

Science and Creation – November 17, 2019 – Jeanne Wherrett

Series – In the Beginning, Genesis 1-3

St George's Battery Point

Readings:

Psalm 19

John 1: 1-18

Victor kindly allowed me to share some thoughts on Science and Creation this morning because it has been a passion of my life for well over 50 years.

For me, "Science and Creation" is a bit of a scary topic to talk about here this morning because it is often seen as an area of conflict. But historically, as well as for many today, the Christian faith works in harmony with Science. I hope that this morning I can share some of the ways that I have seen and experienced that show how they go hand in hand. This is a very brief introduction but if it raises any issues for you let's continue the conversation.

My prayer is that as we share our faith journeys and our understanding of scripture, that it will draw us closer to each other as God's family here at St George's and to the Lord Jesus, the Word of God, whom we heard about in our gospel reading.

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.

I would like to start by sharing a little of my own journey.

I remember looking forward to high school because we would be able to learn about science, something that in those days was never touched on in primary school. I also remember, in the first science lesson at high school, the teacher explained that anything we learnt in science should not detract from faith in God.

I made a commitment to the Lord Jesus in my first year at Tas Uni. I worshipped at Murray Street Chapel, a conservative Brethren church, taught Sunday School at the City Mission and joined the Evangelical Union at uni. I did more growing up than studying in my first First Year at uni. So, when I had to do a second First Year, I picked up Geology. It was a totally new and exciting world for me and I loved it, especially tectonics, the study of the major features on the earth's surface – the pattern of mountain chains, deep sea trenches, mid-oceanic ridges, continental drift, the expanding earth ... and theories of the fundamental mechanisms that drove it all.

The second-in-charge in the geology department was a committed Christian, a leading member of St Peter's Church, Sandy Bay, now Wellspring, Dr Max Banks. His widow, Doris, still comes to the Handweavers, Spinners and Dyers Guild that meets at St George's. In all my time at uni, the only time that I ever heard of a conflict between faith and science, was when an old brethren man debated Dr Banks. I was incredulous. To me the wonders of science revealed the glory of God.

I ended up with an honours degree in Geology. I never actually worked as a geologist, but taught matric geology for three years before taking time off from teaching while our children were little.

When Professor Sam Carey retired, there was a symposium on tectonics organised in his honour. Sam Carey, by the way, was a larger than life character who was one of the main scientists who

developed the theory of continental drift, and later the expanding earth. At that symposium I remember a scientist from Adelaide talking about the double helix being a fundamental structure in the whole of creation. He showed a picture of a galaxy with a double spiral structure, alongside a picture of the earth looking down at the North Pole, showing a similar double spiral pattern in the structures on the earth, both of which were results of expansion and rotation. I was blown away by the wonder of it.

I'll tell you some more of my story later.

Now let's think about What science is and what it is not.

Scientists are always trying to make sense of what they see, to propose a theory that best explains the evidence. If new and surprising evidence is discovered, a new or modified theory needs to be put forward and then rigorously tested. Occasionally this might involve a whole paradigm shift.

One thing that science cannot do is either prove or disprove the existence of God. This is simply outside of its scope. Just because some scientists are also atheists, does not mean that this is the only possible position to hold, or even the most reasonable.

There are many eminent scientists who are also committed Christians – Francis Collins who headed up the Human Genome Project, Simon Conway Morris who is professor of evolutionary palaeobiology in the Department of Earth Sciences at the University of Cambridge, Sam Berry who was the Professor of Genetics at the University of London, John Lennox an Emeritus Professor of Mathematics at the University of Oxford and a Christian apologist, Sir John Haughton who had a leading role in the early days of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and the list goes on.

Also, many of the key figures of science in the past were also committed Christians, or at least believed in God, and were vocal in their claims that science and faith are not mutually exclusive. They understood God to be a God of order, so they could expect to find order and consistency in the world that he had made. These included Francis Bacon, Johannes Kepler, Blaise Pascal, Isaac Newton, Galileo, Robert Boyle, Carl Friedrich Gauss, Gregor Mendel ... and the list goes on.

Science is a quest for truth about the natural world, what Christians would call "creation". A helpful way to think about this, although somewhat simplistic, is that science looks at the questions "how" and "when", faith looks at "who" and "why". Science in itself is neither atheistic nor theistic.

Many of the new atheists are often loud, aggressive and evangelistic in declaring that God does not exist. But loud does not equal true. Even Richard Dawkins has recently acknowledged that he can not say categorically that God does not exist.

I'd like to share two illustrations that are taken from the biography of John Polkinghorne, a British mathematical physicist who developed much of the mathematics in the discovery and validation of the quark, the smallest known particle of matter. After 25 years in academia he resigned his post to become an Anglican minister.

These two illustrations show how two different ways of looking at something can be true at the same time.

The first illustration involves a question one might ask "Why is the water in the kettle boiling?"

“Electricity heats the element which raises the temperature of the water to boiling point, and we could talk about how fast the molecules are moving ...” OR “I am making a cup of tea for my friend.” Both are valid answers coming from different points of view.

The second illustration involves scientists’ understanding of light.

For years scientists showed convincingly, with both observation and theory, that light was a series of particles. Then, scientists showed, again with both observations and theory, that it was waves. It acted differently in different situations. This is known as the wave/particle duality of light. It was a very surprising conclusion that went against the accepted ideas of the day. Again it shows us that two very different ways of looking at something can both be true. But Polkinghorne says that the real lesson here is, “that reality is surprising and teaches us not to think we know. Reality should lead us to ask, ‘What makes you think this is the case?’” Perhaps this is a helpful question for all of us.

So, science and faith both involve a quest for truth. Science can not answer the question “why?” We need both science and faith. They don’t negate each other. They are not foes in the common search for knowledge. They are complementary. They are like two books that seek to explain what we see in the world around us.

So, for a Christian who is also a scientist, how do faith and science interact? As a scientist, when we see the beauty, complexity and order in nature revealed through science, it leads us to praise God. And, as a Christian, because God is Creator, it encourages us to persevere in scientific research to discover more of his works, “to think his thoughts after him” as Kepler said, and to help others to see his greatness.

Each new discovery in science leads us to greater praise of our Creator and in no way diminishes our belief in God. This negates the dismissal of our faith as “God of the gaps”.

Now let’s turn our thoughts to Creation

When I was starting to think about this talk I opened our Study Bible to the beginning of Genesis. There it was, safely kept, a very useful diagram on a piece of scrap paper from a conversation that I had with my son, about three years ago. Among other things, he lectures in biology at university. He has found it useful from time to time to share this diagram with people who have challenged him quite aggressively with questions like “You’re a scientist, how can you believe in God? The world wasn’t made in 7 days...” He would then open the Bible with them so they understood the literary structure of Genesis 1 removing their perceived conflict with the creation story. And it opened the way so he could then point them to the realisation that they could never conclusively prove or disprove the existence of God from the theories of the origins of life. But the thing they could test and have certainty about was the historical person of Jesus. This could then move the discussion to Jesus as the way to know God if they wanted to pursue the conversation.

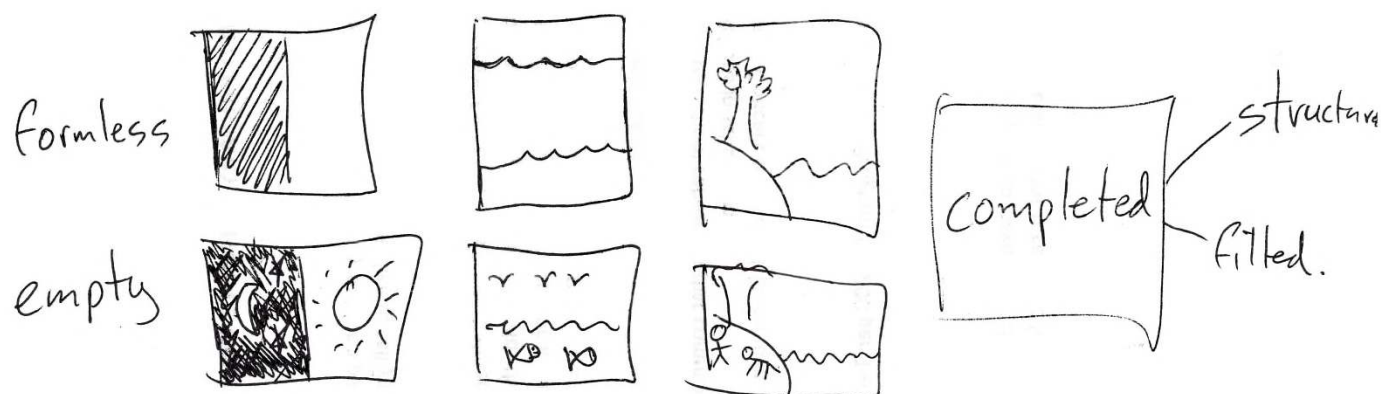
The diagram on the insert in your bulletin shows the structure of the text. I have since discovered it was first developed by a German philosopher and theologian, by the name of Johann Gottfried von Herder, who died in 1803.

The book of Genesis starts off

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

² Now the earth was formless and empty ...”

If we look at the diagram, the pictures in the top row represent Days 1, 2 and 3 in the Genesis 1 account of creation, and those in the second line Days 4, 5 and 6. The square at the end that says “completed” is Day 7.



So we can see, at the left hand end of the top line of the diagram, that the earth starts off “formless”. And then, as we go across the top line we see

On day 1, God said, “Let there be light.” And God saw that the light was good. Then he separated the night from the day.

On day 2, God made the sky and separated the water above and below the sky.

On day 3, God uncovered the land from the sea. And God saw that it was good. Then he filled the land with plants and trees. And God saw that it was good.

But we can see that these environments that the Lord had made were still empty, so he filled each one in turn.

On day 4, God said “Let there be lights ...,” the greater light by day and the lesser light and stars by night. And God saw that it was good. The sun and moon are not even named to emphasise that they are not to be worshipped like the surrounding cultures did.

On day 5, God filled the sky with birds, and the sea with fish and other sea creatures. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them and said, “Be fruitful and multiply ...”

On day 6, God made living creatures to fill the land. And God saw that it was good. Then God created humankind. And God saw all that he had made and it was very good.

On day 7, God had completed the work of creation, so he rested and instituted the Sabbath.

On the right hand end of the diagram is the summary of the completeness – on the first three days God gave structure to the earth, what had been formless now had structure, and on the second three days he filled those structures, what had been empty was now filled. I found that seeing the literary structure of Genesis 1 in this way, was a “light bulb” moment for me and I appreciated it in a new way. It emphasised for me that it was not going to clash with a scientific understanding of creation.

When we think about why Genesis 1 is written like this, a few different ideas might help us come to a deeper understanding.

Firstly, Genesis speaks in language that is accessible to all people of all times. The theological idea of **accommodation** might help us here. It is the idea that God who is infinite and transcendent accommodates himself to the limitations of our language and perspective in order to reveal himself to us. It is part of the whole redemptive story. So what **is** God trying to say to us when Genesis 1 repeats “God said ...” and “God saw that it was good”? Perhaps it is answering the “who” and “why” questions much more than “how” and “when” questions.

Secondly, the way the account is structured and the repetition also function as a memory aid for accurate transmission in an oral culture.

Thirdly: the ordering also challenges the idolatry of ancient near eastern people who worshipped the stars and sun and moon. The sun and moon were just “greater and lesser lights” appearing somewhere in the sequence and of no greater significance than the rest of creation.

So, even though Genesis 1 and science use different types of language and answer different questions, they complement each other. They look at the same phenomena from different perspectives and together we have a more complete picture that gives us even more reason to praise God who is the author of creation and who is above and beyond it all.

So back to my story.

We had been living in George Town at the time of that geology symposium with the presentation that blew me away. It was in the late 1970s, and we were part of the Anglican Church there. It was a church on the brink of revival, a time of great excitement, part of the worldwide Charismatic Renewal that we had also been part of in Hobart in the early 70s. But, for various sad reasons, it all started falling apart, and also at that time we needed to move back to Hobart.

So we moved back to Hobart with three young children, leaving a close Christian community, broken-hearted over the events in the church there, and arrived back to find that many of those Christians that we most admired here were caught up in the Creation Science movement.

We went to a weekend seminar in which we heard things like the magma in volcanoes came from the centre of the Earth, a new sort of coal had been discovered that showed that it was formed in Noah’s flood, and the derogatory comment that some people even thought that you could be a Christian and believe in evolution (followed by a snigger around the room). My faith was rocked to the core and it nearly broke me. I had to battle my way through to eventually decide that I could still be a Bible-believing Christian and not have to agree with their interpretation of the first chapters of Genesis. It was a lonely road! That was forty years ago, and it is only recently that I have been able to talk about these ideas without falling back into the distress and emotional turmoil of that time.

At one time I toyed with the idea of doing a PhD so that I would have some credibility in this conversation. The title page of my thesis would have included the inscription “The heavens declare the glory of God ...” from Psalm 19:1

However, my life had moved on, and the PhD never happened. But science revealing the glory of God has remained a passion of my life, a cornerstone of my existence.

How great is our God and how marvellous are the works of his creation!

10am Recently, I came across a beautiful song that expresses these thoughts. It tells the story from creation to redemption. It talks of the wonder that leads us to praise God with and for his creation, and to offer our lives to him in response to his greatness and compassion. You’ll find the words in your bulletin – “So Will I”. Let’s listen to it now. Feel free to join in if you know it.

So Will I (100 Billion X):

God of creation
There at the start, before the beginning of time
With no point of reference
You spoke to the dark and fleshed out the wonder of light

And as You speak
A hundred billion galaxies are born
In the vapour of Your breath the planets form
If the stars were made to worship, so will I
I can see Your heart in everything You’ve made
Every burning star, a signal fire of grace
If creation sings Your praises, so will I

God of Your promise
You don't speak in vain, no syllable empty or void
For once You have spoken
All nature and science follow the sound of Your voice

And as You speak
A hundred billion creatures catch Your breath
Evolving in pursuit of what You said
If it all reveals Your nature, so will I
I can see Your heart in everything You say
Every painted sky a canvas of Your grace
If creation still obeys You, so will I

If the stars were made to worship, so will I
If the mountains bow in reverence, so will I
If the oceans roar Your greatness, so will I
For if everything exists to lift You high, so will I
If the wind goes where You send it, so will I
If the rocks cry out in silence, so will I
If the sum of all our praises still falls shy
Then we'll sing again a hundred billion times

God of salvation
You chased down my heart through all of my failure and pride
On a hill You created
The light of the world abandoned in darkness to die

And as You speak
A hundred billion failures disappear
Where You lost Your life so I could find it here
If You left the grave behind You, so will I
I can see Your heart in everything You've done
Every part designed in a work of art called love
If You gladly chose surrender, so will I
I can see Your heart, eight billion different ways
Every precious one, a child You died to save
If You gave Your life to love them, so will I

Like You would again a hundred billion times
But what measure could amount to Your desire?
You're the One who never leaves the one behind

Joel Houston, Benjamin Hastings, Michael Fatkin, Hillsong United, © Capitol Christian Music Group, CCLI # 82041

Some suggestions for further reading/listening:

Ep 137 Is the Genesis account simply a myth? City Bible Forum podcast – interview with Dr Andrew Brown, a lecturer in Old Testament at the Melbourne School of Theology, previously a Baptist pastor and whose PhD thesis was The History of Christian Interpretation of the Creation Week in Genesis 1.

<https://citybibleforum.org/city/melbourne/episode/ep-137-genesis-account-creation-simply-myth>

Jeanne has a transcript, email if you would like a copy. (wherrettaj@trump.net.au)

The Reason For God by Tim Keller in St George's library; there are lots of copies – Chapter 6 "Science has Disproved Christianity" is a good place to start thinking about the relationship between Christianity and science, with some particular thoughts on evolution and miracles.

Does science make belief in God obsolete? ABC Religion and Ethics <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/does-science-make-belief-in-god-obsolete/10100646>

<http://iscast.org> ISCAST (Christians in Science and Technology) is an Australian network of people, from students to distinguished academics, exploring the interface of science, technology, and Christian faith. Lots of interesting information and articles.

Test of Faith; Spiritual Journeys with Scientists, personal stories of ten eminent scientists. Jeanne has a copy. The first chapter, by Francis Collins who headed up the Human Genome Project is available at <http://www.testoffaith.com/book/> ⇒ Sample chapter: Francis Collins, "[Learning the Language of God](#)".