

IN THE BEGINNING, GOD

Genesis 1v1.

Early in the 5th century St. Augustine was walking by the shore of the Mediterranean. He was writing about the Trinity so he was thinking about God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As he walked he saw a small boy playing on the beach; the boy had dug a hole in the sand and was carrying water from the sea and emptying it into the hole. *“What are you doing?”* Augustine asked. The boy said, *“I am pouring the ocean into this hole.”* Augustine laughed and said *“Impossible!”* and walked on. Just then the Spirit of God spoke into his heart *“No more impossible than you with your book on the Trinity.”*

I feel much the same with this series on ‘God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit’. I’m pouring the ocean into this “hole” of a sermon series. Almighty God, please help me to say something which lifts our eyes and our hearts to You, and which magnifies Your Glory.

So, here’s a question to launch us; it was posed by Herbert H. Farmer. *“Is there a great Heart at the centre of the universe, or is there only a great hole?”* In other words, does a Loving, Almighty God exist, or is life and the universe a meaningless accident? Agnostics say they just don’t know. Atheists, however, say there is no God. To them there *is* a great hole at the centre of the universe. But even as they say it many atheists are wistful; like French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre who wrote: *“That God does not exist, I cannot deny: that my whole being cries out for God, I cannot forget.”*

Only once in the New Testament do we find the Greek word which gives us our English word “atheist”. In Ephesians 2v12 the apostle Paul speaks of sinful humanity being *“without hope and without God (atheoi) in the world.”* In the Hebrew Psalms we find references to atheism. Psalm 14v1 declares *“The fool says in his heart: “There is no God,”* and Psalm 10v4 describes the wicked: *“in all his thoughts there is no room for God.”*

But we believe in God. All the great Christian Creeds proclaim this. The Apostles’ Creed (second century) and The Nicene Creed (fourth century) declare *“We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.”* The Anglican 39 Articles (ratified in the sixteenth century) speak of *“one living and true God, everlasting, without body, parts or passion; of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness: the Maker and Preserver of all things both visible and invisible.”*

So how and where do we start our thinking about God? How about Genesis 1v1? **In the beginning, God.**

Here in the first words of the Bible there is no attempt to debate the existence of God; it is regarded as self-evident. God just *is*. There is no attempt to prove anything. The starting point is revelation. This first chapter of Genesis is more about God than creation. The word “God” appears 35 times in 31 verses.

But God does not begin here in Genesis 1v1. He was *before* "in the beginning." He was already there when the universe was created. He *is* Eternal. God is not only *in* eternity, eternity is *in Him*. Before there was anything else there was God.

In the beginning, God. There is something about this phrase that reaches into our souls. This is not just information or poetry. This is fuel for worship. It impacts us. It touches us deeply. Why is this? It catches us up into the wonder and the mystery of God. We have the curtain drawn aside for a moment. Peter Lewis writes: "*In the first words of Scripture we are brought to the edge of all we can know, and the brink of all we can never know.*"

So what can we know? What does Genesis 1 tell us about God's essential nature?

1. God is Almighty.

He is *The* Almighty! He has no rivals. There is only One God. **In the beginning, God.** He is not one of many gods or even the greatest of gods. There is no cosmic struggle between two equal spiritual powers - one good and the other evil. He alone is God. Everything outside of Him is His creation.

He is *The* Almighty in creation. He plans when time should begin. He decides what is created. He brings it about. He orders the universe. He is the One who separates and discriminates. He decides what His creation will be called. God is the Sovereign over all things; He is unrivalled and supreme.

The Bible describes attributes that are His alone:

- He is Omnipotent. i.e. He is all-powerful. Here in Genesis 1 He creates out of nothing with a simple command.
- He is Omnipresent: His is not confined to one place. He is everywhere. No place is out of His reach.
- He is Omniscient: He sees everything and knows everything. All truth, all reality, all wisdom and knowledge can be traced back to Him.

He is the One and Only *transcendent* God. His power extends beyond all our earthly limitations. He is above and beyond our limited understanding. He is not dependent for His existence on anyone. Yet, though He is transcendent He is involved with the universe and the world of men and women. This One Almighty God, who is the Sovereign Lord over everything, is also called the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

What an Almighty God! Is He not worthy of our worship? But where do we find words that are adequate.? Some of the great hymns come as close as we can get. I love this one written by Walter Chalmers Smith around 1876.

*Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes
Most blessed, most glorious, the ancient of days,
Almighty, victorious, Thy great name we praise.*

2. God is Personal.

In the beginning, God. Peter Lewis writes, again: "*Here is the revelation of a truth that touches every other truth. Here we are told that the secret of the universe is not a formula but a person.*" And because God is a Person He has a Name. In the ancient Near East a person's name said something about their character or their attributes. He is "El" or "Elohim" – GOD. He is "Elyon" – GOD MOST HIGH. He is "Adonai" – LORD. He is "El Shaddai" – "GOD ALMIGHTY." He is "Yahweh" – "I AM WHAT I AM".

A generation has been brought up with 'Star Wars' philosophy. But in the Bible God is not a "force" or an "it" or an idea. He is a Person. One of the most frequent titles of God in the Bible is "Father". Human qualities are deliberately used to convey that God is personal. He thinks and speaks and sees and decides and discriminates and takes pleasure. This is what we know as *personality*.

Because God is personal He wants to know *you*. He made *you* with a capacity for a relationship with Himself. This is difficult to get our heads around. The One and Only Almighty God wants to know you and me. In fact that is why He created us. Augustine put it like this: "*Thou hast created us for Thyself, and our heart knows no rest, until it rests in Thee.*" This is why in every generation, every culture and every civilization - whether primitive or sophisticated, men and women reach out for God in one way or other. Their reaching out is like blind groping because sin has blinded us and separated us from God – but the longing is still there.

But lest we think God has created us because He is lonely we need to say something else.

3. God is One and a Plurality.

Although God has been the One and Only from eternity, He has not been alone in eternity in His Oneness. **In the beginning, God.** Here we have the ordinary Semitic word for God, and yet when it is used of the God of the Bible it is always *plural* in form. Not 'El' but 'Elohim'. But the noun, though plural is always linked with a *singular verb* to show that Only One God is meant.

In the light of this Genesis 1 v26 is fascinating. "*Let us make man in our image, in our likeness.*" Plural again! Is this significant? Jewish commentators generally interpret this as God addressing His heavenly court, drawing the angels' attention to His master stroke of creation. Others suggest that this is God talking to Himself. i.e. this is plural of self-deliberation, or perhaps a plural of majesty, like the use of "*we*" when our Queen speaks.

But there is another possibility. Is this a brief glimpse of a mysterious plurality within the Godhead? Early Christian exegetes understood this as a reference to God the Father addressing God the Son, especially in the light of John 1v1ff: "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the*

Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made." This is the same "Word" who *"became flesh and dwelt among us"*, (John 1v14) Jesus. The primary emphasis of the Old Testament Scriptures is that God is One. But the New Testament gives us further light; this One God is revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

So even here, in the first words of Genesis, we catch a glimpse of something breathtaking. There always has been love, communication, co-operation, unity and diversity in God Himself. He did not create angelic hosts or humanity because he was a lonely God, as if He needed His creation to make up for some lack in Himself. There was no lack in God, not even lack of relationship.

4. God is Creator.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Creativity is at the very heart of God's nature. David Pawson says *"What an imagination he must have! What an artist! Six thousand varieties of beetle. No two blades of grass the same. No two snowflakes. No two clouds. No two grains of sand. No two stars. An astonishing variety, yet harmony."*

There's a daytime television programme called "Through the Keyhole" where you work out from the clues whose home you are spying on. Well, look at the clues all around you in creation; ask yourself *"Whose world is this?"* Creation demonstrates that this is God's world and God's universe. Psalm 19v1: *"The heavens declare the glory of God."* Romans 1v19f: *"since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse."*

John Piper writes: *"The message of creation is this: there is a great God of glory and power and generosity behind all this awesome universe. What is this universe but the lavish demonstration of the incredible, incomparable, unimaginable, exuberance and wisdom and power and greatness of God! What a God he must be! God means for us to be stunned and awed by his work in creation. But not for its own sake. He means for us to look at his creation and say: If the mere work of his fingers is so full of wisdom and power and grandeur and majesty and beauty, what must this God be like in himself?"* ('The Pleasures of God.' Multnomah. 1991)

We can thank God that in Jesus He has revealed what God is like in Himself. *"In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word."* (Hebrews 1v1-3) **In the beginning, God.** There is a great Heart at the centre of the universe, not a great hole.

John Wilthew. October 2006.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION.

IN THE BEGINNING, GOD.

Read Genesis 1v1-5.

1. Is there any aspect of God's essential nature which especially made an impact on you from the teaching on Sunday?
2. Behind everything we can say about God is the fact that He is a Self-Disclosing God. i.e. we would not know the first thing about Him if He had not first revealed Himself. How did *you* first become aware of God?
3. What helps you to sense something of God's Almighty Majestic Glory? (It might be a particular doctrine or concept; something you can see or experience it might be a great hymn or a passage of Scripture etc.)
4. How can we make more of the Bible's teaching about God to stir ourselves to wonder love and praise?

