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Septuagesima

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READING GENESIS

This Sunday, according to ancient custom, is called Septuagesima: next Sunday is called Sexagesima, and the Sunday after that Quinquagesima. Those of you with some Latin will know that these strange old names mean "seventy", "sixty", "fifty", and that the next in the series would be Quadragesima, "forty", in reference to the forty days of Lent. What they signify is that the Church, having completed the celebration of our Lord's Incarnation in Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany, is now beginning to count down towards Easter (which falls on April 8th this year), and the celebration of our Redemption in the death, resurrection, and ascension of the Incarnate Son of God. On Septuagesima, we are approximately seventy days (nine weeks, to be precise) before Easter.

In accordance with this ancient custom, on Septuagesima we begin reading the book of Genesis (appointed for weekday morning and evening prayer, see Prayer Book pp. xvi, xvii). This reading of Genesis is part of our preparation for Easter, because of its accounts of the creation, the fall of man, and the beginning of our redemption in God's call to Abraham. This ancient history has a profound relevance to us as Christians. The creation of the world foreshadows our new and spiritual creation in Christ; the fall of Adam into sin, our resurrection to a new life of righteousness in Christ; the promise made to Abraham, our redemption in Christ. We read them for their testimony to Christ, and in light of their fulfillment in Christ, which they also prepare us to hear and receive with understanding.

What of the creation? Genesis 1 speaks of a primordial deep, stirred up by a divine wind or spirit, out of which God creates all things by his commanding word; Genesis 2, of a desert-like dust, from which God forms man, like a potter shaping clay, and into which he breathes the breath of life. From these accounts we might mistakenly conclude that God used the sea as raw material for his creation of the world – or perhaps the dust of the earth. Other passages in the Bible clarify for us the meaning of these images. "The sea is his, and he made it, and his hands prepared the dry land" (Psalm 95.5) – so Genesis 1 and 2 are not to be understood as teaching a pre-existent matter upon which God is dependent or which limits his making. Nor do the angelic powers, so easily mistaken for gods, stand outside the creation: "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth" (Psalm 33.6). But the New Testament is even more clear: "All things were made by him" – the Word of God who in the beginning was with God and was God – "and without him

was not anything made that was made" (John 1.3 cf Hebrews 11.3).

Accordingly, from ancient times, the church has inferred from scripture the doctrine of creation ex nihilo, creation out of nothing (2 Maccabees 7.28). That does not mean that the creation is really "nothing", but rather that all that exists, exists only in the word and will of God: there is no thing that has any existence independent of God's creative and preserving power, no thing that is not utterly dependent upon his good and perfect will for its existence. In this sharp distinction of Creator and creature is overcome the confusion of nature and spirit found in pagan religions. In that distinction we are set free from the tyranny of false gods and the worship of idols: no power of nature, no desire of man, no invention of the human mind, may be regarded as absolute: all must be seen in relation to that pure and perfect and infinite good, which utterly transcends all things created, is the ground of their being, and whose all-governing good will is made known to us in his word.

The doctrine of Creation has its corollary in the doctrine of Providence. That which God creates, he also sustains and preserves. All that exists, exists in the word and will of God, and nothing falls outside his good and perfect will, not even the sparrow, as Jesus says. This raises many puzzles – why does God suffer the wicked to live and prosper? why does he tolerate evil? – but it also teaches us to look for his fatherly goodness in all things, even those least promising to our eyes. "We know that all things work together for good to them that love God" (Romans 8.28). Through belief in divine providence, we can (as the Heidelberg Catechism puts it) "be patient in adversity, thankful in prosperity, and for what is future have good confidence in our faithful God and Father that no creature shall separate us from his love". The God who had the first word in creation will also have the last, and all that falls between, even the evil, will be but the means by which he attains his eternal good purpose.

The doctrine of creation also has special reference to man, and man's nature; and this in turn leads us on to consider his fall and redemption, which we will consider in next week's paper.

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