

The six-year-old asked: ‘Mummy, where did I come from?’ Mummy took a deep breath. She knew she had to be honest and accurate but not too technical. She launched into a detailed explanation, and then: ‘So do you understand?’ she asked. ‘Well, yes’, said the little boy, ‘But I just wondered. My friend Billy came from Bradford.’

It’s a basic human instinct to want to know where we came from, where our family and people and tribe came from, and how everything started. Ever since humanity began, people have asked the same questions, built up explanations and told the stories down the generations. In the 17th century Archbishop Ussher calculated from the Bible that the world began on October 23rd, 4004 BC, and was therefore just under 6,000 years old. But science keeps pushing the boundaries back. We now know that the earth is at least 4.5 billion years old, that the simplest single-celled life forms probably appeared about 4 billion years ago, and that human beings who could use tools first appeared in Africa about 3.75 million years ago.

We know much more than Bishop Ussher and his contemporaries, and they knew much more than the wandering tribes who inhabited the near east a few thousand years ago – but just as they had their story about how the earth began, so do we. At the moment we think we know that everything started with the ‘big bang’. But even the most academically rigorous theoretical physicist or cosmologist can’t answer the question ‘What happened before the big bang?’ For all we know, a more plausible theory may be waiting for someone to expound it.

Today’s first reading is one near-eastern tribe’s attempt to explain the origin of the world. They based it on their own immediate experience, so it describes the creation of the fertile coastal land in which they lived. If you read on into Genesis chapter two, you’ll find it is immediately followed by another creation story, but this one comes from a different tribe who lived in a barren desert and whose life depended on rivers and oases. It’s a very different story from a very different environment. Logically, both stories can’t be true because they contradict each other in a number of different respects. Logically, neither of them is true in a strictly scientific sense. Nor is Genesis the oldest book in the Bible, even though it comes at the beginning. Some of the history and wisdom books were probably written down much earlier. But it’s really useful to have these two stories together. They show us straight away that we can’t take everything in the Bible as literal truth. We need to know what sort of text we are reading in order to interpret it correctly - is it poetry, history, law, prophecy, wisdom or story-telling?

Today’s Genesis reading is a particular type of story called a creation myth – every culture has one of these – and it is pointless to search it for historical accuracy. It is a well-crafted story with an element of repetition which makes it more memorable and easier to listen to. Like much of the Bible it was told and retold for centuries, long before it was written down. ‘God saw that it was good’ recurs six times, almost like a chorus. Each time it concludes a sequence of events: God speaks: ‘Let there be...’; God acts: ‘So God made...’; God reviews his work: ‘God saw that it was good.’ Finally, when everything was done and the entire universe scrutinised, ‘Indeed, it was very good’. What an excellent blueprint for us! It doesn’t matter what we apply it to – think, speak, act, review. It’s valid whatever we are doing and however large or small the task: think and plan, discuss it with others, do the work, evaluate the results.

One activity which has become very popular recently is to cultivate the habit of mindfulness. It has been made to sound very modern and trendy, yet for centuries everyone who pursues serious prayer and contemplation has learned to prepare themselves with some form of mindfulness exercise. Mindfulness is about being alive to what is happening now; not allowing yourself to become stuck in the past or to agonise about what may happen in the future. It's about freeing oneself from being in thrall to all the things one cannot control – there's not the slightest point worrying about whether the train will be late, because there is nothing you can do to make it turn up on time. Much better to enjoy the sunset or finish the crossword (though you might want to make a phone call to stop someone else worrying about whether you will be late!)

This is the message underlying the gospel reading. The lilies are beautiful now. The grass is a lovely green carpet now. Enjoy them for what they are at this moment, and trust God to find ways in which you can provide the things that you and your family need. That second creation myth has a different but complementary message to the one in Genesis chapter one. It is a story of God and man working in partnership: God makes, and Adam names. The name is part of creation, part of the essence of something, which doesn't fully exist unless it can be identified by name. Our way of life is God-given, and we live it in collaboration with him. The society in which we live is God-given. The opportunities we have and the skills we need to take advantage of them are God-given, but we must use them. If we help and support each other, we shall have what we need. A tax-man friend of mine describes taxation as a God-inspired, human-created mechanism for meeting the needs of our society. If we follow God's pattern: think, speak, act, evaluate, we play our part in ensuring that everyone has what they need for a fruitful life.

Mindfulness is about living in the 'now' – in the present. I invite you to redefine it as living in the Presence. Trusting in God, walking sensitively in his world, enjoying his creation, listening to him for guidance, helping him to build a better world. Appreciating the lilies, the project plan, the freshly-baked cupcakes, the sanctuary provided by the night shelter, even (perhaps) the completed tax return, and understanding that they are, indeed, very good.