

Before Retirement 13 years ago I worked at Leicester Cathedral where King Richard III has recently been reburied. The City of L had international links with the City of Krefeld in Germany and the Cathedral had several exchanges with Christians in Krefeld similar to your own here today. Once my wife and I had the Pastor at the Altekirche to stay with us. Our German was non-existent and his English was poor. We used to have breakfast with the dictionary open between us. On a free day we decided to take him over to Coventry Cathedral – that great centre of reconciliation. We were worried about explaining things to him. Imagine our delight to find a group just starting a tour of the Cathedral being led by the Anglican priest, Quaker and powerful advocate of Amnesty International, Paul Oestreicher, whose family, when he was a small boy, had to leave their home in Germany due to his father's Jewish ancestry. And the talk he was giving was in German. My wife and I went off for a coffee.

On a similar international note 10 days ago we were in Symphony Hall to hear the great oratorio The Creation by Joseph Haydn conducted by the incomparable Mirga. In German, Die Schöpfung, was first performed in Vienna in 1799 and sung in German but the following year it was published in German and English and has been a firm classical favourite ever since.

The text of the work is taken from the first chapter of Genesis and describes the creation of all we experience around us culminating in the creation of Adam and Eve. It is full of praise to God and the oratorio ends with the chorus singing

Sing the Lord, ye voices all. Utter thanks all ye his works. Celebrate his power and glory. Let his name resound on high. The Lord is great; his praise shall last for ever. (Which probably sounds even better in German.!)

And we have heard a passage from that same chapter of the Bible this morning. And this wonder at creation and the glory we give to God is a major theme of every Harvest Festival. We are surrounded by the bounty of the earth. The narrative we would give to that creation from the Big Bang, through our expanding universe, to the evolution of life on Earth may be different from the Genesis narrative but the praise we give to God the Creator and the gratitude we express remains the same and will do so to the end of time.

But Haydn stops at that point and so did our reading. But of course human history did not stop. Genesis goes on to describe it with a snake, temptation, an apple and

a tree. Humans fall from grace. Sin enters paradise and its evidence is also all around us – in selfishness and greed, in violence and oppression, in fear and hatred. But also within the natural world created by God – storm and tempest in the Caribbean, earthquakes in Mexico, failed rains in Africa. What are we to make of this? We cannot only give glory to God for all that is good. We have already confessed our sins and soon we will pray for our world. But how to make sense of the need for those prayers in a world created by a loving God?

First human sin. However we understand evolution – however we balance the direct hand of God with the blind processes of natural selection – creation has, in our own world, arrived at the age of humankind. And what distinguishes us from all that has gone before, is that we are self-conscious beings. We know ourselves and we know others and we can know God. And because of this we can make choices. And they are real choices. Of course they are heavily circumscribed – by the sort of person I am and have become – by the conditions all around me. For many, many people, choice is a luxury they do not have very often.

I can choose to be a vegetarian. If I was starving – or if my children were starving – how much choice would I have about stealing a loaf of bread? As a western, 21st century man, living in a democracy, my field of choice is far far wider than a woman living in – well, say in 21<sup>st</sup> century Saudi Arabia. I stress this because it is easy to be glib about human freedom. But despite all the caveats I do believe that at the end of the day humans do have choices and we are responsible for them to God.

Hence Sin. God gave us choice. It had to be real choice. Between Good and Evil. Between loving God and not loving God. And this is not God playing games. The whole point of creation is that we should freely respond to God's love. So he creates a world where that free choice is possible. And often we choose wrongly – selfishly. In big ways and small ways we choose the way of pride, of conflict, of jealousy, of domination. And when we do, we cause pain and we cause suffering. And God weeps.

Now what kind of a world would a loving God create where men and women could have that opportunity to freely choose to love him or not to love him? Suffering in our world is not just the result of human sin. Long before humankind evolved animals were surviving by being stronger than their neighbour.

The whole chain of the animal kingdom is based on predators and victims. Nature **is** red in tooth and claw. We know the story of Noah's Ark is a myth because half of them wouldn't have survived 5 minutes! Now this is such a fundamental feature of creation, at least here on earth, that it must have been part of the original plan of

God. Not only is it so basic but it is the very process by which first life and then human life evolved. Millions of species over tens of millions of years, came and went before humankind appeared. Surely that can't just have been a big mistake. There must have been a purpose – unless everything, everything is purposeless. And the purpose must have been to build the best possible world in which humankind could come to know and love God. The best possible world in which the choices we make are real choices. The best possible world in which we can prepare for heaven. ("The best possible world" is a phrase coined by the German polymath Gottfried Leibniz.)

So the choices are real. And they are made in a world where there is challenge. There had to be a snake in the Garden of Eden. There has to be the reality of suffering. Without hardship there is no testing. Growth of every kind – including spiritual growth – depends, it seems, on struggle. And our world seems designed to provide it.

And in this world there is unevenness. Some, both through geography and through biology seem more blessed than others. But sameness all around would be a bland creation and self sacrifice would be pointless and love and care and compassion would not be needed.

These thoughts do not answer all our questions. Why so much apparent waste in the natural world. Why does the level of catastrophe, and indeed the level of pain humans can inflict on each other, seem sometimes so high?

What we must believe is that the world around us is the best possible world in which the Creator can achieve his purposes. In both its beauty and in its harshness we can see the hand of God. It is in fact a world of pointers to God – a God who created us in love to love him in return. Our challenge is to take sides. To take our part in building on all that is good and striving against all that is evil. To help to build God's Kingdom. And that we do as individuals in the daily choices that we make. And we help to build that kingdom in community as well – not least in our Church communities. Today in our country increasing numbers are seeking help from foodbanks. Aston and Nechells Foodbank need our help. And in small but deeply significant ways we can make a difference and help bring in that Kingdom for which Jesus taught us to pray. And how appropriate that is at Harvest Festival.

Food for the world. And the world is our other major concern both at Harvest and in this Christian community. Traidcraft seeks to build the lives of producers who are otherwise at the mercy of large, global retailers and middlemen. Vital concerns as we seek new trading deals following Brexit. Through Fair Trade producers earn a

proper return for their work – confidence in the future and premiums for their communities.

We all have to buy food, cards and presents. By purchasing from our own FT shop we can please ourselves, our birthday friend and someone miles and miles away whom we will never meet but who needs our help to climb out of poverty not through a handout but with a hand up. We can award dignity to our fellows. What a gift to give at Christmas. I urge you – its October after all! - Plan early, and fairly, for Christmas.

And all because we have the God-given freedom to make choices in a world he has created. Today, at Harvest Festival, we thank God for the bounty of the earth and pledge ourselves to seek peace, to seek justice, to help the neighbour in need, because he calls us to love him and to love one another in the name of His Son J Xst our Lord. Amen.