Genesis 2:4-25 and Luke 7:36-50

When Simon handed over the preaching baton to Gray, Rod and me before he went away, he left detailed instructions about our options. We could simply do our own thing – which Gray did admirably last week – or follow the Scripture Union programme which the young people are following, or link in with the IBRA Bible notes - which many of us are using this year and which have been the focus for Simon’s preaching of late.

Gray set the standard last week by focusing on the most important word in the Bible – the word from Christ’s greatest commandment, which should be the root of everything we are and everything we do as Christians – the word love. Gray’s service last week made me smile for lots of reasons; primarily because it was a beautiful and heartfelt message delivered with sincerity and conviction, but partly because it immediately connected with a word which has been niggling in my mind for a long time now and gave me a clear indication about what I needed to focus on this week. When I got home last Sunday I sat down and checked out the Scripture Union notes to discover that the set text for today was the Genesis reading we’ve just heard and that made me laugh a lot. When I fell over Tuesday’s reading in the IBRA Bible notes, which was the Luke reading we’ve just heard then the jigsaw was complete. The connections may not be apparent to you now, but hopefully they will be by the time I’ve finished speaking.

Today’s passage from Genesis is a really interesting one. I’ve been looking at it in some depth as part of the work for my Master’s degree in Theology, Imagination and Culture and have worked on it as part of an essay, and again as part of my final dissertation (which is almost finished!). You may or may not have noticed that there are two different versions of the creation story in Genesis. The first one is believed to have been written by someone usually referenced as ‘the Priestly writer’ and the second one – the one we looked at today – is credited to someone usually referenced as ‘the Yahwist writer’. All this begs the question – why do we need the story telling twice, and what’s the difference between the two versions?

Well one of the crucial differences is the detail in the story about how God made people and what he made them for. Most of us these days accept that the idea of God, in some kind of human form (probably wearing a long white beard and a nighty) bending down to shape humans from the dust of the ground, breathing life into us and letting us loose in the Garden of Eden is probably not quite how things happened; it’s more of a metaphor than a description of how it actually was. We accept Darwin’s theories about the Origin of Species and know that homo-sapiens (as we now call ourselves) have evolved, alongside all the other life forms on this planet, slowly and gradually from other species. It doesn’t mean that God didn’t create us, just that he didn’t do it in quite the way that some people used to say he did.

The Priestly writer (the one we haven’t read this morning) talks about God saying, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea….etc etc… and every living thing that creeps upon the earth.’ The passage then says that God created humankind ‘in the image of God’ and that we were created ‘male and female’. As we heard this morning, the Yahwist version of the story has a bit more detail. It describes God forming man from the dust of the ground and breathing life into his nostrils before setting off to create all the other living creatures in order than man wouldn’t be lonely. Of course, none of the other creatures were acceptable as a helper for man so God created woman from man’s rib and the rest, as they say, is history.

The main similarity in this story is that the human race is seen to be special, to have ‘dominion’ over all the rest of creation, to have the authority to call other creatures by name. The crucial difference, which has caused problems for humanity ever since, is the way that the Yahwist author appears to describe the creation of man first and woman, as an afterthought, from a tiny fragment of the man’s own body – an insignificant rib.

I said that realising I was to preach on this passage made me laugh a lot, so here we go, have you heard the joke about this…? The one where God creates Adam, who complains about being lonely because he can’t talk to the sheep, so God offers him a companion that will be so beautiful and loving and giving and all around wonderful that she will make him happy ever after. Adam’s thrilled with the idea and asks when this companion will turn up, but God has bad news and explains that she’s going to cost Adam an arm, a leg, one eye, one ear, one… well – you know… one of those too…. And Adam thinks for a bit and says, ‘Tell you what God, see what you can produce from a rib!’

And of course this joke is quite funny and it even makes me laugh, but when I think about this, about all of this, it makes me really, really upset and angry. You see this passage has been used throughout much of our human history to justify arguments about the inferiority of women. It’s been used to exclude them from holding office in the church, it’s been used to argue that women are second class citizens, afterthoughts, whose sole function in life is to serve men and produce children….

Which brings me in mind of another joke I heard this week… How many Clare Balding’s do you get for one Gary Lineker? The punchline (between nine and ten) isn’t quite as funny as the Adam joke and the story about BBC salaries this week just goes to illustrate the fact that women are not equal in the 21st Century… of course the other big story of the week is that they certainly shouldn’t be allowed to be Dr Who…! One can’t help wondering how Jodie Whittaker’s salary will compare with Peter Capaldi’s…

The great theologian Augustine of Hippo has a lot to answer for here. I’ve quoted a passage from his famous fifth century work ‘The Literal Meaning of Genesis’ in my dissertation. Here it is:

*Now if the woman was not made for the man to be his helper in begetting children, in what was she to help him? She was not to till the earth with him, for there was not yet any toil to make help necessary. If there were any such need, a male helper would be better, and the same could be said of the comfort of another’s presence if Adam were perhaps weary of solitude. How much more agreeably could two male friends, rather than a man and a woman, enjoy companionship and conversation in a life shared together… Consequently, I do not see in what sense the woman was made as a helper for the man if not for the sake of bearing children.*

The saddest thing about this is that Augustine wasn’t joking…. Women do seem to equal baby-machines in his understanding of how God wants the world to be. This text in Genesis has been used to exclude women in all sorts of ways and on the surface of it you can see why. Before we go much further though we need to think about its context. This passage was probably written about six centuries BC - either just before or during the Israelite’s exile in Babylon – so almost eight hundred years (give or take) before Darwin’s theories about the evolution of species! It was written in Hebrew and has been translated into English, sometimes via other languages such as Latin or Greek along the way. About 4% of Christians today still believe that this is a literal description of the creation of humankind. Augustine may have wanted to see it that way, but as I’ve already said, I see it rather as a remarkably intelligent and divinely inspired metaphor which explains God’s purpose in creating the Earth and God’s intention for humankind to be entrusted with the care and management of the planet. God created us in order that we might be in a loving relationship with our creator, and we were created to live in community with other humans.

The problem comes, as we saw with our ‘groups’ game earlier, when we start deciding which people we want to be grouped in community with… and which we don’t… and when we start thinking that some people are superior to others, and especially when we start using the Bible to try to prove that.

I’m not a Hebrew scholar, but I’ve read some excellent work by people who are – most notably a linguist called Renato Lings - and apparently, when you look at the original Hebrew text of Genesis, one thing that is clear is that throughout the creation stories the pronouns that are used to describe God are both singular and plural, without necessarily being gender specific. This is not a mistake – the text is too carefully polished for that. It’s a very careful attempt to suggest that our creator God transcends the categories of singular and plural, male and female and is beyond our comprehension. How wonderful it would be if this variety of pronoun use had survived in to some of our English translations, our hymns and our liturgies.

When it comes to the first reference to what we might now call homo-sapiens, the ‘adam’ is created from the ‘adamah’ (which is clearly a bit of a pun!). Adamah is a word with feminine gender meaning soil, earth or ground. So adam literally means ‘of the ground’ - earthling or groundling - and is apparently referred to in both singular and plural terms in a peculiar way; adam is a singular word but the pronouns used to describe adam are plural.

When we look at our English translations however, seven of the twelve main translations examined by the scholar Lings translate the word adam as ‘man’. Three use the words ‘human beings’, one says ‘mankind’ and the other ‘humankind’…. So the male gender of the first human is created through translation and is not there in the original text.

The other crucial word in the translation is the Hebrew word ‘tsela’. This exact same word appears in Exodus 25:12 and in that context all twelve of the English bibles translate it as ‘side’. Why is it then that in Genesis, all twelve of them translate the word as ‘rib’? Well apparently it probably first appeared because of the ambiguity created by a Latin translation in the middle ages, whereupon people began to argue that woman was created from man’s rib because she was inferior.

It’s not actually until the second being is formed from the ‘side’ (which of course can be an equal half!) of the first, that the gender specific words ish and ishshah (man and woman) appear.

I was talking about this at our ‘Chop and Chat’ session on Tuesday this week. At the end of the session, in response to my observations about mistranslation, the man who had been cooking with us told me how he had heard that the very first clock face that was ever made was made by someone who didn’t understand roman numerals and mistakenly used four Is instead of IV for the number 4. This mistake has apparently led to many clocks and watches having the wrong symbol for the Roman numeral 4. When he told me the story, I checked my own watch and saw he was right. Now I don’t know whether this really is the story behind the mistake on so many watch and clock faces, and I don’t really care. The point that our friend was making was that one simple mistake or misunderstanding can lead others to mistake and misunderstand, and the consequences can go on for a very long time. Human error can be a terrible thing, even when it’s completely innocent. How much worse when people consciously manipulate truth to suit their own purpose or inclination?

How much damage has been done by the mistranslations and flawed interpretations of our Genesis story? How many women have been led to believe that God created them to be subservient and submissive to men when that’s simply not the case? Genesis tells us that God created us to be in community, that having partners or helpers by our side on the journey through life will help us to live most effectively and find the joy intended for us, that loneliness and solitude are damaging for humans. Genesis is not about gender wars.

Unfortunately, throughout much of our human history, women have been excluded from positions of power and authority, relegated to second class citizens and condemned for sins of sexual misconduct that men have got away with. We only have to look at our gospel story to see the truth of this.

Imagine the scene – one of the leading Pharisees has invited Jesus to dinner. The Pharisees weren’t just religious leaders, they had political power and financial influence too – a sort of combination of a high powered clergyman, an MP and a wealthy businessman all rolled in to one. Why would such a person invite Jesus to dinner…? Undoubtedly it was an attempt to find out what made this hugely popular (and potentially dangerous) person tick, to see if some of that popularity could be manipulated or exploited for his own purposes. Imagine a posh dinner party, no expense spared, and an impressive guest list…. and just as Jesus sits down to dinner in bursts a woman…. Not only a woman, but a sinful woman – the implication is that she was a prostitute. What you need to understand here is that a good self-respecting Pharisee wouldn’t permit any woman to come closer than four cubits away from him (four fore-arm lengths), and Jesus is sitting there happily allowing her to kiss his feet and pour perfume all over them and rub them with her hair. Well come on – imagine that scene in YOUR dining room…! How would you feel?

To be fair, Simon the Pharisee doesn’t make any comment or rebuke in the story, he doesn’t throw the woman out, he simply makes his own silent judgement on the kind of woman she is, and on the kind of man Jesus must be to allow this…. It’s quite a British response actually! It’s the sort of thing we might do if a ragged, undesirable looking person approached us… maybe a bit smelly and unkempt…. We might simply look the other way, remember that we had to rush off and be somewhere else… or just shun them (a bit like the way George Warleggen behaves whenever Demelza turns up at a posh dinner party in Poldark!). Not only did Jesus NOT do this, he accepted her attention warmly, told a story to explain that what matters most is love, and that love doesn’t work that way – love works on forgiveness and inclusion, not superiority and punishment and exclusion. He tells the woman that she is forgiven, and that she should go in peace.

The thing here is that we all know what we’re supposed to feel about this story. We all know that we’re supposed to side with Jesus and not the nasty mean Pharisee who has clearly read a mistranslation of Genesis and thinks women are inferior scum, especially ones who’ve corrupted and seduced innocent righteous men….

Now some of you could be forgiven for feeling a bit disgruntled with me just now and thinking you’ve had enough of sitting and listening to an angry feminist rant, but actually – feminism isn’t my word of the day and women’s rights are not what I’m interested in. The woman thing is just a vehicle – a convenient and easily understood vehicle - for a much bigger and more important concept: in order to love people we must include them in our group and value them as equals.

This issue works in two ways. First of all, what an amazing truth for all those of us who have ever felt excluded, unloved, second class or left out…. Ever considered that we’re on the lower step, the odd one out because of something we’ve done, or something we’ve said, or something that’s happened to us, or simply because of who we are. It’s not just about women… it’s about people with disabilities and mental health issues, people who don’t have the right bank balance, drive the right car, have the right accent or wear the right clothes. Jesus tells us that with God we are NEVER the odd one out – we are all, always, at the heart of the party, loved, included, valued and cherished. Just like the woman in the gospel story, we can all go out of here today in peace…. Part of the family. How amazing is that?

Secondly though, we need to ask ourselves the question – what do WE have to do to actually make that happen for the other people around us…? It’s easy to wag a finger at the BBC, or the politicians, or the super-rich celebrities, but how often, if we are totally honest with ourselves, do we find ourselves in the shoes of Simon the Pharisee rather than Jesus? How often do we avoid and judge and exclude people and pretend that it’s for their own good, that it will teach them a lesson, that it’s the only way they’ll learn to be good and Godly and go to heaven? And even if we don’t actually DO the excluding and the shunning, like Simon the Pharisee we still THINK the revulsion, or the pity, or the judgement against that person who doesn’t fit in to our concept of how people should be. I know I catch myself doing it all the time – and I sometimes think that church has helped to condition me to think that way. It’s so easy to get alongside people who share our values and behave the way we do, and to set ourselves up as God’s mouthpieces and use the Bible – with all its mistranslations – to jump to conclusions about people who are not like us, and explain why they really can’t be allowed to join our group on equal terms.

So if Gray’s word last week was Love, Love, Love… then my word for the week ahead is Inclusion, Inclusion, Inclusion. Let’s all go away from here knowing in our heart of hearts that we are loved and we are included – fully included – in God’s kingdom, and let’s challenge ourselves to try to walk in Jesus’ footsteps this week and not those of Simon the Pharisee, and pray for the Holy Spirit to open our eyes to the injustices and prejudices in some of our judgements… many of which have roots in simple misunderstandings and mistranslations. Amen.