

FIRST READING: Genesis 2.4b-9, 15-25

A reading from the book of Genesis.

In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.' This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

GOSPEL READING: Luke 8.22-25

Hear the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Luke.

Alleluia...

One day he got into a boat with his disciples, and he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side of the lake." So they put out, and while they were sailing he fell asleep. A windstorm swept down on the lake, and the boat was filling with water, and they were in danger. They went to him and woke him up, shouting, "Master, Master, we are perishing!" And he woke up and rebuked the wind and the raging waves; they ceased, and there was a calm. He said to them, "Where is your faith?" They were afraid and amazed, and said to one another, "Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?"

This is the gospel of the Lord. **Alleluia.**

Sermon for 23rd February 2025

When that I was and a little tiny boy,
 With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,
 A foolish thing was but a toy,
 For the rain it raineth every day.

But when I came to man's estate,
 With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,
 'Gainst knaves and thieves men shut
 their gate,

For the rain it raineth every day.
 A great while ago the world begun,
 With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,
 But that's all one, our play is done,
 And we'll strive to please you every
 day.

Those lines are from a song that ends Shakespeare's play *Twelfth Night*. (In my humble opinion one of the best plays in the English language.) They are sung by the mysterious fool named Feste as all the complications of the plot are finally sorted out, and marriages and celebrations occur. From one point of view they are extremely unsuitable for today's sermon. After all, the play they come from is literally named after a particular feast day in the Church calendar: Twelfth Night, the end of Christmas. And it is certainly not Twelfth Night today, and our thoughts are turning from Christmas towards Lent and beyond that Easter. Feste's song, however, does have a significant resonance for today's scriptural readings: in them the Bible discloses one of the great mysteries of creation, and one dear to the heart of almost every member of the Church of England. Today's lectionary is about The Weather.

Or, at least, the first reading is partly about the lack of weather. The Book of Genesis takes a sentence or two to explain that there wasn't any weather when humans were created:

In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.

A troubling passage indeed for a Church of England congregation. In Eden at this moment there were no clouds to point at, no possibility of remarking that it was very mild for the time of year, nor even that it looked a bit black over Bill's mother's. Perhaps a theologian might explain this by pointing out that before there were humans to comment on the weather, there was no need for there to be any weather. In any case, as we turn to the second reading, we find the Apostles troubled with rather too much weather:

One day he got into a boat with his disciples, and he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side of the lake." So they put out, and while they were sailing he fell asleep. A windstorm swept down on the lake, and the boat was filling with water, and they were in danger. They went to him and woke him up, shouting,

“Master, Master, we are perishing!” And he woke up and rebuked the wind and the raging waves; they ceased, and there was a calm. He said to them, “Where is your faith?” They were afraid and amazed, and said to one another, “Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?”

The question which the companions of Jesus ask at the end of the story is, of course, key to the symbolism of the passage. Who is this who can command the winds and the water? The answer is what we have seen in the first reading. It was God who created wind and water themselves, who set them to their workings, and so Jesus’ ability to calm the storm is not simply a piece of wonder-working or an act of mercy to his panicked disciples. It is a revelation of his identity and his nature. The rabbi in the boat on the lake should be recognised as the presence at creation itself. The water originally rose at the Lord’s behest, and it is the Lord who commands it in this story.

And I think the fact that the passage ends in a question makes a lot of sense. From one point of view, it is simply the record of the disciples wondering at the identity of the person they are following. In that sense, we already know the answer to the question. “Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?” Like so many questions asked in church, the answer is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. And we can perhaps sometimes read this kind of story with a slight air of self-satisfaction, seeing over the heads of the disciples, who are confused by something which seems perfectly obvious to us. Who is this? It is the Son of God. But the passage poses a question to us too, I think. For us, gathered around the Bible in a church built to the glory of God revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, the question is inverted.

We are not faced with a miracle-working rabbi who has just calmed the wind and water, and asked to decide who that means he is. We are faced with faith in Jesus Christ, and asked what that means the wind and water are. This passage might ask us what it means to not only worship Jesus of Nazareth, but also to see the storm and the water as under his command. I can’t speak for everyone, but I instinctively find it a bit disconcerting, as I jokingly mentioned earlier, to be so reminded that the weather is not an eternal part of the Bible’s view of the world.

The absence of growth and the cycle of the seasons in Eden is a bit of a jab to the way I look at the world. Shakespeare was apparently wrong – a great while ago the world

didn't begin with a heigh ho, the wind and the rain, or at least not in the sense that I usually think of it.

I love the seasons, I love the annual round of flowering and dwindling, and the festival of the Church year. I love that vaguely-defined thing which we sometimes called Nature, and sometimes Creation, and sometimes the Wild. I often find myself stilled into wonder when walking by a river, or when skirting the edge of a field in the rain, or when feeling the wind across the downs. That wonder often moves me to momentary prayer of a sort, even if that takes no more precise form than a muttered thanks or a quick recitation of a few lines of the liturgy. I daresay a lot of you have had similar experiences. The God who created the natural world often seems to speak through it, or to be somehow near in its presence – to suggest the numinous.

But recognizing Creation as a gift from the divine might also pose a challenge. Seeing the wind and the rain, the earth and the sky, as the domain of Christ might warn us against seeing them as an end in themselves. There can be a risk in concentrating on the natural world as a revelation of God's presence, that we attribute divinity or authority to the Creation rather than the Creator. Perhaps this is a risk for a relatively small number of people. There are obviously religious forms of nature-worship in this country, in modern paganism, but there are also political philosophies which elevate an abstract notion of "Nature" or "the Earth" above our reverence to God, and to the people around us who bear God's image. Today's readings might chasten those of us who love the natural world rather passionately, and remind us that it has no meaning outside the love and generosity of God. Having seen that, we might cheerfully bring together Feste's song with the day's readings, answering the question "Who is this then, who commands even the winds and the water", by humming that "A great while ago the world began" and that we'll "strive to please Him every day".