

Genesis 1:24-31

24 And God said, "Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: the livestock, the creatures that move along the ground, and the wild animals, each according to its kind." And it was so.

25 God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.

26 Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

27 So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

28 God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

29 Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food.

30 And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food." And it was so.

31 God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day

John 1:14-18

14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

15 (John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, 'This is the one I spoke about when I said, "He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me."')

16 Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given.

17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

18 No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in the closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

Let us make humankind in our own image

Genesis 1:24-31; John 1:14-18

At the moment we're in a very strange place. It has the feel of the end of days about it. We're effectively imprisoned in our own homes with very little freedom to move around outside. And far from God's judgement it feels more like something we've brought on ourselves. When we read the bible, it's full of this sort of thing! Nothing actually changes.

But it wasn't supposed to be like this.

Today as the final part of our Lent series we're looking at God's final act of creation. Human beings.

But initially this also covers the appearance of living creatures, so I want to look briefly at this as well because creation is all of a piece, everything God made is interdependent, nature was created to be in balance. And the animals are an important part of it. Their sheer numbers and diversity are proof that they aren't simply a byproduct, but something we are told to rule over and subdue. But this does doesn't imply we can do what we want with them. They're created on the same day as humans. So no special day for us!

And they're part of the plan. Genesis 9 says this

8 Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him:

9 'I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you

10 and with every living creature that was with you –

the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, ... – every living creature on earth. 11 I establish my covenant with you: never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.'

God's covenant promise is to all creatures, and animals feature strongly *throughout* the bible. When Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness, Mark 1:13 tells us 'he was with the wild animals'. But let's track back a bit because in the interim between Adam and Noah something's changed.

Genesis 1:27 says God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

What does this mean, that *unlike* the animals, we're made in God's image? In a 1904 commentary, S.R. Driver said that it can only be that unlike animals we have self-conscious reason.

I think it's also that we have the capacity (and the need) to love and be creative and interact with other people. God himself, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, embodies all these qualities within himself. God is relationship. So being in isolation does us no good at all.

The reason the Israelites were forbidden to make images of God, was clear – *we are ourselves God's image.*

But something changed.

Adam and Eve had an unhindered relationship with God. But when they disobeyed his only command, not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, everything changed.

The warning attached was this: Genesis 2:17 *you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.*

The logical conclusion being surely that if they obeyed him, they would not die. Death was not in the plan.

I would say, just to be clear, that whether the story of Adam and Eve is a literal account of a historical event is not the point. Too much time has been wasted by christians arguing about this.

But it conveys the central truth we need to understand; that we're made in God's image, and we're declared very good, but (*whether or not* we even believe in Him) because of our rejection of God we've caused a faultline in creation, a division between us and our creator. And death itself is the result. And we are unable just to do good and love others because we have eaten from the tree of knowledge; we've bought the lie that there is an attractive alternative to goodness. But it ends in death. And we fear death.

So when we look at the ecological disaster which is unfolding, we can see a theological explanation for why this is the case.

But it is reversible. *If* we take seriously God's command to look after the planet. According to Wikipedia there are an estimated 8.7 million different animal species.

And also more than 99 percent of all species that ever lived on Earth are estimated to be extinct. But on the other hand there are many species we have not even discovered.

So many statistics, but we know for instance, how reliant the human species is on bees to pollinate plants for our food, and yet a World Wildlife Fund report in 2019 said that in the UK alone, 17 species of bee are extinct, 25 species are threatened and another 31 are a conservation concern.

Any fans of David Attenborough will be well up on all this, but not so many will make the connection with what the bible teaches on the reason behind it.

For scientists, the 2nd Law of Thermodynamics describes basic principles familiar in everyday life. It's partially a universal law of decay; the ultimate cause of why, over time, everything ultimately falls apart and disintegrates. *The universe is winding down.* Look at your compost heap, if you have one.

God by contrast is the Lord of life and constantly creating and upholding life. Look at your garden, if you have one. St Paul says this in Romans 8:20-21 *the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay.* Now what is so often controlling our actions throughout much of history? What is controlling our actions now, in the face of a pandemic?

Fear of suffering yes, but above all fear of decay and death. But as followers of Jesus there is good news, which is that God himself entered into his own creation as a human being to put this right.

In our present situation we share in the stress and inevitable sadness and grief for many who have been and will be lost, and we try to support the many who will struggle to survive, emotionally, spiritually, financially. As believers in Jesus we have to offer hope, and the spiritual gift of fullness of life, both before and after death.

We fear death, but the perfect love of God casts out fear.

1 John 4:18 There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

The pope said this on Friday: *The pandemic is not a judgement from God, but a time for us to judge, to choose what matters and what passes away. It's a time to get our lives back on track.*

The story we have to share

is a story of eternal hope coming from a God who is one of us, it's a story of eternal life coming as a result of Jesus' death and resurrection, proof that death was defeated on the cross and it's a story of eternal love which does not give up, rejoices with the truth, always protects, always trusts, and always perseveres.

It's certainly true that mankind has a problem, the truth is that if we want an answer, Jesus is the way, the truth and the life Amen.