

Genesis 1-2:4; Matthew 6:25-end

I once preached on Genesis 1 and said what I thought most preachers *always* say – that of course, most Christians don't think the world was made in seven days. Indeed, there's a good case for saying that most Christians have *never* thought the world was made in seven days. Even St. Augustine, writing a good fifteen hundred years before Darwin, was clear that the seven days were symbolic, that they stood for a very long period of time indeed, and even that some of the creatures we saw now probably developed over a long period from earlier seed-like forms. The idea that on *that* question there is some massive conflict between science and religion just isn't true.

However, after the sermon, somebody came up and said they had listened to many, many sermons and they had never, ever heard a preacher say that. And so they had always thought that you couldn't really be scientific and believe Genesis, that you couldn't believe in evolution and be Christian. Now, I do not want any of you, ever, to say that you have not heard this, so here goes: Most Christians, including the Pope, the Archbishop of Canterbury and every single mainstream Christian leader in England do not think the world was made in seven days, and they accept whole-heartedly the theory of evolution. And that has been the case pretty much since the day Darwin published his book.

Now those same leaders, without contradicting themselves, *also* think Genesis is true. They can think that without contradiction because they don't think Genesis is an historical or scientific account of what actually happened. It was never meant that way. It was always a kind of meditative poem about the nature of life and the world, and what it is to be a creature and not just a thing. About how you and the world got here, it tells you nothing. About what you and the world *are*, it tells you lots, and it tells the truth.

So, at one level, there is no clash at all between believing in evolution and believing in Genesis, between following Darwin and following Jesus. I hope and expect that so far none of this will seem remotely controversial or novel to you.

However, at another level, there is a clash. A great big clash between what some people think science means and what the Gospel is. A critically important clash, which affects your whole understanding of life, and how to live it.

Some of you will have read the books of Richard Dawkins, or seen him on the television. He is a brilliant presenter and explainer, and his explanation of how evolution works is one of the clearest I have ever read. However, Dawkins is not content to just explain *how* things work. He insists on making an overall judgement of it all, to say how we should react to this great teeming mystery of life. What does it all *mean*? Dawkins says, it's a silly question. You might as well ask what colour is music, or what smell is ice? Life doesn't *mean* anything. There's no purpose behind it, no mind trying to express itself, no point being made. He puts it brilliantly, if chillingly:

"[...] In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference. "(River out of Eden)

Now not all scientists agree. Indeed, some reject Dawkins' conclusion so strongly as to be in church somewhere this morning, worshipping. But if this *is* what evolution means – and Dawkins is hugely influential in shaping what most people think it means – then we have one great, big, major and fundamental clash with Christian faith.

We *emphatically* do not think that the heart of things is blind, pitiless, indifference.

We *emphatically* do not think there is no reason and no justice.

We *emphatically* insist Macbeth was wrong: life is *not* a poor tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

We say of the world what the Book of Genesis says, again and again: *and behold, it was good. Behold, it was good.*

To which Dawkins would say, well – why? I know you *want* to think I'm wrong, I know it would be *nice* if I was wrong. But look around you and tell me honestly, do you think I am? Just open your eyes to a fraction of the suffering all around you, the human suffering but even more the vast agony of blood, tooth and claw that is the animal kingdom. *Feel* all of that, and then tell me I'm wrong. Tell me it's all *good*. What's your *reason*? Where's the *evidence*?

That is a fair question. And it is one, if we are honest, that most of us feel lurking just under the surface of our religion. Deep down, I think, most of us are scared witless that Dawkins might be right – even if we've never actually heard of Dawkins. Deep down, we're scared that destruction and violence and death are the heart of things, and that all the other stuff – purpose, Good, Evil, God – are just rather inadequate sticking plasters to cover it up. I sometimes wonder whether it's that half-acknowledged, half buried fear which lies at the root of much depression and anxiety and other mental illnesses. Maybe Dawkins is simply braver than most, facing the facts we would rather not. Humankind cannot bear very much reality.

So what is our reason, what is our evidence?

Well, I say what I'm about to say in the full knowledge that for Dawkins it would not be good enough. He wants proof. He wants it all laid out and testable and objective, like science. That can't be done. You can't *prove* Dawkins wrong, and you can't *prove* faith. Otherwise, only the stupid or the wicked could disagree and whatever atheists are, they are not generally stupid or wicked. So no *proof* here, only things that are more fragile, provisional, questionable. Indeed, what people used to call *evidence* when they still remembered the difference between that and proof. Faith has lots of evidence; it has no proof.

Faith has lots of evidence, but I do not have lots of minutes. There is so much more to say, perhaps on another occasion, but today only time for the heart of it.

The evidence, the reason, for saying that Dawkins is wrong, for saying that the world is good, for saying that the heart of things is not blind, pitiless, indifference but love, joy and peace, is this. Jesus of Nazareth came, and he lived a life that said so. He lived his life as if it were true that the deepest things of all were love and generosity and healing. And around him, the world turned good. It was as if through him, the deep springs of life were unblocked, and joy and goodness surged into the world. And so around Him, bodies that were broken were made whole. Souls that were crushed were lifted up. Lives that were twisted and miserable through greed and violence were untwisted, set right. For that brief moment, the world was full of grace.

And sensing that, the powers of darkness and misery bade their time and gathered their strength, and then finally poured themselves out upon Him – torturing and killing him and rolling a great big stone over his tomb. Don't hope, that stone says. Don't hope. The world is not full of grace. Hammers and nails and power and violence – that's what the world is. No beauty, no healing ... just blind, pitiless, indifference.

And on the third day, the crucified Jesus smashed through all that. He rolled that great, big, stone aside. And from his tomb began to surge something stronger than all the darkness, all the misery. Energies of grace and healing, forces strong enough to reach and touch even earth's darkest places – the hearts of those consumed by fear and despair, even the dead bodies lying in the dust. Joy surges out from His tomb, and it begins to touch and heal all things.

Now I believe because I have seen that joy touch people, and I dare to trust that in some small degree it has touched me also. It is beginning to fill my dark places. It is, slowly, making me more like itself. As I pray and worship and meet with you and take this sacrament and try to live like Jesus, grace is growing inside me. The history outside – Good Friday and Easter – is becoming spiritual reality inside. It's not *proof*, but I could no more deny it than I could my own name.

Why does all this matter? I said at the beginning that the choice between Dawkins and the Gospel really mattered, that it wasn't just about intellectual theories but about *life*, how one lived. Well, you will be glad to know that the sermon is all but over, so there's not time to say much on that score. But it is all in today's Gospel reading. You see, if you think that, in the end, life is blind, pitiless, cruel indifference – well, you will be one scared human being. The natural response to being in that kind of world is be anxious, defensive, fearful. You will spend all your time and energy protecting yourself, making defences, hoarding stuff to ward off the darkness. In short, you will look like many of us do. Like our world does.

But if you were a Christian...

If you believed that in Jesus Christ, it had been settled once and for all that the world was good...

If you believed that despite history's best efforts to prove otherwise, the deepest powers in reality are goodness, and grace, and healing...

If you really believed that you were not some meaningless replication of genes, but a creature, meant from the beginning and worth more than many sparrows...

Well then, deep, deep down in your soul you would know you were *safe*. You would know that you were *loved*.

And so your natural response to the world would be very different. You would not be driven by fear, and all the evil fear brings. You'd be *free* – free to give your money away. Free to be humble. Free from having to succeed. Free to be wrong, free to enjoy being alive. Free even to die, peacefully, because you'd know that in the end, you are loved and all will be well. You would, in short, look very different to most of the world. You would look beautiful, just like that Gospel.

It has been a long sermon. Maybe too long. But if you remember one thing, remember this. Our faith is that because of Jesus, because of his death and resurrection, the heart of all things is Joy. Loving, graceful, healing *joy*. It is going to reach out and touch every single thing, every last bit, of this universe and if they let it, make them whole. Being a Christian means letting that happen. And letting it happen will, over time, change every single aspect of our being, and it will make us beautiful. To our God be the glory, forever and ever.