26 May 2019: Choral Matins
The Fifth Sunday after Easter
Psalm 149, Genesis 1:26-end, Colossians 3:1–11
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‘And it was so.’

In nomine…

In this morning’s first reading we heard once again the story of the creation of humankind from the end of the first chapter of the book Genesis. It’s a famous and much-loved passage. One of the reasons for its fame is of course that it’s self-evidently the most accessible bit of the scriptures – even a real bibliophile can surely make it through the first couple of pages of the average Bible! But, more seriously, this opening chapter is beloved because of the wonderful godly order it sets forth. That godly order is there in what is described – the stately and methodical bringing into being of the world and all that is in it – but, equally important, it’s there in the substance of the words themselves: their rhythm, their pace, their grammar. This text is a litany and, like all litanies from the Book of Common Prayer to the Shipping Forecast, its recitation is in itself an act of blessing. The repetitions are not superfluous; they are of the essence: ‘And God said’, ‘Let there be…’, ‘And there was evening and there was morning…’, ‘and God saw that it was good’. This is a poetic text in the fullest sense of the word: a poem about God’s primal act of poetry: the poiesis, the making, of the world out of nothing.

But of all the repeated phrases of Genesis 1, perhaps the most compelling is the brief four-word phrase I began with: ‘And it was so’.

‘And it was so’. How often in your lived experience have you been able to say – or even think – that? A couple of examples may help.

• ‘James, go and clean your teeth’, I say to my eight-year-old son as we dash around the house in the weekday morning rush. Five minutes later I check to see if it was so. Was it? I think not!
• Or, touched once again by the daily blessing of morning prayer in the Latin Chapel here, I say to myself that the serenity it imparts will colour every encounter throughout the coming day. Is it so? I fear not – it doesn’t take long for a speeding cyclist or an unwelcome email to intervene.

These are trivial examples, but I take it as almost axiomatic that the human condition is one in which we cannot expect to say ‘and it was so’. Occasionally in moments of grace, we glimpse a little of that divine facility which has only to speak for it to be so, but in general our experience is one of the recalcitrance of self and world: their refusal to conform to the wondrous pattern of order that the first chapter of Genesis depicts. It is because of this that the opening verses of the Bible with their vision of the world before the fall have such spell-binding power over us. *Fiat lux*, ‘Let there be light’, says God, and it was so. ‘Let us make humankind in our image’, says God, and it was so. ‘Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive’ – in that pre-lapsarian world when our human forebears shared, however fleetingly, in the divine unity of will and act.

That sense of a world lost to us is one that lives powerfully in most human hearts. Sometimes we locate what is lost in the days of early childhood – as did Wordsworth or Henry Vaughan; sometimes in an unrecoverable person or place, as did Hopkins in ‘Binsey Poplars’:

> My aspens dear, whose airy cages quelled,
> Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun,
> All felled, felled, are all felled;

Whatever its object, what animates this nostalgia is the gap between what we can imagine and what we can attain. ‘How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?’, says the psalmist (137); and the strange land is not just captivity in Babylon, but the banishment of the human race from Eden.

But this mode of pleasant but impotent nostalgia is not where our Christian faith leaves us. The imperative ‘let there be’ and the acknowledgement ‘and it was so’ are unattainable for us now, but the Christian faith teaches us that it is in fact a blessing that this is so. Our calling as Christians is not to command and behold: instead our vocation is to exercise dominion not by lordship, but by service, guiding, shaping, governing in the pursuit of mutual flourishing.

*Fiat lux*, says God, let there be light. But there is another biblical *fiat*, Mary’s response to the angel Gabriel at the Annunciation. *Fiat mihi*, says Mary, *fiat mihi secundum voluntam*
tuam, ‘Be it unto me according to thy word’. Mary’s fiat is not an imperative command; but nor is it exactly passive. Her words are not words of submission to God’s will, so much as its active, trusting embrace. To say ‘Let it be with me according to thy word’ is to take the boldest of steps a human being can take: an invitation to God to dwell with us, a human response to God’s initiative that is an initiative in itself: the fullest illustration we have of the grace of God at work, freeing humanity to be itself. Hearing Mary’s words and taking them as our model, we come as close as we ever shall do to knowing the satisfaction of God’s utterance ‘and it was so’.

‘O sing unto the Lord a new song’, says the psalmist in today’s psalm, and the theme is picked up again in our second lesson from Colossians: ‘…you have stripped off the old self… and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.

The newness here is not novelty – the latest I-Phone or the restless desire to re-invent self and world. It is simply the discovery of that ‘dearest freshness deep down things’, of which Hopkins, in more hopeful mood, wrote.

The allure of Genesis chapter I is very great, but it is to be resisted – and strenuously. God does not call us to the backward glance – remember Lot’s wife – but to new creation. Nostalgia lures us back to the comforts of a world without resistance where to will was to do, but that world is not recoverable. Christian hope draws us forward, letting us glimpse what as yet still transcends us. It has its source in the resurrection of Christ, a resurrection that has become ours too in our baptism, but which we shall finally embrace only at the coming of Christ with his saints.

When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

So it is not with those marvellous six days of creation that we are left, nor even with their coping stone, the seventh day of Sabbath rest. The Christian holy day is the eighth day, which is also the first day, the day that is ever new, in which we rejoice with a hope that exceeds all words and demands a language whose meaning we can barely sense. Alleluia, Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia. To which we reply not with words of satisfied completion: ‘and it was so’, but with a single word that invites and expects: Amen. Let it be so.

In nomine…