

‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’

Session 1: Creation

Text: **Genesis 1:1-6, 9-13, 24-28, 31 & 2:1**

Image: **‘God the Father’** Italian Florentine, about 1430-40 (formerly attributed to Massacio), NG3627

Reflection:

What does God look like? What, specifically, does God the Father look like? Is he a bearded Father Christmas type figure in the sky?

This image might give one cause to commend the Jewish tradition that forbids making images of Jahweh. For you could see this image as reinforcing the idea of God as a benevolent white man with a long beard. You may not find that a helpful image of God.

Whether you find this particular picture of God the Father difficult or not, we all face the problem that our image of God is affected by our image of our human parents, especially of our human fathers. This is so if you have known and been raised with your human father. It’s probably the case also if you’ve not known your father, or if your human father was not present through your upbringing.

I spent my entire childhood frightened of my father, who seemed a distant figure whose approval I could never quite win. For my first 20 years, this affected my view of God, and contributed to me becoming an atheist who rejected the idea of a loving God. But even now, after many years as a follower of Christ, and with a greatly improved relationship with my father, I am hampered in my image of God the Father by my images of my human father and mother. For each of us, to grasp the First Person of the Trinity as “God the Father,” there is the challenge to put aside and grow beyond the associations we have with that term – both the good and the bad ones – into a new and deeper understanding.

The Apostles’ Creed begins with the confession that: “We believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.” The first book of the Bible, Genesis, offers us two different creation narratives. The first, which we’ve heard some extracts from, focuses on God’s creation of the cosmos. The second one, which comes in Chapter 2, focusses more on God’s creation of human beings, whom we are told here are made “in God’s image”.

The emphasis in this first chapter of Genesis is on the huge diversity of God's good creation: plants and animals "of every kind" – a veritable "multitude". If, like my family, you're a fan of the BBC's nature programmes, you'll recognise how extraordinary the diversity and range of this creation is. And this diverse creation, as Sam Wells puts it, "is good for its own sake, whether it relates to human flourishing or not."¹ This is one of the aspects of God the Father that our Florentine painter is trying to capture: the figure is depicted offering a blessing. God the Father is blessing his creation, and part of that blessing is in the great wonder of creation's diversity. And in the creative action, God is looking to be a blessing: as Rowan Williams expresses it, "we exist because of [God's] utterly unconditional generosity".²

A second aspect that our Florentine painter seeks to capture is one of scale. God the Father is much bigger than the whole of his creation. God is God; what God has created is not God. Creation bears the marks of God, and in our case we bear the image of God. But neither we nor the rest of creation are God. We are all creatures. God is the creator, of a different order to us and everything created. Further, "God would have been the same God if we had never been created."³ And in the relationship within the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – God is "sublimely and eternally happy to be God" – which means that God doesn't need us. Or as Sam puts it: "God is not in any sense dependent on the universe, but the universe is completely dependent on God."⁴ And, Williams adds, "the fact that this sublime eternal happiness overflows in the act of creation is itself a way of telling us that God is to be trusted absolutely, that God has no private agenda. ... The love that God shows, in creating us as much as in saving us, is completely free."⁵

So as Christians, when we say that, "We believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth," we are saying that we have confidence in, that we place our trust in, the God who has made all creation. We are recognising that "there is no being without God – no sphere of independent existence that operates outside relationship to the Trinity,"⁶ Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We are also acknowledging that God has no selfish purpose in creation, and that God creates out of the goodness of who God is, and as an act of blessing. And as we go on, we discover that we only begin to grasp what God looks like in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. And we come to recognise that although all of God, Father, Son and Spirit, is intimately involved in the acts of creation, not all of God can be seen in what God has created.

Reflection by Revd Dr Alastair McKay
Assistant Curate, St Martin-in-the-Fields

¹ Samuel Wells, *What Anglicans Believe*, p.23

² Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, p.12

³ Williams, p.12

⁴ Wells, p.22

⁵ Williams, p.13

⁶ Wells, p.24



‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’

Session 1: Creation

A closing prayer (for the end of the session):

Creator God, in whose hands are the depths of the earth, and the mountain heights;
whose hands have made the seas, and moulded the dry land also;

open our eyes to see the wonder of your creation afresh, to appreciate the generosity
of what you have made in its rich diversity;

and enable us to grasp more of what it means that we and all people are made in
your image.

We pray through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’

Session 2: Fall

Text: **Genesis 2:15-18, 2:21-23 & 25, & 3:4-13**

Image: **‘Adam and Eve’** Jan Gossaert (Jean Gossart), about 1520, L14 on loan from the Royal Collection, RCIN 407615

Reflection:

How comfortable are you talking about sin? Is ‘sin’ a word that you avoid, and are embarrassed by? Well, as one writer has pointed out, ‘abandoning the language of sin, will not make sin go away.’⁷

Genesis reminds us that, as part of God’s good creation, we were created good. Our bodies our good. I think this is part of what Jean Gossart captures in this painting. These are beautiful bodies, and he is celebrating every contour. But something is amiss. It’s hinted at by Adam, who’s trying to remove something distasteful from his mouth.

It’s hinted at in the half-eaten apple on the broken off branch, which Eve is trying to hide. It’s further suggested by the coy covering of the couples’ genitals. And further suggested in the couple’s position within the composition: they’re standing outside the garden, heading away from it. The serpent coiled above them completes the sense that something has gone wrong with the good world that God has created.

Our extract from Genesis is part of a story which is most helpful if read metaphorically rather than literally. The story articulates a fundamental reality of our earthly existence: we are part of God’s good creation. And as part of that good creation, we are created to live without shame and in full communion with God, fully reflecting God’s image and the likeness of God. The story illustrates how we are given abundance, represented by the whole garden, but see only scarcity, represented by the one forbidden tree. And it expresses how human beings have participated in a rebellion against God’s good order, a rebellion that shatters our interaction with God, with one another and with the planet, one that infects us with guilt and shame, that ushers in a dynamic of blaming others – and that brings death in all its forms.

⁷ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Speaking of Sin*, p.4

This rebellion may not be one for which you and I feel responsible. But, whether we like it or not, we cannot escape it, and we find ourselves party to it. At a personal level, one of the ways I've been most acutely aware of this has been through the experience of being a parent, along with my wife, to two children. My children are now both adults. But through the process of raising them, I've continually bumped up against my own shortcomings, my own incapacity to love fully, my own tendency to be unkind and to blame others. If you've had children then you'll probably have observed their propensity to be cruel to one another, and their tendency to hide things from their parents, out of shame – just as I remember hiding things from my own parents, whom I can find myself tempted to blame for my failings. And the blame game is one which we can find everyone in our families can enter into.

These destructive patterns are not just to be found at the interpersonal level. We see the fracture at a national and international level. We note the pattern of blaming refugees and migrants to our country for our economic problems, which surfaced during the last general election. We see the problem evident in the corporate cultures, such as that recently revealed at Volkswagen, which deceive customers for company gain. We observe the evidence in the global economic structures, which favour countries like the UK, at the expense of countries in Africa, for example. There is a systemic problem which the Bible talks about as 'sin' that creates a distance between us creatures and God our Creator; and it affects our relationships with one another and with the created world. It's a problem which goes well beyond our own individual 'sins' – those wilful human choices and actions we take which maintain that distance between each of us and God.

Hence in our regular liturgies, the language of the confession is plural not singular. We are confessing not just our own sins, but also our participation in the sin of the world. We admit our sins and in so doing we are taking the first step towards restoration. It is a confession, with Adam and with Eve, that 'I have eaten of the apple', without vainly trying to hide the apple behind our backs. It's a confession that recognises the bitter taste which in some measure now affects all our experience. It's a step towards the truth. But it is a step which hurts us to take. As Rowan Williams challenges us: Can any fallen human being face the prospect of confronting God's purity and light without shrinking?⁸ Like Adam and Eve, we are ashamed, and we want to hide.

There is good news to come. It's good news that we'll explore as we journey through this course. For God comes calling us, seeking us and beckoning a welcome to us. And God in Jesus takes the action to bridge the gulf that we've helped to create, taking the guilt and blame upon himself. But a first step for us is to recognise and admit the gulf, and to confess our participation in the harm which spoils God's good creation. And that participation is what Jean Gossart subtly depicts for us.

Reflection by Revd Dr Alastair McKay
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⁸ Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, p.148



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Session 2: Fall

A closing prayer (for the end of the session):

Great God, in your good design you made us to bear your image and to live in communion with you and all your creation;

help us to be honest about our participation in the sin which separates and spoils;
enable us to receive the forgiveness of our sins that you offer through your Son, Jesus;

and lead us to see ourselves and other people as fearfully and wonderfully made. We pray through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’

Session 3: Abraham and Isaac

Text: **Genesis 22:1-14**

Image: **‘Abraham and Isaac’ Johann Olivier, 1817, NG6541**

Reading of the text, Gen. 22:1-14, with five voices, to come first

Reflection:

A well-known female theologian told this story in an interview: “My dad is a vicar, and he used to do acted-out sermons. One Sunday he dragged me out to be Isaac to his Abraham, and I lay there on a table, this knife above me, and I’ve loathed the story ever since.”⁹ One does not need to have gone through such a disturbing experience in order to have some difficulties with this story of Abraham and Isaac. What is Abraham doing taking his only and beloved son out into the wilderness to sacrifice him? What sort of God would ask Abraham to do this? What must it have done to the relationship between Isaac and Abraham? Would Isaac ever be able fully to trust his father again?

It would’ve been possible for our painter, Johann Olivier, to zoom in on the moment where Abraham raises the knife above Isaac, ready to strike. Olivier might have tried to depict the anguish and horror on both faces. But he’s not chosen such a tragic, close up lens. Instead he’s opted for a wide-angled lens. In the centre we have Isaac loaded up with the wood for the sacrifice. He’s looking away from his father. Had he yet asked the question about where the sacrificial animal is coming from? We don’t know. Also in the centre is Abraham carrying the fire, and – barely visible – the knife. And he has a resolute and determined demeanour. Further down the valley are their servants, pointing up and wondering what’s going on. And all of them are set in a magnificent and broad landscape, with high peaks and rolling rivers.

This story comes at the climax of the journey of faith of Abraham, now a very old man. Many years previously he responded to God’s call for him to leave his homeland, and to travel where God directed him. He was given the promise by God that he’d be blessed with innumerable offspring; and that through those offspring God would bless the world. Abraham had wavered in his trust of God, most notably in deciding to father a child through his slave-girl Hagar, in order to try to bring about what God had promised. Then finally he saw God fulfil his promise and grant him and Sarah a child in the shape of their only child, Isaac.

⁹ Paula Gooder in <http://www.reform-magazine.co.uk/2013/02/a-biblical-relationship/>

Whatever has happened to Abraham over the years, we see from today's story that Abraham has developed a total trust in God. He responds promptly to God's call, and to the command to sacrifice his son. He must be confused and wondering what God is playing at; but he rises early to obey. And then on the journey he's asked the heart-stopping question by his son Isaac. "Where is the lamb for the burnt-offering." And he responds with the deepest words of faith: "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son." At this point Abraham doesn't know how God will do this. But he knows at a deep level that all things come from and are dependent on God. And he trusts that God can still fulfil his promise. So if Isaac is to be the burnt-offering, Abraham knows that, however confusing and heart-breaking it may be, God is still to be trusted.

What does this story tell us about God? It's a powerful reminder that God is God, and not like us. It presents us with two contradictory windows into what God is like. The first window shows us God who tests, and who wants to know whether human beings trust God. This is the God who speaks at the beginning of this story, and then again towards the end through the angel. We can question all we like why God tests Abraham in this way, but our answers probably won't be adequate. For this first window shows us something of God's free and sovereign rule. Which means that God is not answerable to us: God doesn't owe us an explanation.

The second window shows us God who provides, who is the source of life and all that human beings need. This second window reveals something of the graciousness of God, of God's freely flowing love. This is what Abraham grasps by faith, and proclaims with the prophetic words: "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering." For what Abraham cannot fully grasp is a secret hidden until the coming of Jesus. And in Jesus we find the final fulfilment of Abraham's words. In Jesus we discover that whatever God's purpose was in testing father Abraham in this way, God the Father's intention was always to provide in the most costly way, by not withholding his only Son, by giving Jesus as the offering to redeem and save human beings. So it turns out that it's God who undergoes the ultimate testing in the crucifixion of Jesus. And who, in the resurrection of Jesus, offers the ultimate provision of new life.

Although it's only hinted at, for me, this is what I see the painter Olivier pointing us to in his wide-angled painting: he offers us a reminder of the need to pay attention to the bigger, wider story of God's loving purposes beyond the immediately painful story of Abraham and Isaac.

*Reflection by Revd Dr Alastair McKay
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Session 3: Abraham and Isaac

A closing prayer (for the end of the session):

Sovereign and Gracious God, who has provided the ultimate sacrificial lamb in your Son Jesus, in order that we might be set free to live in your love for eternity;
grant us the strength to face the testing of our trust and faith in you, in the knowledge that you will provide all that we need to respond to your call, in hope and joy.

We pray through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’

Session 4: Moses and the Law

Text: **Exodus 32:11-20**

Image: **‘The Worship of the Egyptian Bull God, Apis’**, Follower of Filippino Lippi, about 1500, NG4905

Reflection:

Filippino Lippi was among the most gifted and accomplished Florentine painters and draughtsmen of the second half of the fifteenth century. The National Gallery has a pair of paintings which may have been designed by Filippino Lippi, although they were probably painted by a pupil. It’s likely that the paintings were made to decorate a private house. They form a most unusual pairing.

The painting *Moses brings forth Water from a Rock* depicts an incident from the Exodus. After Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt they lacked water and were murmuring against him. At God’s command Moses struck a rock with his rod and water flowed forth. However, as a result of the way in which he did so, Moses was barred by God from entering the Promised Land. One possible explanation for this outcome is that, in performing this miracle without giving credit to God, Moses acted as though he was an Egyptian magician rather than a prophet of God.

That image, based on a Biblical story, is paired with the one we are now looking at which is titled *The Worship of the Egyptian Bull God, Apis*. This depicts the Egyptian bull-god Apis, with the crescent moon on his shoulder, rising into the air, having come up from a river. And in the foreground are the Egyptians – or perhaps the Israelites – dancing around him with music and chanting. There is a tradition that the golden calf of the Israelites was an image of Apis, so it seems likely that the painter is here alluding to the Israelites’ worship of the golden calf.

The unusual pairing of these two images would therefore seem to relate to an issue that is central to the giving of the Law to Moses and the Israelites: the command to have no other gods but God. Or, in other words, to the development of monotheism. Throughout the Exodus the people of Israel face the temptation to return to Egypt. Ultimately this is the temptation to return to the polytheism of Egyptian religion.

This is explicit in the Biblical story, when Moses was absent on Mount Sinai, and the people said to Aaron, “Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us.” Aaron then takes their gold, forms it in a mould and casts an image of a calf. The people then say, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!”

The pluralism of their request and their worship around the golden calf is in deliberate contrast to the commandments given to Moses which begin by stating: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.”

Similarly, the summary of the Law – “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” (Deuteronomy 6:5) – makes the love of God central to faith. Everything else flows or follows on from this central commitment. As the Israelites struggle with the privations of the Exodus and the challenges of entry to the Promised Land, the temptation to return to Egypt, and to its many gods, remains strong. So there’s a debate going on in these pictures, which derives from the Old Testament itself, about the extent to which Israel will commit to the one true God.

Following Moses’s death, Joshua became his successor. Perhaps through reflection on Moses’s experience, it became paramount to Joshua that this issue needed to be resolved. So towards the end of his life, Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel together. He said to them: “Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” (Joshua 24:14-15).

This isn’t just a choice facing the ancient Israelites. As the commentator Sam Norton writes: ‘Everyone has a hierarchy of values – the truth is that everyone worships something. It’s impossible to be human and not have a sense of some things being more important than others, and everyone builds their life around something. Now it could be that they build their life around various things, like polytheism, but everyone has a sense of what’s important. This is the sense in which it’s true that everyone has a religion, and some religions are not as helpful, as holy as others. To quote Bob Dylan, “You’ve gotta serve somebody.”’

Norton continues: ‘Monolatry is when you worship one thing, that is, give highest value to it, and that one thing then becomes the most important thing in your world and everything else has to shift around it. You might be an absolutely dedicated football fan and you have to go to every match that your team plays. You might be obsessive about a television serial and insist on watching every episode no matter what else is happening. Once you have grasped what this is, you can see it everywhere. The golden calf is a wonderful image for this. For most people, it’s not as clear and you have polytheism, many gods. It might be: my family has this much importance, my work has this much importance, my friendships have this much importance, my pleasures in life have this much importance, and there is nothing beyond them. This is where most people actually live, navigating between different competing interests, muddling along. But there is nothing which integrates them: there is nothing which puts them all in their proper place and actually allows them to flourish fully, to be fully human.’

Norton concludes: 'If you worship the living God, you gain life, life in all its fullness. This is what Jesus came to grant us. To reveal the living God and to give us that life, life in abundance, which is God's intention for us. However, if you worship any other God, you will get what those gods can provide, and they will take your life in exchange; they will destroy life. It is only the living God who grants life, that is why the first and greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength.'¹⁰

*Reflection by Revd Jonathan Evens
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¹⁰ Sam Norton, *Let us be Human: Christianity for a Collapsing Culture* (Xlibris, 2012)



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Session 4: Moses and the Law

A closing prayer (for the end of the session):

Lord God, cause us to revere you so that we might be blessed and restored to you, and ultimately that we might resemble you.

Give us eyes to see and ears to hear your truth; give us understanding to know your truth; and help us to abide fully in him who is true, your Son Jesus Christ.

Give us grace to guard ourselves from idols. And be with us to this end, for your glory.

In Christ’s name we pray, Amen.

‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’

Session 5: The Exile / The Psalms

Text: **Psalms 137**

Image: **‘Beach Scene’**, Gustave Courbet, 1874, NG 6396

Reflection:

Gustave Courbet was an influential and prolific painter who, along with Honore Daumier and Jean Francois Millet, founded the 19th century art movement called Realism. Courbet portrayed peasants and labourers which underpinned his realism and motivated his strong political views. He played a prominent role in the Paris Commune in 1871, when the working class of Paris drove the French ruling class out of Paris. The Paris Commune was the council elected to run Paris after the old rulers left. They did so from March 18 to May 28, 1871. In 1873, following imprisonment for his political activities during the Paris Commune, Courbet went into exile at La Tour-de-Peilz beside Lac Léman (Lake Geneva). This picture probably belongs to a group of views of Lac Léman painted in 1874.

This desolate beach scene seems resonant with the artist’s own solitude and sense of absence and loss. During his exile, the State seized his property, and put his friends and family under surveillance. In spite of the welcome he received in Switzerland, Courbet fell into decline drinking heavily, and only rarely producing works worthy of his talent. Problems with money and legal proceedings became an obsession. He died on 31st December 1877 at Tour-de-Peilz, after the contents of his Paris studio had been dispersed at a public sale.

In Psalm 137 we hear a similar sense of desolation expressed, combined with a thirst for revenge. The Israelite Exile had several phases. In 721 BC the Assyrians conquered the Northern Israelite kingdom. Assyrian policy was to stamp out national identities by mixing up populations. Therefore the 10 tribes of that Kingdom disappeared. The Southern kingdom, Judah, was not conquered until 587. By this time the dominant power was Babylon, whose policy was deportation. So, when Jerusalem was captured, the leading citizens were taken to Babylon. Then, in 587, Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed and all but the poorest were taken.

Walter Brueggemann writes that “Jerusalem was burned and its temple destroyed, the king was exiled, the leading citizens were deported and public life ended. For ancient Israel, it was the end of privilege, certitude, domination, viable public institutions and a sustaining social fabric. It was the end of life with God, which Israel had taken for granted.

In that wrenching time, ancient Israel faced the temptation of denial—the pretence that there had been no loss—and it faced the temptation of despair—the inability to see any way out.”¹¹ This was a crisis of faith, not simply defeat in war and separation from homeland, but the loss of every reference point that explained who they were as a people and the failure of their God to protect them. They had believed they were a people chosen out of all the nations to be in a special relationship with the one true God who created, sustained and controlled the cosmos. This testimony developed as God made covenants about their land, city, and kings. All were lost and this normative testimony was fundamentally threatened.

The Exile was a crisis to which the Israelites responded initially with grief and anger, as in Psalm 137. But, as Exile continued, they reacted, or were asked by God to react, in terms of reflection and reinterpretation. David Sceats has noted that “all the evidence points to the fact that the Old Testament came into existence in substantially its present form in and immediately after this period of defeat, exile and religious disintegration.”¹² The purpose of both collating and organising older material, and of writing new material, was reflection. Those who put together the Old Testament in this way were reflecting on Israel’s past to “remind the nation of its identity, to help it understand its place in God’s purposes, and its responsibility as the covenant people, and, above all, to remember the universal claims of Yahweh, and his authority over all nations, including Babylon.” Sceats argues that the act of reflection undertaken by the Israelites was also about reinterpretation. God was, through the exile, revealing himself in a new way and therefore, in organising the religious literature of Israel, it was also necessary to reinterpret that literature “in such a way as to make religious sense of the crisis of faith it had gone through.”

As Western Christians in the twenty-first century, we have faced a crisis of exilic proportions. An increasing process of secularization has occurred within the West with Christianity being dethroned from the dominant position that it held at the end of the Medieval period. From the Reformation through the Enlightenment to Modernism, Christendom came under increasing threat and has now been gradually dismantled. Enlightenment thinking questioned the historical validity of central Christian doctrines, developed alternative ‘scientifically verifiable’ means of explaining the origins of species, positioned Government as the central means of meeting social/welfare needs, and created a consumer culture of aspiration and progress. The result is that for many in the West “God is dead”, “Man has come of age” and Christianity is dead in the water.

Instead of responding to exile as did Courbet or the writer of Psalm 137, the theologians of the exile can help us in hearing and responding to the call of God in our day and time. Their pattern of reflection and re-interpretation based on the tradition gives a biblical means of reviving our roots and re-claiming our disputed lineage. We need to dream up what Church is and can be for future generations all over again.

¹¹ Walter Bruggemann, ‘Conversations Among Exiles’, *The Christian Century*, July 2-9, 1997, pp. 630-632 - <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=26>

¹² David Sceats, unpublished course notes, North Thames Ministerial Training Course

We should not expect to have all the answers to hand but should engage in a re-examination of our roots in order to imagine our future on a scale that is at least equal to that of the theologians of the exile. Our God is a God of new beginnings, of fresh starts. He is the resurrection God and, therefore, the one who gives hope that we can rise from the ruins.

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‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’

Session 5: The Exile / The Psalms

A closing prayer (for the end of the session):

God of all times and all places, as we gather this day, remind us of the many who are in exile, living in temporary shelters as a result of war, poverty or extremes of weather. Be with all those who have been in exile for long years, those who are trying to make a life and care for their children, planting gardens and seeds of hope and survival in refugee camps with scarce resources.

For all those without the comfort and safety of home, give rest and respite, courage and comfort. For all who are afraid and wonder if their exile will ever end, grant the peace that passes understanding. Encourage hope in those longing for healing and home, through our songs of praise recounting your promises, your provisions, and your power. Amen.

‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’

Session 6: The Prophets

Text: 1 Kings 19:1-18

Image: ‘Landscape with Elijah and the Angel’ Gaspard Dughet, about 1663, NG1159

A note on the artist:

Born in 1615, Gaspard Dughet was born and lived in Rome, the son of a French pastry-cook and an Italian mother. He’s often been considered as a French painter, although he never visited France. In around 1635, aged 20, he became a pupil of the leading French painter, Nicolas Poussin, who had married Dughet’s sister Anne five years earlier. Dughet specialised in painting landscapes of the Roman ‘campagna’ or countryside, becoming one of the two leading landscape painters of his time.

Dughet’s primary interest was in painting landscape. Thus many of his paintings are titled, ‘Landscape with ...’. This interest was so focussed that the human figures of some of his works are painted by other painters, such as those in his ‘Landscape with the Union of Dido and Aeneas’, which has some similarities to this painting. This painting of ‘Landscape with Elijah and the Angel’ dates from about 1663, late on in Dughet’s career. He died in 1675.

Reflection:

The encounter that Elijah has with God here, has deliberate echoes of Moses’ encounter with God on the same mountain. In Exodus 33:12-23 we read that Moses is put in a cleft of the rock, and covered by God until he has passed by, because God said, “you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live”. As God’s glory passes by, Moses bows down in worship.¹³ Moses is Israel’s prime example of a prophet, of one who calls the Israelites to put their trust only in Yahweh. Elijah is following in Moses’ footsteps, seeking, in his own day, to shape Israel into a distinctive community that faithfully worships Yahweh, when the pressures around them are to worship other gods, and to obey political forces which contradict Yahweh’s ways.

Just prior to our reading in 1 Kings 19, Elijah has overseen a victory over the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel, where Elijah’s sacrifice is consumed with fire, after the failure of the prophets Baal to call down fire on their sacrifice. Elijah then leads the people in killing these hundreds of false prophets. He next goes on to intercede with God for the end of the three year drought, and his prayer is heard, and the rains return. King Ahab reports these events to his queen, Jezebel, who has been advocating the worship of Baal; and she, who is clearly the power behind the throne, is determined to kill Elijah in revenge for the killing of the prophets of Baal. And her threat hangs over this story.

¹³ See also the theophany in Exodus 19:16-25 with the thunder and lightning and a thick cloud; when Sinai is wrapped in smoke, and the whole mountain shakes violently.

Under the real threat of death from the rulers of Israel, Elijah flees to the wilderness and falls into a pit of self-pitying despair. Being a prophet, one who speaks up for God, being one who responds to God's call, can feel lonely. This may be especially true for those who are incredibly zealous for God, as Elijah was: but a danger is that one ends up inflating one's own significance, as Elijah does: "I've been zealous for the Lord. The Israelites have forsaken you. I alone am left," he bewails.

The movement of the story is from Elijah being frightened and despairing, indeed wanting to die. But by the end he has moved to being ready to carry on, and to calling Elisha to follow him in the prophetic task, which is recounted in the next section of the story (after verse 18).

There are two transformative events that move Elijah from fear to resolution. First, he is cared for and fed by an angel, a messenger from God, while in the wilderness. Second, he is addressed by a voice, after a bewildering and overwhelming encounter with the elements, and with the otherness of God. He encounters God in what our translators call "a sound of sheer silence", and earlier translators called "a still small voice", or as one contemporary commentator puts it, "a voice of a light whisper".

This story of Elijah provides a reminder that God sustains his people in the wilderness. God doesn't abandon us when we feel all at sea, but God provides the sustenance we need, through unexpected messengers. And it also reminds us that God keeps re-commissioning his people to proclaim the rule of love, over against the competing voices of our day; and that God will provide sufficient people for the task.

Dughet's painting, doesn't give any sense of the wilderness: this is a lush, fruitful, beautiful Italian landscape, populated with prosperous properties. The painting does however give a sense of the humanity of the messengers, the angels that God sends; and of our human smallness before the scope of God's creation, a smallness which Elijah expresses. (This is a massive painting significantly taller than a person.) There is also a sense that the distant mountains could be a place of encounter with the mystery of God, as they were for Elijah and Moses. However, Dughet's figure of God the Father floating in the clouds is somewhat comic and out of kilter with the figure of God portrayed in our narrative from 1 Kings 19.

For here God is revealed to us as one who sustains us in the wilderness; as one who sees us, as God sees Elijah, and asks us what we're doing here; God is revealed as one who listens to our complaint and despair, as God listened to Elijah; and as one who does not allow us as the people of God, to wallow in our despair, but who speaks to us, in quiet ways, calling us to action to proclaim the goodness of God's love; and as one who reassures us that our allies are more numerous than we can imagine, because God provides companions to show God's love, those who bend their knees not to Baal, but who bend the knee to Jesus. And perhaps most importantly God is revealed not as one remote and distant, up there in the sky, but as one who is close, and who whispers in our ear.

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‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’

Session 6: The Prophets

A closing prayer (for the end of the session):

Dear Lord and Father of mankind, forgive our foolish ways!
Re-clothe us in our rightful mind;
in purer lives thy service find, in deeper reverence, praise.
Drop thy still dews of quietness, ‘till all our strivings cease;
Take from our souls the strain and stress,
and let our ordered lives confess the beauty of thy peace.
Breathe through the heats of our desire thy coolness and thy balm;
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
Speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,
O still, small voice of calm.
We pray through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(Drawn from the poem, ‘The Brewing of Soma’ by John Greenleaf Whittier, as adapted by Garrett Horder in ‘Congregational Hymns’ 1884.)

‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’

Session 7: The Annunciation

Text: Luke 1:26-38

Image: ‘The Annunciation’ Fra Filippo Lippi, about 1450-3, NG666

A note on the artist and painting:

Born in about 1406, Filippo Lippi was orphaned as a child and was sent to the Carmelite friary in Florence. But he was not well suited to being a friar. His life is a tale of lawsuits, complaints, broken promises and scandal. His fame as a painter spread beyond his native Florence and he painted fresco cycles in the cities of Prato and Spoleto, where he died in 1469. In 1456, when he was 50, he abducted a nun, Lucrezia Buti, from the convent in Prato where he was chaplain. He was finally permitted to marry her. This over-door panel, together with the ‘Seven Saints’ by the same artist also in the National, was commissioned by the Medici family, the most powerful family in Florence, possibly to celebrate the birth of Lorenzo the Magnificent in 1449. The panel was sold by the Medici Palace owners in C19th.

Reflection:

It is worth remembering that this annunciation to Mary is the second annunciation which the gospel writer Luke gives an account of, the earlier one being the annunciation to Zechariah in the temple. The contrast between the two annunciations is striking, and serves to highlight some of the distinctive aspects of the annunciation to Mary.

Zechariah and Elizabeth are both mentioned by Luke as a coming from a priestly family, but nothing is said about Mary’s background; Mary has no inherited status. Zechariah is addressed in Jerusalem, the holy city of David; while Mary is addressed in Nazareth, a village with no reputation or history. So Luke is emphasising that Mary is from an ordinary family living in an ordinary place. We note that Filippo Lippi paints Mary as if she comes from a wealthy family, with splendid clothing and an expensive bed. This reflects that the painting is a commission for the wealthy Medici family, to adorn their expensive home. It’s beautiful; but it’s not faithful to Luke’s account.

Luke commends Zechariah and Elizabeth for their righteous and blameless life according to God’s holy law. But Luke says nothing about Mary’s righteousness. So we note that our painting uses a number of conventional symbols to point to Mary’s holiness and purity: the devotional book she is reading and white lilies nearby are intended as signs of her righteousness and purity.

However, the emphasis in Luke's text is rather on the unmerited nature of God's grace upon Mary. Hence Gabriel addresses her as "favoured one" and then, seeing her confusion, calls on her not to be afraid "for you have found favour with God". But she's done nothing intrinsically to deserve this favour.

The visit of Gabriel to Zechariah came in response to Zechariah and Elizabeth's fervent prayer for a child. The visit to Mary comes completely at God's initiative, and not as a result of Mary's prayers. The sending of Gabriel underscores that this is "a heavenly initiative in which God does not so much enter a story as make a story"¹⁴. Hence Gabriel announces what will happen: "you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus". This stresses the divine initiative that both creates the child and gives the child his name. Our painter tries to suggest something of the 'how' of the conception: there is the hand of God sending the dove of the Spirit; and then there is a little hole in Mary's dress where the dove might enter her womb. Again, it's worth noting the contrast with the gospel text, for "Luke does not narrate the conception, as he does not narrate the resurrection of Jesus. This mysterious action is hidden from the gaze of curious humans."¹⁵

Fra Filippo Lippi also draws attention to Mary's purity and virginity through the symbols of the walled garden, as well as the white lilies. In contrast, "Luke does not stress Mary's virginity to exalt her as one who is a pure and holy vessel and worthy to give birth to such a child. Rather, her virginity is presented as an obstacle to conception that can only be overcome by the miraculous, creative power of God."¹⁶ The birth of a child to Elizabeth and Zechariah is beyond human hope, given their age, but does reflect what God has done in the past in the Old Testament. The birth of a child to Mary, an unmarried virgin without a male partner is beyond human possibility.

As Sam Wells explains it, the doctrine of the virgin birth "maintains that Jesus was born of a union between the Virgin Mary and the Holy Spirit, and that neither Joseph nor any other man was involved in Jesus' conception. Hence the Chalcedonian Creed states that Jesus was 'begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, according to the Manhood'. This doctrine emphasizes that salvation is entirely God's initiative."¹⁷ It also helps address the fact that although Jesus was and is a single person, "within that single person lies both a divine and a human nature, which are not blended but remain distinct."¹⁸ Jesus is both fully man and fully God.

The promises that Gabriel gives about Jesus identify him as the awaited Messiah; but his miraculous conception reveals that "Jesus exceeds any previous understanding about the Messiah as the Son of God. He is to be divinely conceived, not simply divinely anointed."¹⁹

¹⁴ Coleridge *The Birth of the Lukan Narrative*, quoted in David Garland *Luke*, p.78

¹⁵ Garland, *Luke*, p.82

¹⁶ Garland, *Luke*, p.81

¹⁷ Samuel Wells, *What Anglicans Believe*, p.3

¹⁸ Wells, *What Anglicans Believe*, p.3

¹⁹ Garland, *Luke*, p.81

One of the aspects of this event most beautifully captured by Filippo Lippi is the idea that “God requires cooperation from humans to accomplish the divine plan.”²⁰ We see this in the respectful manner of the angel Gabriel, echoing the respectful posture of Mary conveying her response, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’ Yes, Mary will conceive, bear and name a child. But to do so, she must give her consent, and respond in faith. So Mary is an important reminder to us that God works through ordinary and faithful humans who trust God’s power to bring God’s promises to fulfilment, and who are willing to cooperate with God.

Finally, a closing reflection from Sam Wells: “the conception of Jesus – not specifically in Mary’s womb, but God’s decision never to be except to be for and with us in Christ – is the beginning of all creation, of all life, of all salvation, of everything that matters. Thus the creation itself was a kind of virgin birth because it was creation out of nothing, and it was brought about by the Holy Spirit. And the virgin birth was a new creation, or perhaps even the original creation because it too was brought about in some ways out of nothing, by the action of the Holy Spirit.”²¹

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²⁰ Garland, *Luke*, p.86

²¹ Wells, *What Anglicans Believe*, p.4



‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’

Session 7: The Annunciation

A closing prayer (for the end of the session):

Gracious God, whose word of grace came to Mary, a young woman from an ordinary family living in an ordinary place, and who called her to be part of your great plan; give us ears to listen for your call to us likewise to be part of your purposes, and grant that we, like Mary, might be able to respond, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’

We pray through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.