Genesis 1:24-31 Sermon during Covid in Lent – Palm Sunday

Today is a momentous day for us in our reading of Genesis 1 during Lent – it’s the day that the animals appear, and more particularly, us! In parallel to Day 3 when land appeared and then vegetation was made, we have two creative acts – animas and then a new act in which humanity is made. As always, there is so much to think about in these verses - including a potentially embryonic trinitarian understanding of God in verse 26 - but we have to cut it down a little. We’re going to concentrate on the image of God in verses 26-27, but before that let me make a quick digression into another topic: that of dominion and subjugation.

God blesses the newly created humans and tells them to multiply and subdue the earth, having dominion over the living creatures. It’s a long story, but contrary to some of the teaching you may see on the news from oil-rich Southern states in America, this dominion is a word used throughout the Old Testament in the context of responsible care, like that of a shepherd for his flock. The Old Testament has lots to say about shepherds who exploit the flock, getting fat of the produce of the land rather than caring for the flock, and it talks about shepherding as a compassionate action where the shepherd tends to the needs of the sheep. Just think of Psalm 23 – the Lord is my Shepherd. Therefore, human dominion over the earth is responsible and compassionate care for it.

Similarly, the command to subdue the living creatures has much more overtones of settlement and agriculture than it has of anything to do with oppression or slaughter. The verses that follow are actually a manifesto for a vegetarian diet (although this is reversed after the fall in a few chapters time). The original plan included no killing, no oppression and no exploitation of the earth God had created. Instead, humans were to be those who tended the earth, settling on it and caring for it. This completely different picture has huge environmental implications which affect our attitudes towards our world.

But back to verses 26-27. I remember preaching on these verses in the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter protests, and I stand by everything I said then about all of us being made in the image of God. The word ‘image’ is not really defined here, leaving centuries of speculation as to what it is that exists within us that is the image of God. The Genesis account isn’t interested in this at all. Most likely, this is another case where the account contrasts with others around it. So, for example, in Mesopotamia and Egypt, the kings and high-ranking dignitaries were often known as ‘the image of god,’ denoting their importance and status. In our Genesis account, every last one of us is imbued with that same ‘royal’ status. All humanity is royalty in God’s creation. We are all valuable and important to our Creator. The word for ‘image’ in the Hebrew is translated into the Greek word from which we get ‘icon.’ We, as humans, are icons of God and reflections of God.

Unlike the ancient myths where humanity was created without sexual differentiation, God creates male and female immediately, both reflecting himself. Neither sex can claim a higher status. This is really important in a world where we still reflect on violence by men against women, or where the #metoo movement is still revealing cases of the abuse of power by men against women.

But in focussing on the image of God in humanity – on each of us as an icon, or reflection of God himself – we find ourselves also reflecting on Palm Sunday and the beginning of the Easter story. On Palm Sunday, Jesus, the one perfect image or icon of God, rides into Jerusalem on a donkey. Unlike any of the rest of us, Jesus wasn’t just a misty reflection of God - like looking in a fogged-up bathroom mirror – Jesus is God incarnate. Those who have seen him have seen God. He is the perfect icon - the perfect one who images God to us, and who like in the prayerful use of icons in Christian tradition, leads us to God. As we trace the Easter story over the next week, let us not lose track that as we watch Jesus, we see God. We see our Creator God, who made the sea monsters, the stars, the giant redwood trees, the vast Pacific Ocean, the Himalayan mountains and the very Being of the world itself; nailed to a cross, whipped, and mocked by those who even while they do it, were marring further the image of God in themselves.

There is a terrifying sadness as we watch this God voluntarily give himself into the hands of those who are royal bearers of his own image. It is a horrible betrayal, like a king being attacked by his own men while they are still dressed in uniform and holding his own royal standard. And yet, Jesus, as the perfect icon of God lets it happen. Not just lets it happen, but reveals more and more of God to us as we watch, open-mouthed, as he lets it happen. What do each of us see of our creator God in the Easter story, beginning on Palm Sunday?

Finally, for this morning, we’ve seen how we all carry in us the image of God. We are all icons through which others can see God. There’s a great Catholic theologian called Hans Urs Von Balthasar who talks about Jesus as the Form, and then about art works being ‘good’ by how transparently they reveal the Form of Jesus. Perhaps that is where our ethical and moral quandaries that we live with today - arguing about what is right or wrong, about whether socialism or conservatism is the way forward, about whether we should value rules or consequences – perhaps this is where they’ve all gone awry. Perhaps what really matters is to the extent that we reflect Jesus – to that extent we are living ‘good lives’ worthy of God. To the extent that we are true icons of the creator God who made us and placed his image in us – only to that extent can we be said to be righteous people. Can others see God when they look at me? Or do they see something else?

My guess is that none of us will feel very confident on that reckoning. We are all misted up bathroom mirrors, or icons where someone has thrown a bucket of red paint across it.

At Easter the only perfect image of God, God himself, gave himself to his creation. That is what God looks like. We cannot be perfect icons of God’s image within us – we’re just too broken, scratched and painted out, and each day we add more and more layers of pain, hurt, and guilt on top. God becomes less and less visible.

However, through Jesus’s life, death and resurrection, the original mould of that image is now available again to all of us. By trusting in Jesus, we are re-imaged back into the pattern we were created to have. Like an art restorer works with the cracks to make something beautiful again, so God, through Jesus, can make us image him again, even though the icon has changed.

Let us trust him to do that again this Easter. Amen.