**Sermon February 12th 2023**

Journeys can be as rewarding as arriving at your destination, and it was certainly in that frame of mind that Liz and I set off for New Zealand a few weeks ago. It is such a long way, that unless one is to have a miserable time of it, one needs to adopt an outlook that is open to all that the journey offers, however it might turn out compared with the schedule you have in mind.

One of the joys of travelling to the other side of the world is an appreciation of the vastness of this beautiful world. For hours you cross the sea, 30 thousand feet below you, making the smallest of progressions hour by hour on the flight path map on the back of the seat in front of you. Eating supper when it should be breakfast, one’s rhythms and routines are disturbed by the desire to beat creation at its own game, and arrive before you’ve left or even skip a day in the process.

This is the 4th time we’d made this journey and my sense of awe at the distance travelled, the technology that got us there and the wonder of the creation that greeted us in NZ never wanes.

How appropriate, for me at least, to discover that today’s Old Testament reading and today’s gospel reading have enormous creation themes at their heart.

I’ve never believed in the creation story as fact, but I do believe that the myth of creation as told in the Bible contains unfathomable truths that philosophers, theologians and scientists continue to wrestle with. Let me pull out a few of them for you.

The first is that creation is intended and intentional. Whatever we might understand by the term ‘God’ which in Hebrew simply means ‘I am’, the creation story conveys the process of creation and creating as intentional. The world is not an accident; we are not merely combinations of chemicals, haphazardly arranged. Creation and humankind is intended.

Secondly, creation is essentially good. The writers of Genesis emphasise this six times. ‘And God saw that it was good’, culminating on the sixth occasion with the declaration ‘God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good’. Whatever mistakes humanity has made in the intervening thousands of years since the first spark of creation, creation itself is good. Which isn’t to say it is always harmonious, or that there isn’t pain, nor that there might be conflict and contradiction, but it does mean that the totality is good.

In NZ one is acutely aware of the cost of imported wildlife and non-indigenous plants on the local habitat, not to mention the impact of humanity on this once uninhabited collection of islands. Many of our churches date from a time when NZ had yet to be settled by the Polynesian peoples that became the Māori. Go for a walk in the rainforest in NZ and you will frequently see oblong boxes on the ground – traps designed to capture mice, rats, possums and other imported mammals that kill the flightless and ground nesting birds.

Creation is intended, it is good, but it has also been messed around with.

Thirdly, men and women are made in God’s image and equal with one another. ‘So, God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.’

The story of the fall – Adam and Eve, the apple and that snake – is a quite separate creation story to the one we have heard today. The two stories are unconnected and have quite different mythical origins. One can only speculate why the gender division in one story came to overwhelm the gender equality of the other.

The 4th and final point links us neatly into the gospel reading. On the 7th day, God rested. With the work done, ‘God blessed the 7th day and hallowed it, because on it, God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.’

One would like to think that the dominance of the protestant work ethic in Western society might be drawing to a close as climate change reminds us of the shortcomings of the industrial revolution and its aftermath. We are far from reaching that conclusion. Rather we see a society in this country that is becoming more and more like the far east where long hours for poor rewards are not so much the lower rungs of a ladder up which one might climb towards security and independence, but simply the reality of life. Work for millions is taking on the character of indentured labour as mortgages and high rents force people into working patterns that are unhealthy, destroy family relationships and supress the opportunity for human fulfilment. No wonder we struggle to attract people to church on a Sunday morning when it is – for the majority now – simply another working day and if not that, probably the only lie in of the week.

God wants us rested, and in parallel with that, God wants us to live without anxiety.

‘Do not worry’ Jesus says. Few have that luxury. One might expect wealth to remove worry but it tends simply to re-direct it towards things that only the rich can afford to worry about.

To be free of worry requires us to be pre-occupied with the things of God, not the things of humanity, for worry is primarily the activity of the under occupied mind.

Seek righteousness says God – and all that you truly need will be taken care of; with the lack of justice in the world, there is plenty of righteousness to seek out.

Travelling long distances is not good for the environment – though one can cancel out one’s climate impact of course. It’s not good for the anxious minded either for there are plenty of opportunities for things to go awry over a 32-hour door to door journey.

But it is good for deepening one’s appreciation of the world and of humanity. And most of both, is very good indeed. Just as God intended.

Amen.