and help the helpless.

The theory of biological evolution and a belief in God who creates and sustains are not incompatible but when considered together can show us that God's way of creating is patient, glorious and astonishing.

Amen

* I here wish to acknowledge my borrowing of ideas used in this sermon from the comprehensive and helpful discussion in the booklet *Rescuing Darwin. God and Evolution in Britain Today* by Nick Spencer and Denis Alexander, published by the Theos Think tank in 2009. Website: www.theosthinktank.co.uk