

E100 Week 1 In the beginning 9th Jan 2011
Readings 1-5 Genesis 1-3, 6-8, 11

This morning we are starting the essential 100 bible readings series. Hopefully most of you have either bought the book from Oasis with details of the 100 readings, or you have downloaded the planner from the E100 website or have kept last week's BITE which has all the readings, so that you are ready to do the first reading tomorrow.

We are going to follow option B, which is slightly less hard core than option A, it spreads the 100 readings out over a longer period, which means you get more of a chance to catch up if you miss a couple and it means we keep our AA at the end of the month separate from the E100 series.

So, the readings for next week are found in Genesis, chapters, 1 and 2, 3, 6 and 7, 8 and 9, and 11, covering the creation story, the fall, Noah and the flood and the tower of Babel. And these opening chapters of the whole bible reveal all the themes that run throughout the scriptures and have been described as the most important in the scriptures.

This morning, we will obviously not be able to go into much detail, as will be the case each week, we will be painting with broad brush strokes rather than examining the detail, but in doing so, I hope that what we will be able to do is whet our appetites so that we all go away and read the passages for ourselves in the following week.

So, what are some of the things that we will learn about as we read these opening chapters of the bible?

The first and most obvious is that God made the world. The opening verse in the bible says, "in the beginning God." The point the author of Genesis wants to make in these opening verses is that everything has its origin in God.

When Genesis was written, there were already lots of other creation stories in existence, and lots of gods were worshipped as the author of creation. In these opening chapters Yahweh reveals himself to be the one true author of creation.

And it is important to remember that the question that the creation story seeks to answer is who not how. In the beginning God. God is the author of creation.

If we try to answer the question "how" from these verses things get more complicated. And we don't have time this morning to go into 6 day creation v evolution and so on. You can do that in your own time of you wish, but whatever your view, the opening truth of the bible is that God made the world.

The second thing we can say is that when God made the world it was good. Time and again there is the refrain, God saw that it was good. God was pleased with what he created. And as we gaze at his creation, we can see why. It is pretty amazing.

I watched the top gear Christmas special over the holiday. If you missed it they retraced the journey of the wise men from Iraq to Bethlehem. And on a couple of

occasions they commented on how amazing the scenery was. Once in Iraq and then as they took a slight detour to visit the sea of Galilee I think, with the sun setting over the lake, they were all simply blown away by how beautiful it was. And these were three petrol heads who have no real interest in the environment - but they were overwhelmed by the wonder of God's creation.

And it is a shame that over the years Christians have not understood this truth. Over the years there have been those that have doubted its goodness and sought to be separate from it, the desert ascetics, going into the desert and sitting on a pole for fear of being tempted to sin. The Gnostics, who were not Christian but influenced Christian ideas, believed that creation was bad and sought to be free from it through becoming spirit. Both missing out on the wonder and splendor of God's creation.

And then there are those who have misunderstood God's command to care for the creation and seen our superiority over creation as justification for abusing it for our own ends. The command to subdue it and rule over it has been used to excuse environmental disaster after disaster.

But we have been commanded to tend for God's creation, which implies love and care, not domination. We are meant to live in harmony with God's creation, not destroy it for our own ends.

I believe that Genesis 1 and 2 show us that environmental concern is fundamental and central to our faith. It is not an optional extra for the tree huggers. As I understand Genesis 1 and 2, to be a follower of God is to be an environmentalist.

There are lots of other things we could mention from these first two chapters, man being created in God's image, created to be in a relationship with God, equality between man and woman, the wonder of sexual union, the Sabbath and so on but we are still on the first of our 5 readings so we need to move on.

And so we come to chapter 3, and the story of how it all went wrong! The fall.

At the start of chapter 3, the woman, was having a conversation with a serpent. Obviously serpents can't speak, so the writer is using symbolic language, and the serpent is a symbol of all that is opposed to God.

And the serpent begins by asking an apparently innocent question. Did God really say you must not eat from any tree in the garden? But God hadn't said that they could not eat from any tree, God had said that they could eat from all the trees except one, thus the serpent distorts the generosity of God's original permission by emphasizing and exaggerating the prohibition. Something that many people are guilty of doing today. Focusing on the small things that God says we can't do, and neglecting the vast amount of things that God makes possible for us to do.

Eve however, corrects the serpent, remembering that God emphasized permission, the freedom to eat any tree, except the one in the middle of the garden.

But the serpent continues the conversation by sowing doubt into her mind about God's intention for instruction them not to eat from this tree. He says it is because

God knows that your eyes will be opened, and that you will be like Him, knowing good and evil. He makes out that God is holding them back, that God is preventing them from becoming what they could become. He insinuates that God does not have their best intentions at heart, that God is not a good and gracious God, but is a needy God who is scared that if Adam and Eve eat from this tree, they will no longer need him. But notice the subtlety of the serpent. He does not directly invite them to eat, he leaves the choice down to them.

Having listened to the serpent, Adam and Eve are now confronted by that very simple choice. God has told them not to eat from the tree, but the serpent has made them begin to question God's motives. Do they walk away, do they remain obedient to God, do they continue to trust in God, to look to God to provide for them, or do they reject God's gracious provision and take the fruit and go it alone. Do they make a bid for independence, for freedom from God? That is what the fruit represents. Human autonomy and independence from God. The rejection of God, the rejection of a relationship with God.

So Eve looks at the tree, she saw that it was good, she covets the wisdom that she believes it will bring her, so she reaches out, takes some fruit and eats it, and then gives some to her husband, who ate it as well.

Today, we face the same choice that Adam and Eve faced. The choice to either obey God, to depend on God, to trust God to provide for us, or to go our own way, to trust our own strength, intellect, abilities. And like Adam and Eve, sometimes we can be seduced by that voice in our heads that says the way of the world is better, you don't need God, he is only holding you back, he is making you unhappy. When the opposite is actually the case.

At the start of the year, it is traditional to make resolutions and choices. To lose weight, give up smoking. There is one resolution that is much more important than that. To choose to be obedient to God. To choose not to eat the fruit from the tree, but to follow God, to trust God. To begin everyday with the question, God what do you want me to do today – God show me your path and I will walk down it.

Why don't we make that our prayer at the start of everyday, at the start of every meeting, of every important decision that we must make – God show me your path and I will walk down it.

But it was too late for Adam and Eve, they had made their decision, and in that moment of disobedience they tasted sin, which until that point had been only a possibility. Now they knew about good and evil - and would now reap the consequences.

After making makeshift clothes in an attempt to cover their nakedness, which up to that point had not been a problem, they hear the sound of God walking in the garden. And so they hide from Him. The innocent perfection of chapter 2 Adam and Eve walking naked in the Garden with their creator God is shattered. Trust has been replaced by the fear of guilt.

Then in verses 9 through to 13 God questions Adam & Eve to find out what has been going on – not because he doesn't already know, but rather to call them to account for what they have done. And in the inquest we start to see the full effect of their sin. Adam blames Eve. She gave it to me, perhaps also implying that it was God's fault for giving him the woman. When Eve is questioned she blames the serpent, neither prepared to own up to what they had done.

The once perfect relationship between man and his companion is damaged, now they are set against each other, now there is disharmony, distrust. And similarly both are now alienated from their creator.

In the verses that follow God reveals in even more depth the consequences for their actions – the relationship between Adam and Eve is distorted, where God created mutuality, there is now desire and domination. Humanities relationship with creation is damaged, and creation itself is damaged, producing thorns and thistles to hamper Adam's farming ambition.

But most significantly, their relationship with God was broken and so they were expelled from the garden, they were expelled from God's presence. An obvious consequence of this was that they no longer had access to tree of life. Without it they were now destined to die, to return to the dust. God had told them that if they ate from the tree they would die, and this promise was shown to be true, despite the snake's suggestion that it may not be so.

But as well as inevitable physical death, they experienced another much more significant death, separation from God leading to spiritual death. To the people that read this story, the expulsion from God's presence in the Garden of Eden would have been regarded as far more catastrophic than physical death. The latter was simply the sign of the spiritual death the human couple experienced on the day they ate the forbidden fruit. God had promised that disobedience would lead to death, when they ate it. Indeed death, spiritual death was immediate, even through the inevitable physical death took longer to be realized.

We too need to remember that there are always consequences for our sin. If we go against God's will, we will be doing damage to our relationship with others, our relationship with God, or indeed our planet.

But, Genesis 3 is not the end of the story. And even within the Genesis 3 story there are hints that all is not lost. Even though God is about to throw them from the garden, before he does so, he deals with the problem of their nakedness by providing them with clothes. Most bible experts agree that this is a sign of God's on going grace and generosity; God continues to care for his creation, even though they have rejected him.

But even before that, back in verse 15, as God is explaining the consequences of Adam and Eve's choice to them, when he addresses the serpent, he says, he, that is man, will crush your head, and you will strike his heel. While this is not universally agreed, many bible experts believe that this is referring to the ongoing struggle between good and evil in the world, but the fact that man strikes the head of the serpent hints that he will ultimately be victorious. And there are some bible experts who see this as the first Messianic prophecy in the OT, as it is Christ who fulfils this promise as he crushes Satan under his feet, Romans 16 verse 20.

And then we move on to the story of Noah and the flood. Things have continued to go from bad to worse following Adam and Eve's catastrophic choice. Cain has killed Abel and humanity continues to reject God and his ways. So God decides enough is enough and he will wipe out humanity and start again. Again we see how serious sin is, and how holy God is. But once again there is hope. Noah found favour in the eyes of God. He was righteous and walked with God.

And God graciously saved Noah, and his family, and made a covenant, an agreement with him. And so we are introduced to the themes of salvation and promise. And God is revealed not only as holy but as loving and merciful.

And then finally, we have the story of the Tower of Babel. A story that once again reminds us of human sin, pride, of thinking that we are better off without God, that we can do things without him, that we don't need him.

But it also reminds us of another truth, that God is still in control of his creation. God did not make the world, create the laws of physics and then sit back and relax and watch as it all worked out on its own. God remains intimately involved in his creation. And while we continue to have free choice, God remains ultimately in control of events.

But isn't that a contradiction I hear you say. Well, I can't claim to fully understand how God remains all powerful, all knowing, while at the same time we retain free will, anymore than I can claim to understand how the baby whose birthday we celebrated a few weeks ago was both fully God and fully man.

But a helpful illustration that came out of our house group a while ago was that of a road that God has built. It goes from a to b, and because God is in control it will get to b. But we have choices to turn left or right at crossroads and so on. We retain free will over the route while God retains control over the destination.

Of course as with all human illustrations if you question them too much they break down. But it might be helpful to think of it like that.

But, back to the point – despite humanity's insistence on rebelling against God – God retains control of his creation. And despite the disaster of human rebellion, continues to work to bring about restoration.

So, in a nutshell, these opening readings remind us of God's creating power. They remind us of sin and deadly consequences of sin. But they also remind us of God's love, his grace, and his desire to save us, and restore us despite our best efforts to thwart him.

As we read these stories ourselves over the coming week – let us accept God's invitation to enter into his grace and live in obedience not rebellion.