

The God Who Speaks

4: How we are saved

Opening Prayer and Welcome

God our loving Father,
You made us your children in baptism.
Pour out on us the gifts of your Holy Spirit.
Help us as a parish to know the paths we must follow
so as to build up your kingdom.
Teach us to grow in faith,
to encourage one another with words of hope,
and to care for your family with love.
Let us bear witness to the Good News,
and be faithful followers of your Son,
our Lord Jesus Christ
who lives and reigns with you
and the Holy Spirit
for ever and ever.
Amen

Introduction to the Theme

In the Old Testament book of Genesis, right at the beginning of the Bible, God does something surprising: He goes for a walk. Adam and Eve are in the garden of Eden, they've just eaten some of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they've realised that they're naked, and for the first time ever they're ashamed. And what happens next? God comes along strolling through the garden "in the cool of the day" and they hide. That - according to the Bible - is the start of the trouble.

But, for once, instead of immediately going off into ideas of 'original sin', let's just look at that amazing image: God walking around in the garden looking for these two beautiful people he's just made. "Where are you?" God calls out: Adam and Eve have disappeared and hidden themselves away.

The reason this little story is so important is because it tells us what - at least for the author of the book of Genesis - was God's *purpose* in creating everything: God wanted to be able to walk around in it, because God enjoyed it (that's the hint that those words '*in the cool of the day*' give us). For God, this was a pleasure just like the pleasure any of us might have strolling around a cool garden once the heat of the day has passed.

We are familiar with the story of creation told to us in the book of Genesis. But there is another story of creation that we might not know so well: in it, Wisdom - who is a feminine figure - tells about her role in the making of the world:

Scripture Reading

Proverbs 8:22-31 (JB)

'The Lord created me when his purpose first unfolded,
before the oldest of his works.

From everlasting I was firmly set,
from the beginning, before earth came into being.
The deep was not, when I was born,
there were no springs to gush with water.
Before the mountains were settled,
before the hills, I came to birth;
before he made the earth, the countryside,
or the first grains of world's dust.
When he fixed the heavens firm, I was there,
when he drew a ring on the surface of the deep,
when he thickened the clouds above,
when he fixed fast the springs of the deep,
when he assigned the sea its boundaries
- and the waters will not invade the shore -
when he laid down the foundations of the earth,
I was by his side, a master craftsman,
delighting him day after day,
ever at play in his presence,
at play everywhere in his world,
delighting to be with the sons of men.'

Discussion

*You may find it helpful to sit with the text in silence for a little while. Then, in a spirit of helping one another, you could share your thoughts and discuss with one another what you notice in this text from the Bible. **Listen to one another** because God also speaks through our sisters and brothers in Christ, and through us.*

You can use the following to help you, or explore other thoughts that come to mind:

*What do you feel as you read this text from the Bible?
What does this passage tell you about God and about humankind?
Which word or phrase really stands out for you?*

A quiet reflection

Close your eyes and remain in quiet for a little while. Ask yourself if you can feel God's Presence right now. Or perhaps you can think back to something that happened today, or yesterday, that - on reflection - says to you that God is near, perhaps that God has spoken to you. Or it could be in a memory that comes to mind, where you can say, perhaps, that God was close?

God is not at a distance: God is involved, delighting, playful; not a judging, angry God, but God who is happy to be with us; not disappointed, but encouraging.

It was never going to just be about Adam and Eve: it was never just about the beginning. Christians, over the centuries, have wondered whether the story of creation is true, in the sense of whether it really happened. Some Christians say that it is literally true, but that is not our Catholic way of reading the scriptures: we understand that they are telling us about a deeper truth: truth that has the tone of God's voice speaking to us.

In the story of creation we learn that we are loved, and that God created us for good things. God delighted in making us and our world and God delights to 'walk with us' and to be our friend. Some Christians wonder whether Jesus came to mend a broken world - and, of course, we have ourselves, at times, been very focused on our sin - but the deeper message is that God delights in

us, God wants to be with us and so, perhaps, we can see Jesus as the fulfilment of God's desire to be with us, to live with us.

It was never going to just be about Adam and Eve: humanity, in God's purpose, would multiply and thrive - they would become a *people*.

Later on in the Bible we learn about how God builds his relationship with his people: we hear about the escape from slavery in Egypt - and later about God again freeing his people, this time from Babylon; we hear stories about kings and prophets; we hear promises (and, yes, sometimes angry words): this, all together, is what we call *Salvation History*. It is a journey of God hand-in-hand with humanity, and it continues through to today and into tomorrow. The last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation, imagines the triumph of God's plan fulfilled at the end of the world with the new Jerusalem, where God lives with his people, 'coming down from God out of heaven. It had all the radiant glory of God and glittered like some precious jewel of crystal-clear diamond' (Revelation 21:10-11).

Just as the story of our beginnings offers the deeper truth of God's loving purpose in creating us, so the story of the end tells the deeper truth of its fulfilment. The life we live now - between the beginning and the endpoint - finds its meaning and purpose in the story told in the Bible. But to understand it for ourselves, as Catholics, we don't have to take it all literally: we are invited to pray and reflect on it for ourselves and to allow God's word to speak to us *personally*.

Scripture Reading

Acts 2:1-4;44-47 (JB)

They had all met in one room, when suddenly they heard what sounded like a powerful wind from heaven, the noise of which filled the entire house in which they were sitting; and something appeared to them that seemed like tongues of fire; these separated and came to rest on the head of each of them. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit...

The faithful all lived together and owned everything in common; they sold their goods and possessions and shared out the proceeds among themselves according to what each one needed.

They went as a body to the Temple every day but met in their houses for the breaking of bread; they shared their food gladly and generously; they praised God and were looked up to by everyone. Day by day the Lord added to their community those destined to be saved.

Discussion

'... *destined to be saved*'. Some Christians take those words very literally, but as Catholics we try to hear the tone of God's voice speaking to us more deeply. This is not a rescue attempt - *saving people from a world gone wrong*. Understanding the beginning and the end, in prayer and reflection, we begin to see that it is the working of God's Spirit, the coming together in community as God's people, the loving and generous sharing: these are what saves us; this is God's work and this has always been God's plan.

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You can use the following to help you, or explore other thoughts that come to mind:

*What do you feel as you read this text? Do you feel close to the text, or does it feel distant?
How do you experience God's Spirit in your own life?
How do you experience God's Spirit in the life of your community?*

The Church Teaches

'We are never completely ourselves unless we belong to a people. That is why no one is saved alone, as an isolated individual. Rather, God draws us to himself, taking into account the complex fabric of interpersonal relationships present in a human community. God wanted to enter into the life and history of a people.

I like to contemplate the holiness present in the patience of God's people: in those parents who raise their children with immense love; in those men and women who work hard to support their families, in the sick, in elderly religious who never lose their smile. In their daily perseverance I see the holiness of the Church militant. Very often it is a holiness found in our next-door neighbours, those who, living in our midst, reflect God's presence.'

(Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 6-7, 19 March 2018)

*Read this extract again and sit with it for a short while in silence.
Then feel free to share with one another the thoughts that come to your heart.*

Closing Prayer

We thank you, Gracious Father, for this time of reflection.
We ask you to give us a fresh understanding of your Presence in our lives.
Strengthen us, we pray, in our faith
Help us to be present to each moment
So that we may see You and hear Your Voice
Everywhere and in all things and all people.
Give us hearts and minds that seek the face of Jesus,
And help us, through the power of the Holy Spirit,
To be always grateful for your blessings,
For the gracious gift of Your Presence.
We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ
In the unity of your Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Reading suggestion

Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei* (The Light of Faith), 29 June 2013. This was the Holy Father's first letter of encouragement to the Church - it is not very long and, like most of his writings, is very readable and a good source for reflection and prayer.

Pope Francis, *Misericordia et Misera*, Apostolic Letter on the Conclusion of the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy, 20 November 2016. The theme of mercy is one to which the Holy Father has returned again and again. Here, he reflects deeply on God's loving forgiveness and our journey of reconciliation throughout life.