

Lent 1 March 1st 2020
Let There be Light
Genesis 1:1-5/John 1:9-16

Today we begin our Lent series and we are taking our themes from the Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent Book for 2020, *Say Yes to Life* by Ruth Valerio.

Ruth is a well-respected theologian and has recently been appointed Canon Theologian for Rochester Cathedral.

In her book she draws on the days of creation from Genesis 1 and relates themes of light, water, land, seasons, other creatures, humankind, sabbath rest and resurrection to matters of environmental, ethical and social concern.

In the Church of England this year we are being encouraged to think about ecological and ethical concerns and how we should respond to these issues as Christians.

Our Theme this morning is Let There Be Light but before we go on to think about specifics, I want to cover a few points about the book of Genesis and also how we have to hold both the physical and the spiritual in our thinking and living and how they are both important.

First things first, who can tell me which book in the Bible was written first? Well it has always been known that Job is the oldest book in the bible. For many years it was thought (and still is by a lot of people) that the book of Genesis was written next but nowadays the best information we have indicates that Genesis was not written down until the time of the first Babylonian exile around 597BC. This would make it contemporary with the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Now just because it wasn't written down until then doesn't mean that it is not a lot older, we have no way of knowing how long it was a part of the oral tradition before it was written down. Now it makes a lot of sense that it was written down at the time of the

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exile. You see there were other creation stories that had also been around for a long time, and now that the Israelites were in captivity, they were being exposed in particular to the Babylonian creation stories and so it made sense to counter them with their own written account of creation. There are several things to say: Genesis does not contradict science. It is not a scientific account of the creation of the world, it is a theological one. At the same time it does not contradict anything that current scientific thinking believes happened when the universe came into being. Most of the first chapter of Genesis is written in a unique style that is almost a poem or a hymn, but not quite. The big differences between other near eastern creation stories and Genesis are that other stories have many gods, Genesis has one God, other stories speak of chaos, wars, people being created to be used by the gods etc. Genesis speaks of order, a good creation ending with people being created to be in communion with God and to look after and enjoy the world. The Israelites had a sense of justice and caring for the world. Our creation story is unique in this way. God blessed mankind, told us to be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and subdue it. God told us to rule over the world and being made in His image of perfect love, justice and compassion that means that we should have looked after it well. But we rebelled and sadly we haven't reflected God's image in us in the way that we have looked after the amazing world that He has given us.

Ruth Valerio points out that Lent is a time when we usually reflect on themes of redemption and salvation, but that the God who created the world is the same God who redeems us. Apparently, the

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Cherokee Indians have a phrase for Jesus which means Creator Son; this acknowledges Him as both divine Creator and divine Son. At the beginning of John's Gospel we read, 'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God'. The Creator Son, with the father from the beginning, the one who spoke the world into being and the one who redeems, who is redeeming, who will redeem all things, not just us. In Colossians 1: 15-20 we are told that Christ's blood was shed on the cross to reconcile to Himself ALL things, whether things on earth or things in heaven. We are told that at the end of time when Jesus comes back there will be a new heaven and a new earth. I sometimes wonder what exactly makes us think that God would trust us with a new earth after what we have done with the old one, but then we are being made new as well. We have a responsibility, every one of us, as Christians, to look after the world God gave us to the very best of our ability.

The first thing that God said was, let there be light. And we cannot live without light. Physical light and Spiritual light. In our reading from John we hear that Jesus is the true light that gives light to everyone, this is clearly spiritual light and understanding but at the same time, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. The spiritual and the physical. It makes no sense to try to separate them. Jesus is full of grace and truth and we have been given His grace. Everything we do, the way that we act and live in this physical world should come from that grace. If we belong to Jesus, we too should be full of light and that light should be evident in the way that we live. That means caring about justice and social action,

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fighting poverty, caring for the planet. Caring for the planet was the first thing God gave us to do and He never told us to stop!

Ruth points out that we need the light of the sun to grow our food, give us essential vitamin D and maintain our body clocks. Trees and animals respond in extraordinary ways to light, deciduous trees are able to count the number of warm days until it is safe to grow new leaves and beech trees only begin their growth when there have been thirteen hours of light in a day. Birds' hormones only kick in for them to begin breeding after there are a certain number of hours of daylight. Electricity has transformed our world, possibly more than anything with the invention of the electric light. We no longer have to spend the long hours of winter nights in darkness. We are free to work any hour of the day and night. Emergency operations can be performed 24 hours a day. We take it all for granted but many places in the world have no electricity. Around 3 billion people in the world still cook by burning wood and charcoal and the indoor pollution that creates causes 4 million premature deaths a year. Those who use kerosene and candles are at risk of burns and fires. People need clean affordable energy to get out of poverty. Access to light, electricity and energy is crucial, but so too is the source of that energy. The latest figures are that 65.1 per cent of electricity around the world comes from fossil fuels which we know are contributing to climate change. This has to change, and change quickly. We need to be informed; we need to be responsible stewards of the world we have been given whilst at the same time being good neighbours to those less fortunate than ourselves. It can seem to be overwhelming and we can feel that we

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cannot make any real difference but that is not true. We have an amazing God, who created light and saw that it was good. I encourage you to get hold of this book and read it. We have some cards to give you that have challenges for us to make some changes and make a difference. Pray whenever you turn on a light. Consider changing to a green energy supplier, Turn off lights, eat less meat, buy second hand clothes and furniture, follow the LiveLent challenges on the app or the website or send for the booklet.