

In the beginning, God

*Just remember that you're standing on a planet that's evolving
And revolving at 900 miles an hour.
It's orbiting at 19 miles a second, so it's reckoned,
The sun that is the source of all our power.
Now the sun, and you and me, and all the stars that we can see,
Are moving at a million miles a day,
In the outer spiral arm, at 40,000 miles an hour,
Of a galaxy we call the Milky Way.*

That's the opening verse of the 'Galaxy Song' by Monty Python. The song is full of numbers about the universe: beyond the first verse it tells us there are a hundred billion stars in our galaxy, and our galaxy is one of millions of billions in the amazing and expanding universe.

As we go through our lives, it's easy to lose sight of how amazing and how large the universe is. Even if we know the numbers and the distances, we don't have experience of them. Douglas Adams famously wrote "Space is big. You just won't believe how vastly, hugely, mind-bogglingly big it is. I mean, you may think it's a long way down the road to the chemist's, but that's just peanuts to space."

The recent Artemis mission around the moon took humans further from earth than they'd ever been before – more than 400,000 kilometres. Which is not even 1% of the distance from Earth to Mars. Yes, space is indeed big.

Measured against the vastness of the universe, earth seems insignificant. And it would seem that we are even less significant. What do we matter?

It was with some trepidation that I turned to the first chapter of the book of Genesis for today's service, because the first chapters of Genesis bring with them some baggage: The supposed conflict between science and religion, the interpretation of the seven days of creation, the problems between the statements – such as there was evening and morning on the first day, but the sun not appearing in the sky until the fourth day and so on.

It seems whenever people read the opening of Genesis, they come up with more concerns and more questions. I guess the biggest question 'is where did everything come from?' Or perhaps, 'why are we here?'

I heard a story of a theology class which was going to work through the whole bible, and the lecturer stood up on day one, and said "Alright, everyone, open your bibles to Exodus chapter one.' One of the students approached the lecturer afterward and asked why they weren't starting with Genesis – and the lecturer responded that the class was new and didn't know each other yet, and it was always best to wait until everyone was friends before you opened the book of Genesis.

So, I trust we're all friends here, as we turn to Genesis 1 verse 1, which starts, "In the beginning God". That phrase sets up everything that's to come – before the universe, before time, before anything else and before everything else, there was God.

Psalm 90, a psalm prayed Moses explains it as 'Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the whole world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.'

The scriptures repeatedly make it clear that God has always existed and God will always exist.

God is eternal.

And if we have problems grasping the vastness of space, well, all that vastness just disappears into eternity.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The word 'created' is a translation of the Hebrew 'bara' which has a meaning beyond simply 'made'... it is created out of nothing or brought into being.

Everything that people create is made from things that already exist... whether it's a cake or a house. Things are brought together and assembled in a particular way, in order for the new thing to be made. Things are always made from up of materials that already exist.

But God created everything out of nothing. God created by speaking them into existence. And God was present in what was created: Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

So if we come to the question 'why are we here?' or 'where did everything come from?' the answer is simply God

Everything comes from God, by God, in a wonderful, comprehensive, systematic way and Genesis 1 sets it all out in an engaging, poetic way.

The account of each day tells us what was created, what God called the creation, and ends with the phrase 'And there was evening, and there was morning.' So there's a rhythm to it – evening, morning, and of course the morning leads into a new day.

Day one gives us light and dark, and then three days later, day four gives us the stars and the moon and the sun.

Day two gives us the sky separated from the waters, and three days later, we have the birds of the air and the creatures of the sea.

Day three gives us the land separated from the waters, and the plants of the land, and then three days later, the animals of the land.

Added to the rhythm of creation from day three when the land appeared we have the phrase 'And God saw that it was good'. We are told that the land, the plants, the lights of the sky, the birds, the fish and the animals were all good.

The timescale of creation and the order of creation presented in these opening verses of Genesis may not match modern, enlightened, scientific understanding of how things came about, but I don't think it's how it's intended. It's not a scientific textbook, it's not history – if anything, it's prehistory – it is instead the beginning of the story of God and God's people.

And it's people that come into the story next: verse 26, which began our second reading, "Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.""

So in these verses, the story of the creation of living things continues – we've had plants, fish, birds and animals, and now we get to mankind – people. And clearly people are special, they have a special place in creation and they are created in a special way. "Let us make mankind in our image"

Firstly, we have to wonder who is the 'us' that God is speaking about? Isn't there only one God? Well, the "us" points us to special understanding of who God is, and what God's nature is. As we read the scriptures we find out more and more about God. And we come to know that there is one God, but there are three distinct Persons within the Godhead, who we encounter in the scriptures as Father, Son and Holy Spirit – the Trinity. To go back to the original Hebrew of the text, the word 'Elohim' which is used for God here, is a plural word.

So, in terms of things that are hard for us to understand, Genesis 1 covers an awful lot: Eternity. The vastness of creation and the nature of God. And now, we're told that we're created in the image of God... how does that work? We all look different, don't we? Aren't we all individuals?

Clearly, there's something about humans that's different from the fish, the birds and the animals. Yes, people were created on the same 'day' as the animals... but no other creatures were created in God's image – and no other creatures were given authority like the people were: "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

It's powerful stuff. God created the earth and all that is in it, and then God effectively gave it to people... subdue it and rule over all the creatures in it.

Genesis 1 ends with the completion of creation, the order of all things: the sea, the sky, the land, the plants, the fish, the birds, the animals are in place, and people to look after them. Everything is right at the end of the sixth day. Again, we heard that God saw all

that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning – the sixth day.”

The second chapter begins by telling us “^{2:1} Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.” We are reminded of the scope of creation, the account is centred on earth, of course, but creation isn’t just earth.

Things were good. We’ve been told that through the various steps. And although things did change – which happens in the next chapter – we can still appreciate the goodness of so much of creation. The vastness, the intricacy, the interconnectedness and of course the beauty – and that tells us about the creator. How do you tell if a builder is a good builder? Well, you look at the houses they’ve built. How do we know Stradivari was a good maker of violins? Look at the violins he made (or better still, listen to them).

Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, “For 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” (Romans 1:20).

And then our attention turns from the created to the creator:

² By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work.

The work of creation had been done. The universe, the world and everything in it was complete. And it was good. And God rested.

From these first verses we learn that God is eternal, God is creative and powerful, God is in community and God is good.

On the seventh day, the pattern of the earlier days is broken – there is no ‘And there was evening, and there was morning – the seventh day.’ Instead, we have ‘Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.’

The other things of creation had been called ‘good’ but this seventh day we are told is blessed and made holy.

So what are we to take from the creation account here in the 21st century?

Well, it does remind us of God’s eternal nature and God’s creative power, but it also tells us about God’s plan, about how God intended things to be – and God intended things to be good – the land, the plants, the lights of the sky, the birds, the fish and the animals were all good... and so were people – particularly people, because they – we – were given a special place in creation.

But we know – from the scriptures, from history, and from our own experiences – that things aren’t good – they aren’t as God intended them to be. There are glimpses of God’s intended good creation all around us – and, yes, we should rejoice in them, but there is so much wrong, and we see it all the time.

God, though, is good and faithful to his creation. Even as things began to go wrong in creation, God was working to put things right – through the ancestors, through judges, through kings, through prophets. Time and time again throughout the Old Testament accounts, we see people straying from God, but then being brought back to God.

It wouldn't be until the events of two thousand years ago, when God the Son himself arrived in history. In Jesus, we see God – the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation, as Paul says in his letter to the Colossians (1:15). And it is in Jesus, and only in Jesus, that there is a way for people to be restored to God – to be part of the creation that God intended it to be.

In the meantime, as we wait for the ultimate completion of God's plan, we should work to be the people that God intended us to be, doing what God intended us to do: fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature... to be, as we often say, not destroyers or exploiters of creation, but stewards of it.

But let's also remember the seventh day, the day of rest, the day that God blessed. Let us take that day of rest – whatever particular day or time that may be for us – and let us be blessed in it too.

So, as we're standing on a planet that's evolving and revolving at 900 miles an hour, let's not think that we are insignificant, but rather that we are part of God's creation, and, in and through Jesus, all of creation will be restored, and it will be good.

Amen.