

## **Victoria, 24.08.25: Reflections relating to Jacqui Parkinson's textile exhibition, 'Threads through Creation'**

Kazuo Ishiguro, Nobel prizewinner for literature during an interview: 'I'm more interested in what people tell themselves happened rather than what actually happened.' That distinction is crucial when we read Gen. 1-3 (the substance of the exhibition). In Genesis there is not a shred of information of how planet earth, the solar system or the universe actually began. If we want to know about the universe's origins and development, we must ask a range of scientists who research such themes - astronomers, astro-physicists, the experts in evolutionary biology and the like.

But Genesis remains fascinating for the other theme Ishiguro mentioned: it reveals how the people of Israel, roughly 2.5 millennia ago, spoke to one another, in the light of their faith, about the birth of the small bits of the universe they lived in.

Historical research has revealed that, say, 3000 years ago, throughout the Middle East, the many tribes and nations (including Israel) were all telling stories to show how their various gods were responsible for making the world we live in. They shared stories with one another. During their Exile in Babylon, the people of Israel picked up what to them were some new stories on that theme, and revamped them, to show how their own God was the one and only creator of the earth and the sky, and everything in them. Actually, when they started to go back to Palestine in the 6th century BC, there were a number of major groups of Israelites settling in different parts of the Promised Land. Each had their own favoured creation story and each group gave their story a distinctive spin on how the God of Israel was the maker of the world.

The Book of Genesis was created as a result of a massive editorial effort. But to launch the Book, the editor chose two quite different creation stories, which he placed one after the other, with no attempt to smooth over the many differences. I'll try briefly to sketch what's distinctive about these two stories (found roughly in Gen 1 and Gen 2), and then ponder how we might respond to them today, as 21st century Christians.

### A. Genesis 1

This is an example of what we might call 'blue sky thinking' - a vision of the big picture, a wide-ranging dream of an ideal of life on this planet, as God first created it - with no reference to the dangers of nature, or its cruelties or its conflicts. This 'vision' had been maintained over many, many generations; and in the vision itself the main building blocks are ordered and deliberate.

However, this blue-sky vision *begins* with everything the dreamers and visionaries detested - chaos. And those who told this story pictured chaos like this. Imagine a vast, flat area, extending as far as the eye can see in every direction. It's covered by deep water. Everything is in pitch darkness. And a violent wind blows non-stop, stirring up massive, turbulent waves and a lot of noise. Everything is hostile and threatening.

In 6 days, in a very formulaic way, God brings order out of this chaos. At each step, God has but to express what God wants in words, and it came to be - such was Israel's faith in God's power. And the people who told this story themselves had very orderly minds; so Gen 1 is tightly structured. [See diagram in separate attachment.]

And notice how time itself is sanctified. God's making of everything takes a week, the sacred unit of time still today for Jews - 6 days of work and the sabbath for complete rest from work.

On day 6 something remarkable. God who has made the world, block by block, now creates - still on day 6 - the whole human family (women and men together). And God passes over to humanity the care and oversight of everything God has created. For humanity, as one community, acts for God - all together, they are made in God's image and likeness.

To use a metaphor to grasp the 'feel' of this. I suggest: God cares for everything God has made as a farmer cares for his fields, hedgerows and trees, and the quality of his seed, and lots of animals. The aim is to maximise the fruitfulness of the crops and flocks. The farmer has learned immense skills to oversee the whole of land-based nature. Perhaps we had better add a fisherman as a related metaphor, managing, protecting and harvesting catches of fish. I think these metaphors give the sense in which God is 'master' or 'lord' of all that God sees, all that exists.

Now humanity is charged by God with being a good farmer and a good fisherman, caring for everything God has made and ensuring its fruitfulness.

How are we to think of this today? Our simplest and best response is to see Gen1 as a hymn (or psalm) of thanksgiving to God for what God has given us in the natural world; it's a hymn with an introduction and 7 verses, so that we can ponder and thank God in turn for light, the earth, for trees, etc etc.

I suggest that we make time in the coming weeks to stand in front of the panel for each of the 7 days, explore Jacqui Parkinson's interpretation, and call to mind something wonderful or fascinating from our own experience about the bit of our environment that is attributed to that day. And thank God for it. And especially on day 6 we can also thank God for God's trust in humanity actively to care for it all in an interdependent way. The simplest summary I know of thankfulness and responsibility in Genesis 1 is found in just two lines (we can commit them to memory!) of a harvest hymn:

God, whose farm is all creation,  
take the gratitude we give. *John Arlott, StF 122* .

[We express our thanks here and now by reading Gen 1 together as a psalm of praise and thanks.]

A New Testament reading: Mark 4.35-39

This illustrates how the basic themes of Gen 1 carry over into the story of Jesus - from the chaos of a tempestuous storm to a deep peace, a dead calm. Order restored!

## B. Genesis 2

Here is something very different! This is a much older story than Genesis 1. It has been composed on a small, intimate scale (unlike the grand dream or vision of Gen 1). The starting-point is different, though it has the same sense of a deadly threat to everything wholesome and lively. It starts in the dust - the dry dust, I suggest, of a blistering hot desert. But the story is focused on one, relatively rare phenomenon in the desert: very occasionally there is a source of water, a spring, maybe, or a river.

God now begins God's creative work by forming one male, Adam, from the desert dust near a river. God breathed into Adam the breath of life. Then, with the help of some rain, God created and planted a garden around the water source in the desert: a true oasis. Notice the homely scale of everything: a garden - not the vast expanses of sea and land in Gen 1. This is God's own garden, Eden. God walks in the garden in the cool of the day. God delights in this garden, as doubtless Adam does too. But here's another difference: God does not delegate to Adam all God's care and oversight of the garden that God has planted, with trees and crops to grow. Here God treats Adam as an employee: there are rules that Adam must keep. There are two trees he must not touch, and one of them will certainly produce fruit he must not eat. Otherwise, as God's steward, Adam is responsible for tilling the soil and making crops fruitful and enjoying the crops he produces - a sort of tenant gardener.

But now the next thought in this small-scale story. Adam is lonely. God has to experiment to deal with Adam's loneliness. So this creation story is all about relationships. The relationship between God and Adam; and the discovery of love and companionship in a garden. At first God offers a range of animals and birds - living creatures but not true companions for Adam. Then Eve comes on the scene.

A trigger warning here! Be aware of how common were patriarchal ideas in the ancient world - which Genesis 1 is remarkably free from; but they are writ large in Gen 2. The woman is formed from a rib that God takes from Adam while Adam is asleep, and then closes the wound in Adam's chest - the first surgical operation ever recorded! Here at last Adam recognises a being who shared his flesh and blood. And in the first era of innocence they were both naked, and without shame. So, a proto-nudist colony.

I'm not going to delve into Gen 3 where everything starts to go wrong in the Garden of Eden - though I will refer to that again a little later. I simply here remind us the two main themes in these 2 different stories:

- The majestic vision of Genesis 1;
- The delights of male and female, nakedly enjoying a beautiful and fruitful garden in Genesis 2

Gen 1 shows everything in nature, in sky and sea and on the land to be an orderly gift of God to humanity as a whole; who, in God's name, are to care for the earth and the seas and everything in them.

Gen 2 shows God's concern for life springing like an oasis in the desert, which then becomes a garden of delight for a man and a woman who find intimacy and fellowship there, and who must work, within God's stated limits, to keep the garden beautiful and fruitful.

#### A New Testament reading: Mark 1.4-13

This passage is about the desert and water running through the desert as the location for God's unique self-revelation and self-gift, first in John the Baptist and then in Jesus.

#### C. Some of the Christian uses of the images in Gen 1-2

First, I want to suggest that the images of Gen 1 are now most useful and powerful for us in helping with those times in our inner lives when our hearts are full of chaos. That chaos may feel like being threatened by a raging storm or a wall of water engulfing us. Perhaps the cause is an outburst of fierce and uncontrollable anger. Or our inner storm may be about an emotional conflict that seems beyond resolution; or may be caused by an outburst of jealousy that eats away inside us; or by grief when a close loved one dies ('that great ocean of awfulness'). Inside us a gale is raging. It's so overwhelming that we lose all sense that the spiritual presence of Jesus is with us, in the depths of our hearts, wanting to love us, longing to grant us peace, serenity, and calm.

But being forgetful of Jesus's hidden presence, we can at least cry out in bitter complaint to an empty universe: 'This dreadful storm, in these deep, passionate emotions which are seemingly out of control, inside me: *Does no one care?*' That is precisely the time to listen - usually to a fellow believer who wants us to recover our faith in Jesus's unalterable love; or in the worship and prayer of the church. Listen for the voice of Jesus in the storm; Jesus is with us, and he says, 'Peace! Silence! Be still!' Then be open to the gift of renewed faith, of mercy and forgiveness, of stability and creative silence.

My second and third reflections come from Gen 2.

So, to start with: There is only one place in the NT where the notion of garden is picked up. It is to be found in John's Gospel. John wraps the last section of Jesus's life (from his arrest through his burial and then his spiritual presence from Easter Day onwards) in gardens. So, John alone says Jesus and his disciples went, after their final supper together, to a garden where they often met together (and enjoyed fellowship). It was there that he was betrayed and arrested. Jesus was buried in an unused tomb in a garden immediately adjacent to the spot where he had been executed on a cross. And of course, when Mary Magdalene came to the now empty tomb on Easter Day, she at first confused the risen Jesus with a gardener. Then that astonishing moment. Jesus utters her name. She recognises it is Jesus. She addresses him as usual, as Teacher, and then flings her arms around him - almost as if the two of them are as intimate as Adam & Eve in the garden of Eden. Though Jesus has to restrain Mary in the new era of Jesus's spiritual presence.

It's as if John is saying: Whatever went wrong in the Garden of Eden (that's spelled out in Gen 3, all about a snake and eating forbidden fruit, and the expulsion of Adam and Eve, drenched in sinful disobedience) - all of that has been put right by Jesus's self-emptying love-unto-death, and then his new spiritual presence available to everyone who believes, so that they can become sharers in eternal life and partners in sharing Jesus's selfless love for one another and for our broken world. So, for John, the heart of the Gospel is presented in the context of a garden.

Third. What about those times in the Christian life when we feel utterly dry, tired, deadened by heat exhaustion, and lifeless? With little or no interest in prayer or reflection on scripture or sharing in worship. Barrenness is the condition of our heart; we are in a spiritual desert. Could it be, could it indeed be the case, that the hidden, gentle, faithfully loving presence of Jesus in our hearts still wants to give us new life, though we cannot sense it? Could it be that the Spirit of love, like a spring or a river in the desert, wants to revitalise us, and cool us down? Practically, could the Spirit of Jesus want us to enter a garden, where beauty, order and fruitfulness all co-exist in small compass?

Yes, maybe the spiritual therapy we all need for times of dryness and exhaustion in the Christian life is simply to rest in an actual garden - and allow it to trigger in our imagination how Jesus, ever loving his enemies as well as his friends, allowed himself to be given over to death for us in and near gardens; and opened up wondrous new possibilities of faith and hope and love in a garden. So we may simply need to sit in a garden, in the silent company not only of plants and trees but also of many of the smallest creatures - butterflies, bees, birds, etc. The betrayal, abuse and death of Jesus and the release of Spirit can take on new meaning in a garden - overcoming the aridity, loneliness, and tiredness of feeling we are consigned to in a spiritual desert. A garden becomes a place of silent contemplative prayer. And all will be well.

And a garden may also be where we choose to talk to a friend, even an estranged friend, to rekindle or deepen love and mutual support. Or where we talk with a group of friends. Like Adam & Eve, we are never alone on the Christian journey, however complex it may be. And gardens are for fellowship.