

Sermon – 22/03/20

“Let There Be Lights in the Sky” – by Tony Coulson

As we open the Bible, we read this story of God’s creation. What a vast and amazing story set in the context of six days of creation, and then God resting on the seventh day.

On the first day we hear God saying, “Let there be light”, separating light from darkness, calling the light “Day” and the the “Darkness” night. And then, very strangely, on the fourth say God saying “Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night.” How could there be light before sun and moon? What need of the sun if there was already light? We are at once reminded this is not a scientific account of creation. This is a parable telling us of the wonder of God’s creation and stimulating a right reaction to the emerging creation into which we have been born.

These words in Genesis chapter one probably reached their final form and were written down at a time when the people of Israel were in exile in Babylon amongst a people with a pagan religion, believing in many gods. They saw these ‘gods’ at work in the sky – sun, moon and stars – but in the Bible, it is firmly declared that God is the creator of all things. If anyone believes in astrology (that our lives are controlled by the stars), or that it is useful to read a horoscope, or imagine that we are the kind of people we are because of the sign of the zodiac connected with our date of birth, then notice the clear statement: “He made the stars also.” God is the creator of everything, and what an amazing creation it is! It is beyond our imagining or understanding.

This is an extract from the book we are studying this Lent, ‘Saying Yes to Life’ by Ruth Valerio:

“The world we inhabit is one planet within a solar system...within a galaxy...within a universe. Our sun is just one of between two-hundred billion and four-hundred billion stars in the Milky Way galaxy, and earth is just one of at least a hundred billion planets. There may also be ten billion white dwarfs, a billion neutron stars and a hundred billion black holes. And that is just one galaxy out of possibly two billion galaxies.”

We read those statistics, but they are indeed far more than we can understand or imagine. But we *can* be caught up in the Bible’s wonder at creation. Psalm 19 says:

*The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.*

And in Psalm 8, we read:

3 When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,

*4 what is mankind that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them?*

This is the reaction of the people of God in the Bible, in stark contrast to the people amongst whom they were in exile – but sadly also in contrast to the Israelites themselves at times. In his speech in Acts 7, Stephen looked back to the time at Sinai when Israel worshipping a golden calf, “and so” said Stephen, “God turned away and gave them over to the worship of the heavenly bodies.” And in the book of Ezekiel we find a graphic description of those who, instead of glorifying the Almighty God, worshipped the sun He had created: “With their backs toward the temple of the Lord and their faces toward the east, they were bowing down to the sun in the east.”

Towards the end of the book of Job, after all the false comforters, God Himself addresses Job: “Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades? Can you loosen Orion’s belt?” Who do we think we are to believe we have all the answers as we confront the Creator of heaven and earth?

And where is all this ultimately leading? The prophet Habakkuk, writing perhaps about the same time as the first chapter of Genesis was finally written down, foretells a time when “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.” And in the next to last chapter of the Bible, Revelation 21, we see that vision of the future when “the city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the lamb is its lamp.” The sun and the moon mean so much to us, but their existence points forward to that new heaven and new earth lit by the glory of God.

These sermons following the theme of the six days of creation in the first chapter of the Bible challenge us all to think again of the implications of the fact that God is both Creator and Redeemer.

“Come see his hands and his feet, the scars that speak of sacrifice. Hands that flung stars into space to cruel nails surrendered.”

We must love Him very much if He has done all that for us – created us and redeemed us, set us in a world, in a universe of unimaginable complexity, and yet humbled Himself to the death of the cross for each one of us. Lord Martin Rees, the Astronomer Royal has said that this is the first century in the long history of this planet that one species, humanity, has the future of the planet in its hands. The fact that there are more of us than ever before combined with advances in technology have brought this about. Lord Rees once said that there was a probability of extinction in the 21st century, but he has amended that to saying it will be a “bumpy ride.” And no one can deny that we are having a “bumpy ride” at the moment with the coronavirus spreading across the world and affecting the lives of us all.

However some things continue unchanged – the sun, moon and stars – and God Himself remains the same. Like St Paul in the fifth chapter of his letter to the Romans:

We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance;

perseverance character; and character, hope, because God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom He has given us.

Lord Rees reminds us that the night sky is something we have in common with all the generations that have gone before us. We are the heirs of those generations. Our faith in God our Creator and Redeemer should make us more eager to care for this planet. Our faith is a clue to this understanding. C.S. Lewis said, “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen; not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.”

The sun itself is pictured in Psalm 19 as a strong man getting up in the morning, breathing the air and going for his daily run:

In the heavens God has pitched a tent for the sun. It is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, like a champion rejoicing to run his course. It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other; nothing is deprived of its warmth.

We look with awe and wonder at the sun, moon and stars, and again we ask: “What is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?” But it is true: we are invited to join in the worship of our Creator.

“Angels, help us to adore Him, Ye behold Him face to face; Sun and moon bow down before Him Dwellers all in time and space. Praise Him! Praise Him! Praise with us the God of grace!”