

Message for January 10, 2021

Genesis 1-2:3

Susan and I were on summer holidays a few years ago and were spending a couple of days in Niagara-on-the-Lake. As we often do, we picked up a light lunch and walked down to one of our favorite spots, the park at the mouth of the Niagara River directly across from Old Fort Niagara. We were sitting at a picnic table eating when we were approached by three older people, a man and two women. They said that they needed a rest and asked if they might share the table with us. Of course we agreed and inevitably perhaps we started chatting.

It turned out that the man and his wife were from Iowa and were visiting the other woman who lived in Buffalo. As the couple had never been in Canada before, the three had decided to cross the border to spend the day. We chatted about this and that and it was all quite friendly. Then the man asked me what I did for a living. I told him but I was totally unprepared for his reaction. Indeed, in a split second his mood changed completely.

“Oh”, he sneered, “you are one of those people who believe that the world was created a couple of thousand years ago”. Somewhat taken aback, I said no, that I didn’t believe this. I had spent seven years in university and knew full well that the universe is billions of years old. Then it was his turn to be taken aback as whatever answer he expected from me, that certainly wasn’t it. He paused for a moment and then with a big smile on his face offered to shake my hand saying, “put it there!”

Our conversation quite happily went on from there, but I have often reflected on it since. Why was it that he assumed that because I am a Christian, I must, in his eyes at least, be anti-science and a Biblical fundamentalist or literalist? But then again isn’t that how many people view us Christians? Isn’t this the way that we are often portrayed in such as many TV shows? That things are this way though is unnecessary and its roots go back over two hundred years. Indeed, the roots of this conflict are explained in a book entitled “God’s Funeral”.

“God’s Funeral” explores why so many leading writers, poets, and thinkers in nineteenth century England came to lose their faith in God. Many did so because of the rise of what is known as Biblical criticism. As the scholars studied the Bible, they realized that it has a number of contradictions. In the New Testament for example, three of the gospels state that Jesus chased the money changers out of the temple at the end of his ministry; John however says that he did so at the beginning. Why even Genesis has two different creation accounts. In light of inconsistencies such as these many thinkers of the 19th century dismissed the Bible altogether as being worthless.

At the same time while this was going on, there was also an explosion of scientific knowledge. Those working in the new field of geology for example discovered that contrary to what people had thought before, the world is far more than a couple of thousand years old. Or what about the dinosaurs? They were around millions of years before we humans were. And then came Charles Darwin’s famous book “The Origin of the Species” and its theory of evolution. What to make of such as Genesis and its creation accounts if we humans and other creatures have evolved over time from other more primitive creatures? How could any of this be reconciled with such as today’s scripture passage?

At the beginning of the 1800’s most writers and thinkers were practicing Christians but by the end of the century very few of them were; they had lost their faith and so proclaimed that God was dead. While many Christians took the scientific discoveries of the 19th century and those since in stride, others saw them as a direct threat to their faith and even Christianity itself. Their response was to “double down” arguing that since the Bible is the Word of God, it is infallible and correct in every detail even if some of those details are seemingly contradicted by science. Turning to today’s scripture passage for example, the “fundamentalists” argued that since the Bible says that God created the world in six days then that is the way it happened, end of discussion. And so the battle began and still goes on today. One of the ironies of this though is that both sides in this debate, perhaps without even realizing it, share one assumption in common and that is that the Bible, whether one agrees or disagrees with it, must be understood literally. To do that however is to do the Bible a great injustice.

While the Bible is the sacred Word of God, it is also a product of its time and one of the things that we must remember is how people back then wrote their history and proclaimed their truths. We tend to think of history as being a narrative of facts but in the ancient world people told their 'history' by telling stories. What this means is that to get hung up on all of the details is to miss the point altogether. To use an example, the Roman historian Tacitus wrote about the Roman attempt to conquer Scotland. Tacitus says that right before the pivotal battle of Mons Graupius, the British leader gave a speech inciting his warriors to fight bravely. In his history Tacitus includes the entire speech with its famous line that the Romans create a desert and call it peace. Now did the British leader give a speech before the battle? Quite likely. Did he really say the famous line about creating a desert and calling it peace? Possibly. Is however Tacitus' literary well thought out speech the one that was actually given? Absolutely not. Tacitus certainly includes historical details or facts in his history but he, like the people of his time, related history by telling a story and to worry about whether every detail is true is to miss the point altogether. Indeed, Jesus himself did this.

Jesus of course was a wonderful teacher and he often proclaimed his message by telling stories such as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Now did that story ever really happen? Was there a loving father with a prodigal son and a resentful older brother? To worry about this is to miss the great truths that Jesus was proclaiming, that God is love and that we can always turn to him no matter what. And so it is with today's scripture passage as well.

To worry about whether or not God actually created the world in six days is to lose sight of the great truth being proclaimed; namely that over a period of time God created the universe and all therein. How did God do this? That is not the concern of Genesis at all. One person who certainly understood this was one of the greatest theologians of all time, St. Augustine who lived 1600 years ago. He insisted that while the creation account in Genesis is theologically true, that does not mean that it must be scientifically true. Theological truth and scientific truth are two different things but both are equally valid. In fact St. Augustine even said that we Christians ought to study science: "An ever-present danger for Christians" wrote Augustine, "is that they will make fools of themselves in the eyes of unbelieving scientists if they do not know their science but simply make

wild claims on the basis of how they understand one portion of scripture". And to think that he wrote this 1600 years ago! Augustine even thought that science, with its truths and discoveries was a friend to be embraced by us Christians rather than to be regarded as an enemy to be feared. Indeed science, by teaching people more about the world and God's good creation as it does, could lead people to God rather than away from him. Truly St. Augustine was a man far ahead of his time.

"God's Funeral" is the name of one of the most interesting books I've read in a long time recounting as it does why so many of the great thinkers, poets and philosophers of one hundred years ago decided that God was dead and that Christianity should be relegated to the waste bin of history. They set off a debate that continues today but what those worthy Victorians failed to realize however is that science and religion are not mortal enemies; rather they deal with different truths in very different ways. Back in the Middle Ages the study of God and the Bible was called the "Queen of all the Sciences". Living in the pre-scientific age as they did, they may have been closer to the truth than what they ever realized.