

Session 12: The Old Testament Creation Stories

B. The creation narrative of Genesis 2

Activity 12.3

Read Genesis 2:4-25

If we compare Genesis 2 with Genesis 1 it is immediately apparent that the two creation accounts belong to very different literary 'genres'. Genesis 1 is structured, 'hymnic' prose, in some ways like a liturgical procession, in which humankind comes on to the scene at the end, the most important place. In complete contrast, Genesis 2 is a STORY. To understand what we can learn from it, we need first to understand how stories work:

- a) Stories evoke the imagination and draw the reader in. They invite the reader to think and feel from the point of view of the characters. When God says, 'It is not good for the man to be alone,' there is a point of tension. Will God find a solution to the problem? The tension is resolved with the creation and gift of a woman as companion.
- b) They are often full of symbolic features that resonate with experience, in which the meaning is always greater than it is possible to pin down. In Genesis 2 the garden, the rivers, the tree and its fruit, and the serpent all strike chords in the unconscious. Eden is a garden in the desert, from which flow four rivers, one toward each point of the compass. Since water is the course of life, symbolically all life flows from this garden.
- c) Stories make their point by providing a pattern for thinking about experience. Genesis 2 and 3 together portray an original state of communion with God in a paradise garden, from which the man and woman are perpetually shut out because of an act of disobedience. This story invites us to see the whole of human life in creation in these terms.
- d) Stories are highly memorable.
- e) But they always mean more than one thing. They teach not so much through intellectual analysis but through stimulating the imagination. They are open-ended: there is more to be discovered.

Genesis 2 contrasts sharply with Genesis 1 also in its portrayal of God. Whereas in Genesis 1 God is transcendent and creates by command, in Genesis 2 he forms a human being from clay, breathes into his nostrils, plants a garden, leads animals to the man, takes a rib from the man and makes it into a woman. All these are 'anthropomorphisms', descriptions of God in human terms, a portrayal of him that is literally much more 'down to earth' than the first chapter.

But this does not mean that chapter 2 is simpler or more 'primitive' than chapter 1. All these actions of God function as evocative symbols. They give the reader a clue as to how to think about God, the world and humankind, but leave him or her to draw out the implications. Moreover, the idea of God making, deciding and speaking to the man and the woman, portray him in a way that is accessible without pinning him down. In fact, the story is just as deeply theological as is the account in the first chapter.

In chapter 1, human beings are portrayed as the crown of creation, a special creation of God distinct from the rest of the animal kingdom, the rulers of the created world. In chapter 2 the same general concept is expressed in a different way. The breath of God is in Hebrew the *ruach* or 'spirit'. Formed from clay, human beings are very much creatures of earth, but at the same time enlivened by the spirit of God to become *nephesh*, or 'living souls'. In this account the whole creation is modelled around and for the first human being in order to provide him with the best possible environment. His task is to 'till the garden and keep it'; so work is very much a part of humankind's God-given vocation, its purpose being to bring creation to its full potential. The man is also differentiated from the animals not just by the mode of his creation but by his naming of the animal kingdom, symbolic of him assigning each species its place in the created order.

The differentiation of the sexes is presented as a mystery. The word for 'man' is *adam*, used of 'the human race' and very similar to *adamah* meaning 'earth' or 'ground'. So humanity as a race is taken from the earth. After the creation of the woman, he becomes *ish*, or 'male human being' to whom *ishshah*, the woman, is a counterpart. Thus men and women are different and yet the same. She is a suitable partner: not just helper but companion and equal. Unlike the animals she is taken not from the ground but from the man himself. The man and the woman are made for one another: their desire is for the unity they have, expressed as 'one flesh'.