

Fairy tales of Scripture

Lent Term, 2017

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Rev Dr Simon Perry

Taking Genesis Literally

Gen 1

22nd January 2017

Well, New year, new hope, possibly a new historical epoch. For those of a gloomier disposition – we might fear it is the end of history. Although, if you know your political philosophers, you know that the End of History already happened in 1989.

But cast your minds back, if you will, to ancient history. To a time when the nation wanted to be great again. The nation had once been dominant, powerful and proud – but over time it had lost most of its territories and pretty much lost its sovereignty. The nation was being controlled by unelected bureaucrats hundreds of miles to the east, in a land that cared little for our own nation. A time when immigration had become the major issue, the biggest refugee crisis in living memory. And a majority of dominant voices opted to take back control – which is exactly what happened.

I refer of course, to the nation of Judah in the year 586BCE. To take back control, Judah revolted against Babylon and forged an alliance with Egypt. The Babylonian war machine promptly rumbled into Judah and steamrolled its way through Jerusalem. The Temple was destroyed and the inhabitants were dragged away into captivity in the city of Babylon itself – where they remained in exile for the next two or three generations.

The trauma these exiles experienced was compounded by the trust they had always invested in the Temple in Jerusalem – the meeting place of heaven and earth, the dwelling place of Yahweh – their deity. But like all other petty states in the region – they had been crushed beneath the weight of the Babylonian superpower. Their trust in the Temple had clearly been misplaced, and their deity – like all other tribal deities – had been defeated by the superior might of Babylon. So off they went, as prisoners – to the capital of the world's dominant power. For the people of Judah (the only surviving region of Ancient Israel) it was indeed the End of History. For the people of Israel, it was time to them to learn their true place in the Cosmic order of things. And that began as they were exposed to a new political propaganda... and that propaganda came in the form of a pagan creation narrative.

The Babylonian creation story is called, 'Enuma Elish.' I re-read it yesterday, and it's brilliant –According to Enuma Elish, violence is written through the fabric of the created order. The goddess Tiamat was slaughtered by her offspring, and from the blood of her dismembered body, humans are formed to serve the gods as slaves. It's not the most heart-warming story. But, as Quentin Tarrantino would say, it does seem true to life. The world is horrible, and unfair, and violent – and though there are pleasant interludes of fluffy kittens on youtube, pretty sunsets on aeroplanes and David Attenbrough's voice on television, such moments are fleeting and destined to be engulfed by cold, unsympathetic, unending darkness. Enuma Elish articulates this worldview of inescapable and ultimate violence. It is a piece of literary propaganda, designed to explain why violence is everywhere, why might is right, and why humans must resign themselves to their apportioned state in the violent cycles of the cosmos. Conquered peoples had to learn how to accept their status as conquered peoples. But ... some of the Jewish exiles in Babylon had developed a dogged immunity to oppressive ideology. And, they were gloriously incapable of behaving as though they were conquered, as though they were the helpless devotees of a defeated deity.

Among the exiles, counter-propaganda began to circulate. It was so brilliant, it could have been penned by the 45th president of the United States! In all seriousness, to quote the new president, “I went to an Ivy League school. I’m very highly educated. I know words, I have the best words. I have the best...” End. Quote. Of course it’s been ridiculed and mocked by the unreflective punditry of today’s media machine, but heard in context it forms part of a monologue that is disturbingly coherent, uncomfortably convincing – and above all – subversive of the prevailing propaganda. But – whoever wrote these words from Genesis was even better with words than Donald Trump.

And in the form of poetic, prophetic, counter-propaganda – into a world where violent gods ruled all and conquered nobodies accepted their place – came the words, ‘In the beginning, Elohim created the heavens and the earth.’ In poetic form, comes the subversive counter claim that violence did not have the first word and will not have the last. Far from being a universe in the grip of warring deities using humans as pawns – there is something more primordial than gods, something beyond the realities of the immediate, some form of power more effective than coercion.

To turn this into some form of proof that God created the cosmos in 7 days is a complete failure to take Genesis literally. Today, it is not only creationists that declare we should read Genesis this way – but militant scientific atheists, who claim that the refusal of modern Christians to believe in a 7 day creation, is to water scripture down and not take it literally! Aha – if you’re going to “pick and choose” which bits are metaphor and which are fact – it undermines your entire belief system. The trouble is, whenever you read something literally you have to pick and choose. To read literally is to recognize the genre of a text, its function in context, the occasion of its authorship, its perceived authorial intent. To ignore all of this, is to read illiterally, to water down the text, to protect oneself from its explosive claims. If we read any text as though it were timeless, it becomes harmless and pointless. We are then forced to picture God leaning down from a cloud, ‘Hey Moses – have you got a pen? Well pull up a floorboard and let’s do science. Here’s how it all began...’

To take the first Genesis creation account literally, does not mean that we follow John Lightfoot, the 17th Century Vice Chancellor of this University, who calculated that God created the universe on Monday 10th November, 4004BC ... at 9 o’ clock in the morning.

To take Genesis literally, is to recognize the subversive nature of a text, designed to encourage a beleaguered people. To recognize the beautiful structural simplicity of the poetry, where the first day is coupled with Fourth, the second with the Fifth, the third with the Sixth – culminating in the Sabbath. To realize that for these exiles, their disastrous circumstances did not spell the End of History and the end of their people, as it did for so many others. To entertain the author’s claims about something bigger than gods, something other, transcendent, beyond the immediate – underpinned history. Of course, in this creation account the focus of this God might well appear to be a distant, aloof, deity removed from the petty troubles of human plight – but it is balanced with a second creation account, which begins with Yahweh stooping to the ground and getting his hands dirty as he scoops up the soil. But that is a different text, a different literature with a different literary purpose. The only way to understand these accounts, is to take them literally, to take them seriously as literature.

Revd Dr Simon Perry

Noah and Divine Genocide

29th January 2017

An oft-cited quotation from a well known figure, described by one newspaper as 'former biologist turned cult-leader', reads "The God of the Old Testament is... a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully." All of which, is entirely correct with the exception of one assumption. That there is such a thing as the God of the Old Testament.

The Hebrew Bible, which Christians adopted as their Old Testament, is a compilation of at least 39 pieces of literature, compiled over the course of at least a thousand years. Literature that is varied in genre, in tone, in provenance, in outlook and in belief. So that the conceptions of God are enormously varied. The medieval church flattened this varied literary landscape with the imposition of chapters and verses. Imposing chapters and verses onto Scripture allowed Christians to lift verses and stories out of their context, out of their genre and out of their place in the wider scriptural narrative. Add to that claim that each isolated unit constitutes the 'Word of God' (a claim that the bible itself never once makes about the bible itself), and you're left with a bizarre religious document that can be used to justify anything.

It's like claiming that every piece of the jigsaw contains the entire picture!

No, the pictures of God we find in Genesis are often different from the God Jesus describes, leaving those inflicted with Obsessive Compulsive Literalism to perform all kinds of interpretive acrobatics to defend the infallibility of isolated verses and stories. But if the New Testament pictures of God are different from Old Testament pictures of God – who has changed? God? Or human understanding of God? I can't help thinking of Mark Twain's famous quotation. "When I was 14 my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21 I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in 7 years."

Some Biblical scholars have described the Old Testament as a 'gradual revelation', where modern readers are invited to work their way through the entire narrative to grasp the fuller picture of God. Only in that fuller context, can we make sense of the partial pictures adopted along the way, and the story of Noah is one of the earliest partial pictures of the apparently genocidal God of Richard Dawkins.

Genesis is distinctive from other Ancient Near Eastern flood narratives, principally because it is seen as an act of justice (against violent

humans) rather than divine impatience (because humans have started making too much noise). In fact, woven through the Genesis story is a tale of enormous reluctance to administer such terrible justice. It goes all the way back to a character called Enoch, the first real prophet. At the age of 65, Enoch fathered a son and gave him a prophetic name – Methusaleh... a name that alludes to the flight of an arrow. And Methusaleh's life would be like the flight of an arrow, but on the day he died, something would happen.

At 187 years old Methusaleh became the father of Lamech. When Lamech had lived 182 years, he became the father of Noah. So how old was Methusaleh when Noah was born? 369. Now in Genesis 7:8, we read that when the flood came, Noah was 600 years old. So how old was Methusaleh when the flood came? 969 years. Methusaleh's life had been like the flight of an arrow, and Enoch knew that God would judge the evils and injustices of the earth. And when Methusaleh died – that is precisely when the flood came. Those of you who have heard the name, Methusaleh, may know it as a piece of trivia since according to Scripture, he is the oldest man who ever lived. But the point of his great age is less well known – because it shows God's patience, and reluctance to administer judgment that was coming upon the human race.

But finally judgment does come – in the form of a deluge. Do you know how many of each animal entered the ark? Most think it was two, but it was in fact, 14. Even if they went in 'two by two, hurrah, hurrah'. In any case, what seems to follow is an act of indiscriminate divine genocide because God is good, and people are not. (Nor are the animals:

What about the fluffy kittens that didn't get in, hurrah hurrah, not to mention the people?) The raised sea-levels were awash with corpses, not to mention a future cursed with an irreversible lack of genetic diversity.

So what was the first thing the godly Noah did when he disembarked?

Well, he'd witnessed a holocaust – he was a genocide survivor, so his first project was to build a vineyard, to establish a means of taking refuge from his scarred memory with the excessive consumption of alcohol. And Noah's godly family? His son Ham, found the inebriated Noah lying naked and went round gossiping about it – a serious crime in an honour culture. And sure, God had promised never to wipe out humanity again, because the human heart is inherently evil. Which happens to be precisely the same reason he caused the flood in the first place.

So what on earth do you take from a story like that? Joseph Campbell's classic *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, reduces the foundation narratives of multiple cultures to a single formula – the monomyth – and claimed that the Noah story is the perfect example. That at the end of his adventure, Noah returned to a happy life and order is restored. It couldn't be further from the truth. Life in the new, post-apocalyptic utopia was no better than life before it. Human beings are human beings. Had God's radical and extensive exercise in ethnic cleansing made the world a better place? Seemingly not – hence the rainbow, God's promise that he would never not repeat such violent action. It clearly hadn't worked – and that is what's really distinctive about the Biblical flood story. From the outset, the new order was no better than the old.

Violence is not a strategy that works.

Joseph Campbell's biggest fan was probably George Lucas who produced the Star Wars movies. Yes, there is the standard adventure story – evil is rife so you have to destroy it. Just as God wiped out life in Ancient Mesopotamia, so Luke Skywalker wiped out the evil Death Star. Had that worked, the real sequel should have had second Star Wars film with Luke Skywalker, Hans Solo and Princess Leia fighting in a town hall meeting over who would take responsibility for the allotments. The morning after the revolution, the day after the apocalypse. Most narratives (like most revolutionaries) don't give you much of a blue print for the post-apocalyptic utopia. Instead you get more of the same, *The Empire Strikes Back*, new cycles of violence.

Read in this light, the Noah story is about the futility of making the earth a better place with violent, genocidal ethnic cleansing – pretty much a norm in the Ancient Near East – we are confronted with the portrait of a God who says, 'No – that does not work'. And it's precisely that God in whose image humanity is forged. To be good is to reflect the character of this non-violent God. And it may well be for this reason, that the entire story climaxes with God forbidding anyone to shed human blood.

In this light, the God of the Noah story is the exact opposite of the infanticidal, filicidal, genocidal bully imagined by Richard Dawkins.

Prof Morna Hooker

I do not permit a woman to teach

5th February 2017

‘I do not permit a woman to teach.’ As most of us have long realized, the chaplain has a perverse sense of humour. If I am not permitted to teach, why has he invited me to speak today, and why has he given this title to what he expects me to say? What am I to do? Sit down and shut up, or stand up and speak out? Do I obey what some Christians devoutly believe to be ‘the Word of God’? Or do I try to ‘listen for the Word of God’ as our service order puts it in a passage where it may be difficult to hear? If Simon was hoping for the shortest sermon ever delivered in this chapel he will be disappointed, for throughout my career I have constantly challenged accepted views. I must clearly do what I have been trained to do – ask ‘Who? What? Why?’

Who wrote this extraordinary command? Our Bibles attribute it to St Paul, but if Paul wrote it I’ll eat my hat. I once spent a whole week in Rome studying the First Letter to Timothy in depth with 30 other Pauline scholars, and the experience convinced me for all time that Paul could not possibly have written it. The vocabulary, syntax, style, attitudes, manner of reasoning and theology are all very different from Paul’s. Who then? Probably an admirer of Paul who was attempting to pass on what he thought Paul would have said to Christians of the next generation – but an admirer who had not really grasped the essential heart of Paul’s theology, and was in any case chiefly concerned with the problem of keeping order in a community which he thought was getting somewhat out-of-hand. Nevertheless, what he wrote is there, in our New Testaments. What are we to do with it?

A well-known biblical scholar used to insist that it was important to look at both the text and the context. Texts torn out of context are inevitably distorted. What was the context in which our author was writing? Churches – small Christian communities – had been established throughout the Roman world. But living in this world was dangerous. In the previous generation, Paul had faced constant danger from his fellow-Jews, who were trying to destroy what they saw as heresy. Now the greatest danger came from the Roman authorities, concerned about anything which might endanger the state or disrupt the Pax Romana. If the Church was to survive, it was important not to be regarded as challenging imperial power or to be undermining society. There came a point, of course, when Christians felt it necessary to do both these things, but for our author that point has not yet come.

And so he begins by urging his readers to pray, and in particular to pray ‘for sovereigns and all in high office, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life, free to practise our religion with dignity’. So far, so good. It seems good advice, as much for our modern world as for the one in which our author lived.

In our democratic world, we have the freedom to express our disagreement with our leaders in a way in which he did not – but we may well feel that those leaders are in dire need of our prayers. And we may well find ourselves saying ‘hear, hear!’ when he goes on to talk about the need for truth, which for him is clear and unclouded by any strange notions of ‘post-truth’. For him, this truth is embodied in the gospel which Paul had been commissioned to take to the Gentiles.

It is when we get to the second paragraph, that our hearts may well begin to sink. ‘It is my desire’ he begins – and notice that this is what he wants; he refrains from suggesting that it is a divine command – ‘It is my desire that everywhere prayers be said by the men of the congregation’ – and immediately we know where he is coming from, for this was the custom in every Jewish congregation in the ancient world, and the Christian community had begun as a sect of Judaism, and inherited its core beliefs and many of its customs. Men and women sat separately in

synagogues – and have continued to do so in the majority of synagogues right down to modern times. Men led the worship, and it was unthinkable that a woman might take part. No wonder, then, that our author decrees that men should be offering prayers, and that women should keep quiet. That's how things had always been, and how they must continue to be! He goes on: 'I do not permit' – notice that 'I' once again – 'I do not permit a woman to teach; they must keep quiet'. Of course! At least he allows them to listen and to learn! But they must not get above themselves. Women, he says, must dress modestly and soberly.

Why does our author think it necessary to lay down the law on these matters? The answer perhaps lies in the teaching of St Paul, that great champion of women's' rights, who refers frequently to women whose ministry he greatly valued – women who were leaders and teachers in his congregations. Paul, too, wrote about the appropriate behaviour for men and women when they were praying, but his advice was very different. Addressing the Corinthians, he told them that when a woman was praying or prophesying, she ought to have some kind of head-covering as a sign that she had been given authority. Once again, we need to ask about the context of this text. The city of Corinth was famous for its sexual licence. Pagan worship encouraged worshippers to sleep with prostitutes. Women who appeared in public without some kind of head-covering were clearly no better than they ought to be. Paul did not wish the Christian community to be brought into disrepute, so he instructed the women to cover their heads and the men to remove their headgear. As a result, Christian for the next two thousand years continued to obey his rules: women wore hats to church, and men removed them. Society had moved on, but the church, slavishly obedient to the text, had not.

What nobody obediently following Paul's guidance noticed, however, was that in this passage he was assuming that women were praying or prophesying – in other words, leading church worship and preaching. They were doing what Jewish women had never been permitted to do. Paul is well aware that this is a revolutionary step. That is why he interprets the woman's head-covering as a sign of authority. He saw it as a sign that she is modestly glorifying God, not bringing honour to herself.

Understanding the context in which a text was written helps us to understand it. Taking it out of context distorts it – and this is precisely what our forefathers did for generations. I say 'forefathers' advisedly, because it was male translators and commentators who interpreted Paul's teaching in the context of their own time, where women were expected to be silent and subservient. Unable to believe what Paul appeared to be saying when he wrote that a woman must have authority on her head when she was praying or prophesying, the King James' Version helpfully added a note to the text explaining that what he meant was 'a covering in sign that she is under the authority of her husband'. St Paul says nothing about husbands, but he does say that the women are praying and prophesying, something which was ignored for almost 2000 years, until women exegetes began asking questions about the text.

Paul's words must have encouraged women to take an active role in worship. Was this what worried the author of 1 Timothy? Were questions being asked about behaviour in the churches, bringing them into disrepute? Both our authors addressed men and women separately, but with very different advice. Paul's conclusion is that 'in the Lord's fellowship woman is as essential to man as man is to woman', which he backs up by pointing out that though the first woman, Eve, had been created out of man, it is now through women that men come into the world: both have an important role. The author of Timothy got hold of the same story about Eve's creation, but used it in a very different way. Adam was created first, he reminds us, then Eve, but it was Eve, not Adam, who was deceived by the devil, and so sinned! He had clearly not read Romans 5, where Paul goes to town on the sin of Adam, and makes no mention of Eve's part in the story. Echoing Adam's words in the original story in Genesis, our author lays all the blame on Eve. But there is hope for her, he adds, for she can be saved by bearing children. This must surely be the low-point in NT theology. I can imagine St Paul reading his disciple's efforts, and writing a very large NO! in the margin.

So what are we to do with 1 Timothy? What is my answer to those who regard the Bible – all of it – as ‘the Word of God’? As the chaplain suggested last week, it is a mistake to use this description of the written words of the Bible, but many Christians confuse the two.

There’s a hymn which begins with the words ‘O Word of God incarnate’, and when I was very young I used to sing it with gusto, believing that I was addressing the Bible. After all, it was in the section of the hymn book labelled ‘The Holy Scriptures’. But the hymn goes on, rightly, to distinguish between the Word of God incarnate and the words written in the Bible. For Christians, the Word of God was made flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. The Bible is not ‘the Word of God incarnate’, but shows us what men and women at different times have believed God to be saying to them in their particular situations. The problem with words is that they are vulnerable – they can be misheard, misunderstood, mistranslated, misinterpreted, and the words in our Bible were words written by men who were endeavouring to interpret what they thought God had said to them. Sometimes they got it right, sometimes they didn’t.

So what are we to do with our text? We must read it in context! And when we do that, we find someone attempting to guide the church in a difficult situation. From St Paul he had learned that, whether or not the church approved of the Roman Empire, it was best to avoid confrontation with Rome if possible. From Paul, too, he had learned the need to ensure that the Christian community’s behaviour did not bring it into disrepute. Both of them attempted to balance the insights of the gospel against the risks involved in confronting contemporary power structures and beliefs. That gospel would eventually change society and topple states, but it would take time.

Paul had begun the process, recognizing that the church was being guided to accept the role of women in worship, while aware at the same time that he must accept many of the customs of the age. Perhaps, a generation later, our author felt that his community was getting out of hand – and sadly, he set a precedent for ‘keeping women in their place’. Both of them lived in a world dominated by slavery, racism, and misogyny – but it took centuries for the Church to challenge those forces, and it is still fighting them today, sometimes within its own doors.

From our standpoint at the beginning of the 21st century, it’s not surprising if we feel that our author’s endeavours to deal with the problem were, to say the least, disappointing. But before we simply dismiss his advice, it is well to ask how we are dealing with similar questions in our very different context. We may well pray for our leaders; but how do we balance our support with our opposition to their policies when we think them misguided or downright evil? Do we conform to society’s conventions or challenge them with the message of the Gospel which, as St Paul insisted, declared that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, and no male and female? (Gal. 3:28). Racism, slavery and misogyny are still all too dominant in our 21st century world. The truth expressed in Paul’s gospel challenges us still.

Revd Dr Simon Perry

Miracles

12th February 2017

This term we are looking at Fairy tales about Scripture, and this evening we look at Christian myths about believing in Miracles. As today's New Testament reading seems to suggest, you need faith in order to believe a miracle, and that miracle can lead to you being forgiven and everybody living happily ever after. This framework, that miracles provide some kind of a basis for Christian claims is rightly and widely ridiculed.

According to the text, a bunch of Jewish peasants take their disabled friend to be healed by Jesus, but the venue is packed with admirers and critics. So, they climb up on the roof, remove the tiles, and lower their friend into the centre of the room. It's a ridiculous scene, this chap dangling from the sky in some kind of makeshift harness with all the dignity of Boris Johnson. Jesus heals the bloke, commends the faith of his friends, and tells him his sins are forgiven. Everybody, or almost everybody, is happy. Job done. Faith leads to miracle leads to forgiveness... and hey presto: Christianity.

The trouble is, as Professor Hooker implied last week, a text without a context is a con. And the context of this incident is pretty clear. Jesus had contravened religious procedures healing a leper, declaring him clean – then sending him to the priesthood. He was courting controversy. How did the priesthood react? A bunch of Pharisees and their legal team had climbed into a minibus and travelled up from Jerusalem, to see what this Jesus was up to.

He had, after all, declared in public that the Old Testament reading we heard (Isa 61:1-3), was being fulfilled in him. A new age had dawned, an era of forgiveness when debts are cancelled, slaves are freed, and all other kinds of socially chaotic realities followed. The tension created by this incident, has been obscured because words like faith and forgiveness have decomposed into a morass of religious slush.

Forgiveness, in the context of Old and New Testament readings here – before anything else, means liberation. That is, freedom from oppression, from slavery, from social and economic humiliation. All those horrible, dehumanising forces lose their power when liberation comes. And the word we use to translate that liberation, is the same Greek word as forgiveness. Forgiveness, above all, marks a new era – a new state of affairs which renders obsolete a status quo from which political and religious leaders were beneficiaries. They had the monopoly on declaring forgiveness and liberation – who did Jesus think he was, declaring forgiveness willy-nilly? All the officials from the mini-bus were livid. He was undermining their authority. Who can forgive sins but God alone, they grumble.

But here, faith is the other problematic word. Faith is generally understood as the act of removing your brain, and straining yourself to accept things that can't be true – performing mental gymnastics to make yourself believe what is clearly false. But again, the word used for faith is better translated loyalty. In this instance, loyalty to the God of Israel. That is, loyalty to this God means not accepting the status quo of the priesthood. Faith is essentially acknowledging that this Jesus is the means by which the God of Israel is working amongst his people. Faith and forgiveness are better translated as loyalty and liberation. When you do that, this story is heard very differently.

Those who are loyal to what God is doing now, experience the liberation God has promised now – not simply forgiveness as a spiritual transaction to prepare you for the afterlife, but liberation in the most practical, down-to-earth sense. For the author of the Gospel, this – like all other supposedly miraculous events, is not a mere

metaphor. It is clearly an incident he believed actually took place. It becomes an acted parable, an actual incident that shines a light on who Jesus was and how God was at work through him.

This is not to say that Luke automatically expects his readers to believe it, but that he simply reports that this is what seemed to happen. Luke never demands that his readers use incidents like this as a basis for faith, or that they need some kind of faith in order to believe in stuff like this. He simply says, here's what I think happened: you make of it what you will.

Of course to modern readers, miracles look silly. This is mostly because modernity was the era when there were such things as laws of nature, of which humanity had a pretty good grasp. So when something happened that did not comply with the perceived law of nature, it must thereby have been miraculous or supernatural. This is certainly the view defended by sceptics from David Hume to the New Atheists.

But, Augustine – in the fourth century – had a more sophisticated and defensible view. For Augustine, 'Miracles are not contrary to nature but only contrary to what we know about nature' (Augustine). It's quite hard to argue with that. For Augustine, as for the authors of Scripture – there was no supernatural realm. Because to appeal to the supernatural is to assume that all avenues of the natural realm have been fully explored and understood. Equally, the Scriptural authors could all count themselves as materialists, and could quite happily accept there was nothing beyond matter. Again, since scientists cannot fully explain how matter works or where it comes from, there is no need to appeal to anything beyond matter when unexpected things happen in the material world.

When something unexpected happened, first Century Jews didn't think – oh, that was supernatural. They thought, oh – our understanding of the world as we thought we knew it may have to be reconfigured in light of what has just happened. So when people witnessed this healing event, we hear that they did precisely that – they had witnessed what is called a paradox, something unexpected that contravened their understanding of how the world works.

In a world where the dice were loaded against the poorest members of Galilean society, in a world where they felt and were made to feel, that their lot in life was divinely ordained, where lack of wealth or health or freedom were a divine curse – they were confronted with a person whose every action undermined those dehumanising beliefs. To witness an incident like this one that undermined those beliefs, left them scrambling for a new way of looking at the world. That, in itself, was good news.

The assumption that modern readers are more perceptive and less gullible than the Iron Age inhabitants of Lower Galilee is a very difficult claim to take seriously. The assumption that modern western voting public are informed citizens who make rational choices. Ancient Galileans working at close quarters with nature, witnessing death on a regular basis and conscious of their place in society, were ignorant, gullible myth-victims who didn't know where babies came from and didn't know how death worked. I've not read any valid modern objection to miracles that had not already been raised in the Ancient World.

In fact, history has left modernists like David Hume superseded by scientific progress, but vindicated the fourth century Augustine. Unlike his New Atheist comrades, Richard Dawkins unwittingly endorses Augustine's view. 'Miracles', says Dawkins, are 'natural phenomena we don't understand yet.'

That is precisely what Luke seeks to communicate to his reader. To those on the minibus who like the world as it is, for those from the lower echelons to whom the world has been cruel, Luke's Jesus declared in word and action that the natural world is not what you thought it was. The onlookers did not say, 'oh okay – that miracle's convinced us to become slavish gullible religious puppets'. They worship God but conclude nothing more than, 'we've seen strange stuff today,' or in Dawkins' words, 'we've seen natural phenomena we don't understand yet.'

Claire Todd

Violent Child Abuse

19th February 2017

Genesis 2:9, 16-17; 3:1-7, 14-19

Jn. 3:11-17

As a child, and like many children, I really enjoyed fairy tales. My favourite was Cinderella, but many others too, such as Hansel & Gretel, and Little Red Riding Hood. But fairy tales are definitely not for children; they were never intended for children and have become very sanitised over time to match the cotton wool existence we want our children to have, devoid of any horribleness in life, anything remotely resembling evil; and that natural propensity to protect our children from every possible ill, but is that at the expense of teaching them about real life? That real life isn't all fluffy; it involves tough stuff, and boundaries, choices and making judgements and necessarily discipline. Fairy stories are borne out of folklore and legends by the likes of Baroness d'Aulnoy, Giovanni Straparola, Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, and Hans Christian Anderson, who were incidentally all Christians. And so the question arises as to what sort of parent would subject their children to any sort of harm or abuse, such as taking them into the woods and leaving them there to fend for themselves, or sending their innocent little girl through dangerous woods to take treats to grandma? They contain some really grim child abuse but are also full of hidden meanings and metaphor and morals; so for instance Red Riding Hood is about obedience, and also about predators of women and young girls, and a few other things depending on the variation and translation. Stories are how we communicate something, and fairy stories communicate something deeply spiritual. They take us to a place where something deep within connects with a world of suffering, toil and sorrow, and mingles with the ashes of the dead, as well as gloriously happy outcomes. They are a journey through the world with its trials and tribulations, they involve transformation, and they describe the purpose of life; they are a union between the soul and the divine, and combine the mortal with the immortal.

Which brings us to this alleged fairy tale about Adam and Eve. If only Adam had not taken a bite of that dreaded apple, nor Eve for that matter, human beings might still be wonderfully innocent and blissfully immortal, at least in theory anyway. This emphasised narrative of the human race in Genesis sets the scene for its failure, and the first discipline and punishment for wrongdoing and overstepping the boundaries which God had lovingly put in place out of his care for the humans he had created. Although not immediate, Adam was sentenced to inevitable death. To touch or eat from the tree of life is a paradox in itself because it meant certain death. The tree of good and evil by definition symbolises having a conscience, awareness and morals, and knowledge which necessarily involves developing some sort of moral compass. The freedom which Adam exercised sealed his future, or lack of it. Death by its very nature therefore is both our enemy and our destiny, the limits of sin and death being an integral part of our human existence. God gets exasperated with us humans, and with our human hearts, because evil subtly and insidiously slithers in, with a cunningness like the serpent.

But Jesus turns this around in his selfless act of complete obedience and devotion, not only to the Father, but to each person; to make atonement for us in other words. God reconciled the world to himself through Jesus. An example of violent child abuse? Let's see.

At face value this evening's subject seems like a contradiction in terms. The very notion of child abuse conjures up a scene which in itself is an obscene and abhorrent evil by any standard, reflecting the depths of depravity to which our human nature is capable of reaching; and that's just it, our human nature. Abuse of any kind, by its very nature is violent. And yet the very term child abuse is very open to definitions of varying degrees. Take Dawkins for instance,

who along with referring to God as an 'intelligent knob-twiddler' who randomly interferes with the rules he himself has put in place, has recently asserted that to teach or bring up a child in any faith is child abuse because it can cause more lasting damage than sexual abuse. This proclamation has its roots in the perversion of Biblical teaching; that misinterpretation of what scripture says and interpretation of what scripture doesn't say. People have held all sorts of beliefs through the generations, knowingly or unknowingly contrary to scripture, and often been inculcated without proper understanding. They have then used this against people of other faiths, other denominations, other traditions. This is why there is such a huge responsibility on not just ministers and pastors, but all Christians to share the real truth of the Bible, the truth of God's love which invites all people into both a personal and a corporate relationship with him through Jesus Christ.

But why would anyone want any sort of relationship with a God who is portrayed as both violent and non-violent; bipolar and schizophrenic even?

I, quite flippantly and maybe too often, talk about God forever changing His mind in the Old Testament; people do bad things and turn away from Him, and then He says 'oh I'm gonna do this, I'm gonna do that, I'm gonna send this disease, and that plague, and the people say 'oh sorry sorry sorry' and turn back to Him, and He says 'aww, ok then, its fine, we're good'. So the God of the Old Testament is seen as wreaking vengeance and punishment, whereas the God of the New Testament is a God of mercy, forgiveness and redemption. That is, apart from the book of Revelation, which uses a great deal of metaphor to build a picture of an unprecedented cataclysmic eschatological cosmic violence at some point in the future, even greater than anything which has gone before. But actually God is not a violent psychopath; this concept comes from trying to understand God in our human terms and in doing so we try to humanise him.

So when we talk of divine child abuse, or cosmic child abuse, it is referring to God the Father sending his Son, Jesus, to the Cross. But why did God send his only son into the world, knowing what lay ahead, that he would endure rejection, suffering, torture and ultimately be killed in a horrific way? Some lines of thought say that God was just trying to appease himself, to make himself feel better. But why did he need to, he's God? In sending his son, he was actually sending himself; when we accept that Jesus was God, the Word incarnate, being fully human and fully divine, then God sent himself to pay the penalty for our sins and reconcile the world to himself. Why? Because of his love for the whole human race. For God, this was the only way atonement could happen. Gregory of Nyssa said that 'All that the Father is, we see revealed in the Son'. This is what is known as atonement. So God uses himself as the most superior scapegoat possible, as atonement, becoming 'the lamb of God', the third party.

Steve Chalke, a British Baptist Minister, coined the term 'cosmic child abuse' in describing what some see as God getting his 'ounce of flesh' through the blood sacrifice of his Son, whilst telling us to forgive and then not doing the same himself. In fact this is what Chalke said in his book *The Lost Message of Jesus*: "The fact is that the cross isn't a form of cosmic child abuse – a vengeful Father, punishing his Son for an offence he has not even committed. Understandably, both people inside and outside of the Church have found this twisted version of events morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith. Deeper than that, however, such a concept stands in total contradiction to the statement 'God is love'. If the cross is a personal act of violence perpetrated by God towards humankind but borne by his Son, then it makes a mockery of Jesus' own teaching to love your enemies and to refuse to repay evil with evil." (Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* [Zondervan: Grand Rapids, MI, 2003] pp.182-183)

On the contrary, what God did in and through Jesus is the greatest act of self-sacrifice and mercy in the history of the whole world; the ultimate act of forgiveness.

A favourite Biblical quote of mine is one which I share with many people. There's a wonderful piece of music about it called 'God so loved the world' from John Stainer's Crucifixion. The piece is based on a verse from John's Gospel; 'God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.' (Jn 3:16) And the story doesn't end there. This amazing story of Jesus Christ includes his glorious resurrection, and the key part of what was actually happening in 1st century Israel and penetrates the whole of time, whatever we perceive time to be. This is the most profound demonstration that God is God and even Satan cannot and will not be the one who ultimately emerges victorious. Revelation tells us that his time is short; his fate at the end of time is to be annihilated himself. In the Eschaton, God will finally redeem the world and make it as it should have been in the first place. Revelation is full of metaphorical imagery which paints a picture and promise for the future of the world, and although also described in violent and abusive terms, actually reveals something more about the nature of evil rather than the goodness and love which is God. The Bible needs to be taken as a whole, and through standing back and seeing the bigger narrative, we understand more about God's love for his creation and the ultimate sacrifice he was prepared to make for the love of each one of us.