



Any Questions' Sermon series

Week 1: Adam and Eve- were they real? How far should we believe the creation account in Genesis?

- This is the first question posed in our sermon series 'Any Questions' and so perhaps it's fitting that we begin all the way back at the beginning of creation.

The first thing to point out is that, although on the surface this seems to be a question posed about whether or not Adam and Eve were real historical people, there are much deeper questions that underlie it. Questions like: how do we interpret the Bible? Is the Bible historically reliable? Can we trust it? It's as much a question about the Scriptures as a whole as it is about the origins of the universe recorded in those Scriptures.

Biblical Genres

- So perhaps the first point worth recognising is that the Bible is a collection of books made up of all kinds of genres. There are Law Books (for example the first 5 books of the Bible, collectively known as 'The Torah' or 'The Law'), History books (for example, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Esther, etc.), poetry and wisdom books (for example the Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Solomon etc.), prophetic literature (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, etc. etc.), Letters (by Paul, John, James, Peter and a few others), Gospel Biographies of Jesus (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), Apocalyptic (end of time) literature (Revelation).

What kind of genre is the early part of Genesis?

- Genesis is not a science book. It's a narrative about our origins as humans, our goodness; it's a book about the meaning and source and glory of creation, the sovereignty of God, God's careful attention to detail, his concern for his creature's well-being.

Genesis is historical narrative, but not in the sense that we are used to. It's not like modern day journalism where history is written down or recorded by those present, using eye-witness accounts and other data to build a picture. How could the creation story be history in that sense? Who was there to write it down or be interviewed? Genesis only says that God started it all. It doesn't deal with how, or when or where, only 'that'.

Historical narrative in the Hebrew tradition, like in so much of the Bible, is about stories, stories that have a purpose, stories that record historical events of the past in a way that gives meaning and direction to those living in the present. This is history that isn't written in the way that post-enlightenment writers write history; the writers in the Ancient Near east often write history to make a point. This is true

of most cultures but of course, in the Jewish/Christian tradition, the story isn't just our story; it's God's story that becomes our story too as God writes us into it. God begins writing us into His-story in the early chapters of Genesis, when he breathes his life into the first Adam.

Interestingly, the Hebrew name for Adam means 'the human'. It's a generic name rather than a specific name like Sheila or Chris. Similarly, Eve means 'mother of the living' or 'source of life.'

So, given the narrative and often poetic nature of the early part of Genesis, I would say that Adam and Eve are more archetypal, representative figures than they are historical. (Of course that's not to say that every person in the Bible is archetypal and not historical. Remember, it depends on genre. There is plenty of evidence for the real historical existence of other Bible characters, most notably Jesus. It's not logical or fair to say, 'Well if you can't believe in Adam and Eve then you can't believe anything the Bible says.')

How are Adam and Eve representative of all of humanity?

The parallels are numerous and hopefully obvious.

God is intimately and passionately involved in the nurture of the garden and its inhabitants. He walks among them and talks intimately to them throughout. God breathes his life into human lungs and gives them a 1) vocation – a call to partner with God in tending and caring for what's been given; 2) a permission to enjoy everything in the garden except 3) the one prohibition – to not eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. (No explanation of the prohibition is given; the story does not tell us why the tree is there at all. This is God's garden and these are his terms!)

This is God's invitation to the whole of humanity – in relationship with him, to partner with him in his creative purposes, enjoying what's been given whilst managing some kind of boundary within that relationship of what can and can't be known and what should and shouldn't be done. Can you recognise your own life and existence within that framework?

Then 'the Fall' happens:

- The serpent (no explanation is given as to who he is) tricks them into believing that God isn't quite who he says he is and that he is some kind of divine spoilsport. ('Did God really say....?' is his opening gambit and Adam and Eve's image of God becomes distorted. Do you recognise your own capacity for a similar response to lies about the love and goodness of God? Do you sometimes have trouble believing God is good like Adam and Eve did? I know I do.
- Adam and Eve's thirst for knowledge gets the better of them. Once they've got the knowledge, they'll be able to decide for themselves what's good and bad and right and wrong, and black and white, and therefore who's in and who's out. Don't you

recognise yourself in that kind of judgemental thinking? I do. No wonder God's desire is that we don't eat from such a dangerous tree.

- But The Fall is not the end for them. God goes looking for them and clothes them to hide their shame. And that surely resonates with our faith experience too?

The fall is not one moment for them, Adam and Eve; it's every potential moment in every life everywhere. This desire to gain 'knowledge', to have the certainty of 'I know', is the ego's way of wanting to be in control of all the data about our lives. But we are not in control. Adam and Eve must live and work in the garden, following the terms without understanding them. Their foundation for thriving here must be trust, and mutual investment in the relationship God has initiated with them.

The open-endedness of the Bible

So, were Adam and Eve real historical figures? The Creation story can be taken literally – that God did create in 6 days and that Adam and Eve were real people – and many do. But if reading the story literally is only simply a response to our desire for certainty, our way of categorising into Yes or No, Black or white, then I suspect that misses the point.

I think this is why Jesus so often taught in parables, to leave the interpretation open to each hearer/reader, for them to interpret what it means for *them* in *their* context, rather than have 'answers' neatly categorised and filed away for all time, which asks very little of us. When people say, 'Well you should just do what the Bible says!' I don't see how that's possible most of the time; we have to work out what it means at this point in time, in this place and for this community. And that means asking questions of the text and questions are liberating. They remind us that we don't have to be God and that we don't have to pretend we have it all figured out.

So, in relation to Adam and Eve, it's perhaps more helpful to recognise that, like Adam and Eve, I live in a world full of uncertainty and mystery; that, like Adam and Eve, it is not for me to seek to understand it all; that, like Adam and Eve, God seeks a friendship with me and has a role for me to play in his creative purposes; that, like Adam and Eve, I hope I can be self-aware enough to recognise my own capacity for falling; and that, like Adam and Eve, God can even work my sin into his loving purposes.

And how does 'evolution' fit into all this?

Nobody asked that. Thank goodness!

Revd Chris Martin, June 2017