

Art and the Bible Story - Creation

Genesis 1:1-5, Genesis 1:24-28, Genesis 1:31-2:1

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 over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. And God said, 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.' And it was so. God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

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Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'

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God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude.

Around the table

1. What do I find interesting, new or challenging about the image and/or the passages that we've read?
2. How do I relate to the picture in terms of understanding the Christian faith?
3. What does a focus on this picture say to us about following Christ today?



Italian, Florentine, *God the Father*, about 1430-40 © The National Gallery, London

Reflection by Revd Dr Alastair McKay

St Martin-in-the-Fields

What does God look like? What, specifically, does God the Father look like? Is he a bearded Father Christmas type figure in the sky?

This image might give one cause to commend the Jewish tradition that forbids making images of Jahweh. For you could see this image as reinforcing the idea of God as a benevolent white man with a long beard. You may not find that a helpful image of God.

Whether you find this particular picture of God the Father difficult or not, we all face the problem that our image of God is affected by our image of our human parents, especially of our human fathers. This is so if you have known and been raised with your human father. It's probably the case also if you've not known your father, or if your human father was not present through your upbringing.

I spent my entire childhood frightened of my father, who seemed a distant figure whose approval I could never quite win. For my first 20 years, this affected my view of God, and contributed to me becoming an atheist who rejected the idea of a loving God. But even now, after many years as a follower of Christ, and with a greatly improved relationship with my father, I am hampered in my image of God the Father by my images of my human father and mother. For each of us, to grasp the First Person of the Trinity as "God the Father," there is the challenge to put aside and grow beyond the associations we have with that term – both the good and the bad ones – into a new and deeper understanding.

The Apostles' Creed begins with the confession that: "We believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth." The first book of the Bible, Genesis, offers us two different creation narratives. The first, which we've heard some extracts from, focuses on God's creation of the cosmos. The second one, which comes in Chapter 2, focusses more on God's creation of human beings, whom we are told here are made "in God's image".

The emphasis in this first chapter of Genesis is on the huge diversity of God's good creation: plants and animals "of every kind" – a veritable "multitude". If, like my family, you're a fan of the BBC's nature programmes, you'll recognise how extraordinary the diversity and range of this creation is. And this diverse creation, as Sam Wells puts it, "is good for its own sake, whether it relates to human flourishing or not."

This is one of the aspects of God the Father that our Florentine painter is trying to capture: the figure is depicted offering a blessing. God the Father is blessing his creation, and part of that blessing is in the great wonder of creation's diversity. And in the creative action, God is looking to be a blessing: as Rowan Williams expresses it, "we exist because of [God's] utterly unconditional generosity".

A second aspect that our Florentine painter seeks to capture is one of scale. God the Father is much bigger than the whole of his creation. God is God; what God has created is not God.

Creation bears the marks of God, and in our case we bear the image of God. But neither we nor the rest of creation are God. We are all creatures.

God is the creator, of a different order to us and everything created. Further, “God would have been the same God if we had never been created.” And in the relationship within the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – God is “sublimely and eternally happy to be God” – which means that God doesn’t need us. Or as Sam puts it: “God is not in any sense dependent on the universe, but the universe is completely dependent on God.” And, Williams adds, “the fact that this sublime eternal happiness overflows in the act of creation is itself a way of telling us that God is to be trusted absolutely, that God has no private agenda. ... The love that God shows, in creating us as much as in saving us, is completely free.”

So as Christians, when we say that, “We believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth,” we are saying that we have confidence in, that we place our trust in, the God who has made all creation. We are recognising that “there is no being without God – no sphere of independent existence that operates outside relationship to the Trinity,” Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We are also acknowledging that God has no selfish purpose in creation, and that God creates out of the goodness of who God is, and as an act of blessing. And as we go on, we discover that we only begin to grasp what God looks like in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. And we come to recognise that although all of God, Father, Son and Spirit, is intimately involved in the acts of creation, not all of God can be seen in what God has created.

A prayer

Creator God, in whose hands are the depths of the earth, and the mountain heights;
whose hands have made the seas, and moulded the dry land also;
open our eyes to see the wonder of your creation afresh, to appreciate the generosity
of what you have made in its rich diversity;
and enable us to grasp more of what it means that we and all people are made in
your image.

We pray through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Art and the Bible Story – The Fall

Genesis 2:15-18, Genesis 2:21-23 & 25, & Genesis 3:4-13

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.' Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.'

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So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.

...

And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

...

But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of [the tree] your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?' 10 He said, 'I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.' [The Lord God] said, 'Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?' The man said, 'The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.' Then the Lord God said to the woman, 'What is this that you have done?' The woman said, 'The serpent tricked me, and I ate.'

Around the table

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Jan Gossaert, *Adam and Eve*, about 1520,

The National Gallery, London, on loan from The Royal Collection Trust

Reflection by Revd Dr Alastair McKay

St Martin-in-the-Fields

How comfortable are you talking about sin? Is 'sin' a word that you avoid, and are embarrassed by? Well, as one writer has pointed out, 'abandoning the language of sin, will not make sin go away.'

Genesis reminds us that, as part of God's good creation, we were created good. Our bodies are good. I think this is part of what Jean Gossart captures in this painting. These are beautiful bodies, and he is celebrating every contour. But something is amiss. It's hinted at by Adam, who's trying to remove something distasteful from his mouth.

It's hinted at in the half-eaten apple on the broken off branch, which Eve is trying to hide. It's further suggested by the coy covering of the couples' genitals. And further suggested in the couple's position within the composition: they're standing outside the garden, heading away from it. The serpent coiled above them completes the sense that something has gone wrong with the good world that God has created.

Our extract from Genesis is part of a story which is most helpful if read metaphorically rather than literally. The story articulates a fundamental reality of our earthly existence: we are part of God's good creation. And as part of that good creation, we are created to live without shame and in full communion with God, fully reflecting God's image and the likeness of God. The story illustrates how we are given abundance, represented by the whole garden, but see only scarcity, represented by the one forbidden tree. And it expresses how human beings have participated in a rebellion against God's good order, a rebellion that shatters our interaction with God, with one another and with the planet, one that infects us with guilt and shame, that ushers in a dynamic of blaming others – and that brings death in all its forms.

This rebellion may not be one for which you and I feel responsible. But, whether we like it or not, we cannot escape it, and we find ourselves party to it. At a personal level, one of the ways I've been most acutely aware of this has been through the experience of being a parent, along with my wife, to two children. My children are now both adults. But through the process of raising them, I've continually bumped up against my own shortcomings, my own incapacity to love fully, my own tendency to be unkind and to blame others. If you've had children then you'll probably have observed their propensity to be cruel to one another, and their tendency to hide things from their parents, out of shame – just as I remember hiding things from my own parents, whom I can find myself tempted to blame for my failings. And the blame game is one which we can find everyone in our families can enter into.

These destructive patterns are not just to be found at the interpersonal level. We see the fracture at a national and international level. We note the pattern of blaming refugees and migrants to our country for our economic problems, which surfaced during the last general election. We see the problem evident in the corporate cultures, such as that recently

revealed at Volkswagen, which deceive customers for company gain. We observe the evidence in the global economic structures, which favour countries like the UK, at the expense of countries in Africa, for example. There is a systemic problem which the Bible talks about as 'sin' that creates a distance between us creatures and God our Creator; and it affects our relationships with one another and with the created world. It's a problem which goes well beyond our own individual 'sins' – those wilful human choices and actions we take which maintain that distance between each of us and God.

Hence in our regular liturgies, the language of the confession is plural not singular. We are confessing not just our own sins, but also our participation in the sin of the world. We admit our sins and in so doing we are taking the first step towards restoration. It is a confession, with Adam and with Eve, that 'I have eaten of the apple', without vainly trying to hide the apple behind our backs. It's a confession that recognises the bitter taste which in some measure now affects all our experience. It's a step towards the truth. But it is a step which hurts us to take. As Rowan Williams challenges us: Can any fallen human being face the prospect of confronting God's purity and light without shrinking? Like Adam and Eve, we are ashamed, and we want to hide.

There is good news to come. It's good news that we'll explore as we journey through this course. For God comes calling us, seeking us and beckoning a welcome to us. And God in Jesus takes the action to bridge the gulf that we've helped to create, taking the guilt and blame upon himself. But a first step for us is to recognise and admit the gulf, and to confess our participation in the harm which spoils God's good creation. And that participation is what Jean Gossart subtly depicts for us.

A prayer

Great God, in your good design you made us to bear your image and to live in communion with you and all your creation; help us to be honest about our participation in the sin which separates and spoils; enable us to receive the forgiveness of our sins that you offer through your Son, Jesus; and lead us to see ourselves and other people as fearfully and wonderfully made. We pray through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Art and the Bible Story – Abraham and Isaac

Genesis 22:1-14

After these things God tested Abraham. God said to him, 'Abraham!' And Abraham said, 'Here I am.'

God said, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt-offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.' So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt-offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away.

Then Abraham said to his young men, 'Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.' Abraham took the wood of the burnt-offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife.

So the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father Abraham, 'Father!' And Abraham said, 'Here I am, my son.' Isaac said, 'The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt-offering?' Abraham said, 'God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son.' So the two of them walked on together.

When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.

But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' And Abraham said, 'Here I am.' The angel said, 'Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.'

And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt-offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place 'The Lord will provide'; as it is said to this day, 'On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.'

Around the table

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Johann Heinrich Ferdinand Olivier, *Abraham and Isaac*, 1817 © The National Gallery, London

Reflection by Revd Dr Alastair McKay

St Martin-in-the-Fields

A well-known female theologian told this story in an interview: “My dad is a vicar, and he used to do acted-out sermons. One Sunday he dragged me out to be Isaac to his Abraham, and I lay there on a table, this knife above me, and I’ve loathed the story ever since.” One does not need to have gone through such a disturbing experience in order to have some difficulties with this story of Abraham and Isaac. What is Abraham doing taking his only and beloved son out into the wilderness to sacrifice him? What sort of God would ask Abraham to do this? What must it have done to the relationship between Isaac and Abraham? Would Isaac ever be able fully to trust his father again?

It would’ve been possible for our painter, Johann Olivier, to zoom in on the moment where Abraham raises the knife above Isaac, ready to strike. Olivier might have tried to depict the anguish and horror on both faces. But he’s not chosen such a tragic, close up lens. Instead he’s opted for a wide-angled lens. In the centre we have Isaac loaded up with the wood for the sacrifice. He’s looking away from his father. Had he yet asked the question about where the sacrificial animal is coming from? We don’t know. Also in the centre is Abraham carrying the fire, and – barely visible – the knife. And he has a resolute and determined demeanour. Further down the valley are their servants, pointing up and wondering what’s going on. And all of them are set in a magnificent and broad landscape, with high peaks and rolling rivers.

This story comes at the climax of the journey of faith of Abraham, now a very old man. Many years previously he responded to God’s call for him to leave his homeland, and to travel where God directed him. He was given the promise by God that he’d be blessed with innumerable offspring; and that through those offspring God would bless the world. Abraham had wavered in his trust of God, most notably in deciding to father a child through his slave-girl Hagar, in order to try to bring about what God had promised. Then finally he saw God fulfil his promise and grant him and Sarah a child in the shape of their only child, Isaac.

Whatever has happened to Abraham over the years, we see from today’s story that Abraham has developed a total trust in God. He responds promptly to God’s call, and to the command to sacrifice his son. He must be confused and wondering what God is playing at; but he rises early to obey. And then on the journey he’s asked the heart-stopping question by his son Isaac. “Where is the lamb for the burnt-offering.” And he responds with the deepest words of faith: “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son.” At this point Abraham doesn’t know how God will do this. But he knows at a deep level that all things come from and are dependent on God. And he trusts that God can still fulfil his promise. So if Isaac is to be the burnt offering, Abraham knows that, however confusing and heart-breaking it may be, God is still to be trusted.

What does this story tell us about God? It’s a powerful reminder that God is God, and not like us. It presents us with two contradictory windows into what God is like. The first window shows us God who tests, and who wants to know whether human beings trust God. This is the God who speaks at the beginning of this story, and then again towards the end

through the angel. We can question all we like why God tests Abraham in this way, but our answers probably won't be adequate. For this first window shows us something of God's free and sovereign rule. Which means that God is not answerable to us: God doesn't owe us an explanation.

The second window shows us God who provides, who is the source of life and all that human beings need. This second window reveals something of the graciousness of God, of God's freely flowing love. This is what Abraham grasps by faith, and proclaims with the prophetic words: "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering." For what Abraham cannot fully grasp is a secret hidden until the coming of Jesus. And in Jesus we find the final fulfilment of Abraham's words. In Jesus we discover that whatever God's purpose was in testing father Abraham in this way, God the Father's intention was always to provide in the most costly way, by not withholding his only Son, by giving Jesus as the offering to redeem and save human beings. So it turns out that it's God who undergoes the ultimate testing in the crucifixion of Jesus. And who, in the resurrection of Jesus, offers the ultimate provision of new life.

Although it's only hinted at, for me, this is what I see the painter Olivier pointing us to in his wide-angled painting: he offers us a reminder of the need to pay attention to the bigger, wider story of God's loving purposes beyond the immediately painful story of Abraham and Isaac.

A prayer

Sovereign and Gracious God, who has provided the ultimate sacrificial lamb in your Son Jesus, in order that we might be set free to live in your love for eternity; grant us the strength to face the testing of our trust and faith in you, in the knowledge that you will provide all that we need to respond to your call, in hope and joy. We pray through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**