

1 September 2018

Coherence (John 1: 1-5)
Creation Sunday (Pentecost XV)
© Sarah Bachelard

A few weeks ago, Neil and I obtained a copy of *A Book of Uncommon Prayer* by the Canadian Catholic writer Brian Doyle.¹ This collection has some truly wonderful and (indeed) uncommon prayers in it – ranging from a ‘Prayer in Gratitude for the Right Song Arriving at the Right Time’ to a ‘Prayer for the Brave Small Girl Who Had the Courage to Ask Me *What is Wrong with Your Nose, Mister?*’ to a particular favourite of mine, a ‘Prayer of Thanks for Good Bishops, as Opposed to Meatheads Who Think They Are Important’. The final piece in the book is called ‘Last Prayer’. It was written not long before Brian Doyle died of a brain tumour and it’s a remarkable prayer of thanksgiving – full of gratitude and trust. But it’s the way he addresses God in this Last Prayer that’s stayed with me ever since: dear Coherent Mercy, he writes.

Today the church around the world celebrates the Day of Prayer for Creation and so begins the month-long liturgical Season of Creation – an annual celebration of prayer and ecological action which runs until St Francis’ day on October 4. There are different approaches to marking this season liturgically – last year, you might remember, we followed the suggestion of the Uniting Church in Australia to focus on particular aspects of the natural world each week – land, forests, rivers and wilderness. But this year I’m going to invite us to reflect in a bit more depth on the very notion of ‘creation’ itself and what it means to understand our world *as* created. What difference does it make to how we relate to plants, rocks, seas, sky, stars and animals if consider them not just as ‘the environment’ but, theologically, as ‘creation’? And in particular, inspired by the invocation of God as ‘coherent mercy’,

¹ Brian Doyle, *A Book of Uncommon Prayer: 100 Celebrations of the Miracle & Muddle of the Ordinary* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2014).

what difference does it make to see the world as being created by *this* God, our God? My sense is that this exploration might offer another way of deepening our relationship with earth and understanding our part in its life. Tonight, I want to begin this series by contemplating the stupendous leap of Scriptural imagination that resulted in the proclamation that the world is meaningful, intelligible and intended - a coherent whole.

We all know how the story goes. 'In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept ('while God's breath hovered') over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light' (Gen. 1: 1-3). According to the opening lines of Genesis, the act that creates the world is an act of divine speech and this imagery is recalled in the opening lines of the gospel of John: 'in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being' (John 1: 1-3).

Well, it's beautiful – don't you think? But immediately, it seems, we run into all kinds of difficulties – straight into the so-called 'debate' between science and religion, between evolutionary theory and intelligent design as competing accounts of how the world came to be. Genesis might be all very well as mytho-poetics, but it's hard to swallow as the truth of how things are. I'll come back to this issue – which is so crucial for intelligent engagement with what our tradition means by the doctrine of creation – but for now let's stick a little longer with the Scriptural vision. There's richness here that we miss if we jump too impatiently to these contemporary pre-occupations.

Biblical scholars have understood for a long time that the account of creation in Genesis 1 draws on ancient Near Eastern creation myths, particularly the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*. But, significantly, it does so in a way that articulates a

distinctive and quite different vision of reality.² The major difference is to do with the lack of violence in the Scriptural account of creation. In the *Enuma Elish*, the Babylonian gods create order by means of the violent conquest of disorder. They're in combat against a hostile chaos represented by monsters of the deep. But in Genesis 1 there are no monsters and the primordial waters are more like simple potential. The deep is no-thing and no threat, and God does not need to fight to overcome it. In fact, the whole scene speaks of ease. Scholar J. Richard Middleton writes: 'The typical pattern of divine command (for example, "let there be light" or "let the waters be separated") followed by an execution report ("and there was light," or "and it was so") pictures God as encountering no resistance in creating the world'.³ In this vision, there is no 'over against' at the foundation of things.

Middleton goes on then to highlight the 'invitational character' of God's summoning the world into being. The grammar of 'let there be' in Hebrew is a form of speech whose force can range from near command to gentle wish, but it 'always possesses a voluntary element'. Walter Brueggeman similarly writes of 'God's gracious "summons" or "permission" for creatures to exist'.⁴ And this seems consistent with the story's unfolding. As soon as God has generated certain hospitable spaces – sky space, sea space and earth space – God invites the created order to participate in its own emergence and evolution: 'Let the earth bring forth vegetation ..., Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures', and so on. On this account, the whole of creation is invitational. It's pure gift, from nothing and for nothing – gratuitous delight.

Where does such an extraordinary vision of the world's origins come from? How is it that the ancient Hebrews came to such a distinctive belief – so different from the myths of origin of the peoples around them? It seems to have emerged

² J. Richard Middleton, 'Created in the Image of a Violent God? The Ethical Problem of the Conquest of Chaos in Biblical Texts', *Interpretation* (October 2004), p.352.

³ Middleton, 'Created in the Image of a Violent God?', p.353.

⁴ Middleton, 'Created in the Image of a Violent God?', p.353.

with full prominence in the Jewish tradition about the time of Israel's return from exile in Babylon.⁵ This deliverance from Babylon had seemed decisive and unexpected – like a second Exodus. And you'll remember that the first Exodus, the liberation of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt, was the event by which God had established the people of Israel as a people for the first time. It was their founding event, their birth as a nation. Rowan Williams says: 'Out of a situation where there is no identity, where there are no names, only the anonymity of slavery ..., God makes a human community, calls it by *name* ... Nothing makes God do this except God's own free promise; from human chaos God makes human community'. If this is how God is seen to act in history, 'It is a short step to the conclusion that God's relation to the whole world is like this'.⁶ The Exodus comes to be seen as a sort of recapitulation of creation – and creation is seen as performed by the free utterance of God; it's pure summons.

So let me draw out a couple of implications of this. Notice first that such a vision of the world's coming to be is compatible with a whole range of accounts about how it unfolds – and indeed, with how and even whether it 'began' with an identifiable event. The only thing the Judaeo-Christian doctrine of creation tells you is that everything depends on God's free act – God's will that what is not God should be. There's nothing here about the mechanics.⁷ This suggests that much of the science-religion debate is going on at the wrong level. The Scriptures aren't supplying information about the processes of existence, but expressing faith that the existence of the world as a whole is given by and in response to God's call, God's free determination that it be.

OK – but who says? What should make us believe that reality is 'created' and that the world exists in relation to its creator? What should make us believe there's intelligibility and will at the back of it all and not just a contingent happening? How

⁵ Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p.67.

⁶ Williams, *On Christian Theology*, pp.67-68.

⁷ Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p.68.

do we know this whole vision isn't just human projection, the illusion of order and meaning imposed on the intolerable randomness of existence? Well, the short answer is, we don't. For ancient Israel, the belief that God created the world out of nothing was an outworking of their lived experience of being called and given being from beyond themselves. It reflected their sense of continuing to be summoned, to be-in-relation to that endlessly giving reality. The doctrine wasn't their explanation for the world's existence, but a statement about what their experience taught them about existence and about God. It's a confession of faith in the coherence of things – that the deepest experience of human life is of a piece with the basic dynamic of all life. How do we come to know it? Only, I think, as we undergo something of the same experience. Perhaps we get glimpses as we look back at the experience of being summoned, called from beyond ourselves, and the aliveness that comes as we respond. Sometimes in prayer there's a sense we're held, sustained at the level of our being by a gracious and liberating reality.

How this belief in creation and in God as Creator affects our relationship with the world around us ... we'll have more to say about this in coming weeks. But at the very least – it should remind us that the earth does not exist solely for our benefit, an endless pot of resources made available for our convenience. Creation has its own independent life, its own summons to be from the Word of Life. And this suggests that only as we're properly responsive to our place in the whole, do our lives find their true meaning and coherence.