

Journey of Love

Genesis 1.1-2.4a.; Isaiah 40-55

South of Bagdad, the capital of Iraq, the ruins of an ancient city called Babylon are found. From the years 625-539 b.c., Babylon ruled a vast empire covering a substantial part of the Middle East including Jerusalem.

Jerusalem's efforts to shake off Babylonian control lead to destruction, large scale deportation and exile. Arriving in Babylon, the exiles encountered a vast and wonderful city. However, the religion of the city and empire was seriously alien. The heaven of the Babylonian gods, male and female, was blissful. It was not always so. In the past, one of the gods became evil. He was ejected from heaven; killed; and from his blood became man. As a result, the human being is the encasement of evil and the gods are blissful again. Astrology was a powerful constant force as people struggled to ascertain what is to happen about which they had no control.

From the study of the biblical texts, a critical consensus agrees that both Genesis 1.1-2.4 and Isaiah 40-55 emerged from the experiences of the Jewish exiles in Babylon.

The serene presentation of the poem Genesis 1.1-2.4 contrasts with the dramatic poetry of Isaiah 40-55. The Genesis text calmly radiates blessing on all that exists. The poetic prayers of the unknown prophet Isaiah, reveals the struggle, but carries rest, comfort and hope to the exiles.

It does not end there. The spirit of these texts carries an enduring message. Life as lived over two and a half thousand years ago is very different from today. However an artist while composing for his time can capture a feeling, an insight which is immortal and speaks to every age mind and culture. In the 1994 film, *The Shawshank Redemption*, the central character, Andy Dufresne played music from Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* over the public address system. The prisoners in the prison yard were silenced with mystery. One of them said "It was like some beautiful bird flapped into our drab little cage and made these walls dissolve away. For the briefest moment every last man in Shawshank felt free." It was composed in a different part of the world and many years before. Yet it captivated these dangerous men standing, enthralled, looking at the window from whence the music came. Intuitions of an artist can live forever in compositions as do these passages from the Bible.

Genesis 1.1-2.4a

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 there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.' So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.*

*And God **said**, 'Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.' And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was **good**. Then God **said**, 'Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.' And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was **good**. And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.*

*And God **said**, 'Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.' And it was so. God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was **good**. And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.*

*And God **said**, 'Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.' So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was **good**. God blessed them, saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.' And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth 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**.*

*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.'*
God said, 'See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.'
*And it was so. 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. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

Genesis 1.1-2.3 is a remarkable document which affirms the wonder of hope which is and is to come. In opposition to the blackness of a world captured by evil, the author of Genesis selects the known levels of creation and one by one affirms their blessed goodness.

This theme in the short span of writing indicates a determined emphasis. “God **said**, let there be... God saw that it was **good**”. This was repeated seven times. Gen.1:3-4,10,13,18, 23, 25, 31.

“God said...” The word of God introduces the seven groups of creation. He speaks them into existence one by one.

- “God **said**...” The whole thing is interpersonal: **I-thou**. What he is doing is shaped by interest and care. God did not produce a machine that ticks away by itself.
- “God saw that it was **good**.” What he created is what he **loved** and eternally **loves** with a **loving** word.

From all this, comes an extraordinary and rich understanding of the sacredness of creation. Genesis 1.1-2.4 is not a document which is content to lie in the dust. Every verse pulsates with love. It is meticulous. It draws our attention to the energy of creation, to life and adventure. This is captured by the account of the burning bush in Exodus 3. 1-6. The bush is blazing and yet remains itself. The mystery that lies within it spilled over into visibility. It is the mystery of God’s presence, whose titanic energy holds everything in existence. Moses is invited to take off his sandals in recognition of that reality throbbing within all that exists.

The mystery of creation can be felt in what can be read from the Jewish Sabbath Prayer Book.

“Days pass, and the years vanish, and we walk Sightless among miracles. Fill our eyes with seeing and our minds with knowing. Let there be moments when your Presence, like lightning, illumines the darkness in which we walk,. Help us to see, wherever we gaze, that the bush burns, unconsumed. And we, clay touched by God, will reach out for holiness and exclaim in wonder, "How filled with awe is this place.”

With the seventh day, “God finished the work. He rested, blessed the seventh day and hallowed it,” Gen.2.1-4. The acknowledgement of universal relationship was the point of the text. Now that it was done, God relaxed into the joy of communion with his cosmos.

Isaiah 40-55

The years 597 and 586 b.c saw two deportations of Jews to Babylon. The year 539 saw the collapse of the Babylonian empire with the arrival of the Persians. In meantime, new generations of Jews were born in Babylon and saw that city as their home. They retained their Jewish identity; the dream of Jerusalem featured in their liturgy. However, Babylon was a better option

than the ruin and poverty stricken Jerusalem. When released by the Persians, many if not most, remained in Babylon.

They knew that every empire is dismantled by time. Only, the God of Genesis, the God of love, is eternal. "The grass withers, the flower fades but the word of our God remains forever" (Isa.40.8; 55.6-11). "Can a woman forget her suckling child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you" (Isa. 49.50).

For the author of Second Isaiah exile was no longer the pain and loss of the home they were driven from. Exile had become a way of living the separation demanded by the Jewish faith. The vision of Genesis 1 has a clarity and wonder that is not compatible with the chains of astrology and the hopelessness created by the gods. The idols of Babylon are empty, dull and meaningless. They were mocked. "To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him? The idol! A workman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold, and casts for it silver chains. He who is impoverished chooses for an offering wood that will not rot; he seeks out a skilful craftsman to set up an image that will not move." (Is.40:18- ;44:9-20;46:5-7). By contrast, the wonder of the Loving God, cherished and proclaimed by Genesis, was total.

Generations came and went while an enterprising people looked to their faith and future. Their Jewish belief was their strength and they lived in peace with the people of Babylon. For the majority, their way was clear; what is of no substance is to be shed; what is central is to be cherished. The Isaiah message is clear. "No need to remember past events no need to think about what was done before. Look I am doing something new it emerges; can you not see it?" (Is. 43.18-19). Do not be afraid to make changes, big or little, "Fear not. I am with you" (Is. 41.10; 41,14; 43,1-2). Work was done in Babylon on the shaping of the Bible. In the absence of the Temple, the synagogue became the place of gathering and prayer.

Empires, societies, communities are never perfect. What is wrong can worm its way into minds, organisations, governments. For the Israelites, the word 'exile' ceased to be a geographical term. Israel remodelled the experience of exile in a positive way which filtered out what was seen as wrong and so they learned how to be their precious faith while living in a foreign land.

With the coming of Jesus of Nazareth the community was defined in the most sacred of words, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these." (Mark 12. 30-31).

Universal love is proclaimed in the opening chapter of the Bible. It rings its way to the final words of the Bible where we meet the welcoming arms of Jesus.

"I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End"
(Rev.21.13).

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