

I believe in God, maker of Heaven and Earth

Text: Acts 17:22-31

Westlake Church, Nyon. January 21, 2001.

Introduction

As we consider this affirmation from the Apostles' Creed I will be referring from time to time to how Paul's understanding of God as Creator shaped his preaching of the Gospel in the passage we just heard from Acts. So our text isn't so much the basis for what we will think about together as an example of it in practice. Paul was preaching the gospel in a society not so very different from our own in Western Europe – the novelty driven, consumer, religious supermarket society of Athens.

I suspect that for Christians who are confronted by the Creed the issue is not so much that we are unable to affirm what it says, but that it is not easy either to see a fraction of the implications of what we say we believe, or perhaps more seriously, if we do glimpse those implications we draw back from them as being too costly. In both cases there can be many reasons for that.

Reasons for limited understanding

Certainly we are more pressed into the mould of society's view of things than we imagine, hence Paul's warning at the beginning of Romans chapter 12. One modern translation has it:

“Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking”

Church history reveals time and time again the uneasy treaties Christians have made with their times, from the superstitious practices of the twelfth century church, to the defence of slavery or racism on the part of churches in the eighteenth century, to the aberrations of militarism or the defence of apartheid, or materialism in our own times. Our times and cultures can cling to us very closely. So you were rightly reminded earlier in this series that only the renewal of our minds by our God who reveals himself in Christ and in the Scriptures, by his Holy Spirit, can deliver us from being pressed into the distortions of the societies we live in which are determined to edit out the Creator from their experience of the world. As Christians it is so tempting to continue living and thinking as we used to before we came to know Christ, and to attempt a kind of accommodation between what has been called 'practical atheism' and a Christian profession of faith. Essentially, while calling ourselves Christians, we live like anyone else who doesn't believe in God in terms of our choices, or preferences, our manner of life. There is no doubt that there has been a powerful Christian heritage in Western society, and so Christians have become accustomed to the idea that to be a good Christian is the same as to be a good Dutchman, or Frenchman, or American or British person. But if it ever was true, as the influence of Christian thinking diminishes rapidly, the situation is more akin to a person with a foot on two ice-floes which are drifting apart very fast. A choice has to be made, but we are very unaccustomed to the idea that we cannot simply belong to our cultures. So this is the first challenge, not to miss the implications of what we believe by being unthinking members of cultures which deny the Lordship of Christ.

Choices

More seriously, God is always calling us literally to take to heart who he is and what we believe. So in worship, in study, while with other Christians, through God's prompting in the circumstances of our lives as he lovingly takes hold of us, we sometimes get a better glimpse of what Christian belief can mean. That immediately faces us with hard choices because inevitably, and increasingly so, we are going to be different in vital ways from most of those we live and work with if we take our relationship with God at all seriously. C. S. Lewis was only one of many who have realised on

becoming a Christian that if our life is a house, God is not interested in a touch of interior decoration, but in pulling the whole edifice down and starting again.

A starting point for belief

Today's affirmation from the Creed is truly fundamental 'I believe in God, maker of heaven and earth' and probably more than in any other section of the Creed we face both of these challenges of limited understanding and of choice in coming to terms with it. There are so many implications, and as we begin to glimpse them, there is a huge challenge in taking them on board in our lives. The affirmation is fundamental, not just because it begins the Bible in Genesis 1:1, but because it states our understanding that God is the author of all. I will use the word Creator for God as well as maker because the original Hebrew word *bara* is one that is reserved for God alone. Only he creates, or makes, in the true sense, from nothing. All we do is re-order his creation in a very tiny way following that.

You'll notice that this is not primarily an affirmation about us - in our people-obsessed societies, that itself comes as a big shock. Not 'I believe in God who made me' - but 'I believe in God, maker of heaven and earth.' We are quite literally put in our place, in direct contradiction of our popular assumption that people are at the centre of all things. (It is interesting that even those who are concerned to re-establish the importance of the non-human environment can, from a biblical perspective, easily stray into overstating the final significance of people either as managers or destroyers.) We understand who we are first of all in relation to God, and then in relation to Creation. Jim Houston, in his wonderful book *I believe in Creation* says this:

The world we see is the mirror image of our hearts. We perceive reality as we conceive it to be. If we have given up the hope of finding meaning in our lives, then we see the world as a desert place, a threatening wilderness. If, however, we have hope in God the Creator of all things, then we can, and shall, see it very differently.

The centrality of belief

This puts so powerfully an idea that is completely at variance with our times but which is at the heart of the Christian understanding of the world. Belief itself is central, and not merely an optional extra for those who like to consider themselves religious. What we believe the world to be will affect profoundly how we treat it, and how we live in it. To adapt Jim Houston's words, we are making a desert of the world we live in (few would doubt that now) because it is the prevailing belief of our times that the world around us is best understood as merely raw material for our own economic growth. Even if a place is given to the concept of biodiversity, the usual argument begins from our need as a human species for access to the resources held therein for our own well-being. This is merely a belief (and a remarkably inconsistent and untenable one) but it is central to what we experience around us. Despite that, and those who work professionally in environmental issues will perhaps bear me out, it is extremely rare for any consideration of this 'belief basis' to how we treat the world around us to be given any attention by those most concerned for its well-being in secular institutions, despite the obvious beliefs that undergird all their activities. There is a constant and strenuous attempt to edit out discussion of belief from the business of government, or public life generally. Just look through any daily newspaper and note the absence of any reference to God or to belief to see how successful the campaign has been. And yet self-evidently we treat the world around us according to what we believe about it.

But this affirmation about God as Creator is equally at variance with another aspect of the popular religious approach of our times. Not only is religious belief popularly seen as a marginal interest for those few who are taken that way, but if a place is given to belief at all it is as a commodity, an extension of our self-fulfilment, as one among many choices. The biblical understanding is exactly the opposite. We are seen as knowing who we are because of God, deriving our identity from him, and not the other way round. As good residents of Europe you'll share the amusement of people

this side of the English Channel who hear of the British notice 'Fog in the channel, Europe cut off.' Similarly it is absurd for us as people to begin to construct God from a set of our own needs, perceptions and desires on a selective basis. The biblical vision is entirely other. We are who we are because God made us.

Relationship with God

This then goes beyond a simple affirmation and begins to seem more important, because the God who made us has revealed himself to be personal, and is calling us to relationship with him. A simple glance at the creation itself shows how intensely relational the whole business is. Ecology is the study of those relationships. But it is not merely that we can have a relationship with our Creator, but that if all around us is God's handiwork, inevitably also it has a relationship to him. In contrast again to the idea that there are some things which can be considered religious, but that most of life is simply neutral, the Bible teaches in Colossians chapter 1 that all things were created by Jesus and for him. So there is a theology of everything we know in time and space which frame God's artefacts, and which are themselves the work of his hands. Instead society offers the church a golden cage where it can sit quietly commenting on such issues as how to run religious services, or new translations of the Bible, or maybe a few moral issues such as abortion, but must never stray out into work on economics, or the environment, or the arts, or health. Too often we are happy enough to accept the reduced space, and consign the rest to unbelief.

So the first implication that we need to take into our minds and hearts is that our relationship with God, whether lived as rebellion or belief, is fundamental to all the shape taken up by all that we see around us. It is understood as we enter more fully into a renewed relationship with God ourselves. We live in Creation, not 'the environment', or 'nature', and we ourselves are 'God's offspring' as Paul puts it in our text from Acts, happy to quote from a contemporary poet to find his phrase. I hardly need to point out again that the disintegration of relationships of all kinds is deeply embedded now in our society. It extends from the destruction of community and personal relationships at all levels, to the destruction of meaningful relationship with anything we consume, from food (which appears we know not from where) to the machines we use (often produced in appalling conditions in parts of the world we never see) to the waste we produce – spirited away, but as Loren Wilkinson has pointed out, where in creation is 'away'? As against this individualistic and isolated existence, Christians in affirming their belief in the Creator, affirm their belief in all kinds of inter-dependence and relationship. Of course this insight is entirely confirmed by the observations of any simple ecologist or biological scientist.

There is one created reality, visible and invisible

The second astonishing implication that we must come to terms with is that God made heaven AND earth. There is one created reality, visible and invisible, and any idea that only the material is real is far from Christian understanding. Equally strange to Christian thinking is an idea which is often part of popular Christian imagining that somehow the word 'spiritual' refers to the non material. Biblically what is 'spiritual' is simply whatever is the fruit or work of the Spirit of God – who of course is seen in the Bible as Creator of, among other things, the material. 'How many are your works O Lord... When you send your Spirit they are created,' Psalm 104: 24 – 30. If we believe that 'spiritual' means non-material, then of course it is reasonable to suppose that much of what we do, and all around us, is of supreme indifference to God. But if we believe as the Bible teaches us, that matter itself is God's handiwork and is created for his glory and praise, then all our relationship to it is of course firmly in the realm of the spiritual. God is interested in how we make our money, or what we eat, or what we watch on television, or how we treat the environment. These are 'spiritual' issues. They are spiritual not least because as the Psalms also explain 'The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it,' Psalm 24:1.

Where or what is heaven?

There isn't time to go into one final but important point about heaven, but I can recommend some reading afterwards if people are interested. Suffice it to say that one of the biggest changes I have seen in evangelical thinking over the last five years has to do with a re-discovery of the biblical understanding of heaven. The burden of scripture is that creation itself is waiting, with us, for renewal, and for redemption. As John Stott has expressed it: 'It would not be wise to speculate how the biblical and scientific accounts of reality correspond. The general promise of the renovation and transformation of nature is plain... God's material creation will be redeemed and glorified.'

Immediately this rescues creation from any suggestion of irrelevance, and the church from the heresy that you sometimes hear expressed, 'Ah well, it is all going to burn up in judgement, so why should it matter what happens to it meanwhile.' It is a good job that we don't treat our bodies, which are the part of the physical creation with which we are most intimately concerned, in the same reckless fashion!

The Gospel is for the whole earth

But if there is an implication to be drawn from the reference to heaven, there is a third important lesson to draw from the reference to earth. The gospel is for the whole creation, as Paul teaches in Romans 8:21 that 'the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.' In A Rocha we are trying to put into practice that message of hope as a sign of the coming Kingdom – to make a difference to disappearing habitats and polluted wasteland, and to the injustice suffered by the human communities that depend upon them for their life. But you will notice how Paul in his Acts 17 sermon makes it clear that the fact that God is Creator automatically means the gospel is relevant to all people as well (a clear basis for a missionary church) and confers absolute equality on all people – When Paul says 'We are God's offspring,' he means all created people. In western societies that marginalize the elderly in the adoration of youth, and which are increasingly drawn to nationalism and built on practical racism in their overseas policy, it is a vital corrective. It is the loss of our belief in God the Creator in post-Christian Europe that is the root cause of a multitude of ills in our human relationships. Ironically, an attempt to overcome the problem by an idealisation of the human, which in the media and the press takes a highly selective and unreal view of what the term means, only leads to further contempt for real people. Once again people find their dignity and meaning only in relation to their loving Creator God, and not in competition with the super-rich and super-beautiful.

A Challenge for Christians

However if the secular world faces a challenge from the claim that God is our Creator, Christians do too in an area which is often uncomfortable for us to recognise, namely in our desire to share the good news of Christ with other people. If we are to believe Paul, we belong with everyone else in one created community rather than being able to retreat into an 'us-and-them' view of people. There is, of course, a distinct people of God, saved by Christ, although only God knows its limits. There are two communities, theologically defined. But psychologically defined, in terms of where we place ourselves, there is one community, the one which Paul describes as 'God's offspring.' On that basis our challenge is to put in common, in ways which are genuine and open, the gospel which we have come to know, and to share our relationship with God in Christ. Manipulative attempts to reach out and pull people into the church are an abuse of our human relationship as fellow created beings, which is prior to any beliefs we have, and commitments that we have made. For ten years in Portugal we lived alongside visitors to the A Rocha field study centre, many of whom had often only had limited contact with Christians. But distressingly often they had stories to tell of being pressurised, or in other ways not treated with integrity by Christians who had viewed them rather as targets, or merely potential converts, with little interest in a genuine

relationship. In my view it stems from an over emphasis on personal salvation at the expense of an understanding of God as Creator.

What is our response?

Finally Acts 17 leaves us with the final challenge. 'From one man,' says Paul, 'God made every nation of men, so that... people would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him.' A response is required from us today whoever we are, whatever we believe. If we don't believe in the Creator then we must look hard at the implications of the other bleak possibilities. Jim Houston identifies five, and they are all very problematic in different ways from the chance and empty universe of the secularist to the unpredictable impersonality of the new age divine cosmos. Do we really live consistently with the belief that we are merely an accident, and the product of unknown forces? But living in the world, which is creation, will constantly prompt us to reach out for the Creator.

And you may find that the process of becoming a Christian is as the American writer Farrer Capon describes – we discover 'not that the world now means something it didn't mean before, but we finally learn what it has been about all along.'

But if we are Christians we face a big challenge of living in the world as creation, of allowing Jesus Christ to redeem all our relationships in all their brokenness and complexity, so that we begin to acknowledge him as he is, the Lord of Creation, and not merely a personal saviour in some reduced private space. Then we can recognise with Paul, that, 'In him we live, and move, and have our being.'

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