

## Exploring John's Gospel through the Creation story

The following article is the first chapter from a book entitled *Beginning Over Again: Through Lent with Genesis and the Gospels*, written by Clare Amos, USPG's Theological Consultant and Director of Theological Studies for the Anglican Communion Office. The chapter refers obliquely to some of the issues raised by the story of the woman of Samaria. The book is now out of print.

### Focus

The vivid reminiscences of Genesis which we find in the Gospel of John encourage us to share in God's ongoing work of creation, in which love plays a central part.

### Key Bible passages

Genesis 1–3; John 1:1-14; 4:5-42; 19:25-30; 20:1-18.

### Resources

You might find it helpful to have an icon, perhaps of Christ, to look at. Pictures of Michaelangelo's *Creation of Adam*, or William Blake's *Creation* could also be useful (though not essential).

There is no end to the beginning of Genesis. It is a story without a proper starting point, and it is a story whose conclusion humanity is still involved in writing. This Lent book seeks to invite us to become part of the story.

The traditional opening words of Genesis that we know so well from the Authorised Version, 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth', lull us by their sense of familiarity. Yet can we properly speak of 'the beginning' before time itself has begun? And in fact there is no 'the' before 'beginning' in the original Hebrew of this sentence. It is almost impossible to reproduce in English the exact nuance of what the Hebrew text is trying to convey: perhaps 'When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void...' is as close as we can get. The essential point is that what we are being told about here is a process; not 'the beginning' that is totally separated off from where we are now, and not something that is over and done with. In Gen. 1–2 the six days on which the earth, plant and animal life and humanity are made are carefully signed off with the repetitious 'There was evening, and there was morning, the...x day'. But the seventh day, the sabbath day, has no such mark of time attached to it. The seventh day is a day without end. It is the 'day' in which we are still, and still waiting for the completion of all things. In John's Gospel, when Jesus is accused of working on the seventh day, his response is 'My Father is still working, and I also am working' (*John 5.17*). God and his Christ are still weaving the threads and textures of creation. What does this mean for human beings? What is our place and our role in this story?

It was a question several of the books of the Old Testament were also anxious to ask. Do you remember Job and how he raged at God, refusing – quite rightly – to accept that the profound suffering he was experiencing was due to some evil he might have done, wittingly or unwittingly? Job's frustrations are poured out in chapter after chapter of the Old Testament book which bears his name. Then suddenly in chapter 38 the story shifts. Now it is God's turn to offer a challenge. The challenge is twofold – he offers Job his own presence, and he reminds him sharply of the vast gulf that exists between God and humanity,

'Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth...  
When the morning stars sang together,  
And all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?' (*Job 38:4,7*)

A few years ago I wrote a reflection that was linked to the ideas expressed in this chapter of Job.

If only we had been there  
when the earth was born  
perhaps we would have seen more clearly

how precious is our world, how fragile and irreplaceable,  
perhaps we might have cherished it better and loved it more  
*If only we had been there*  
*When the morning stars sang together, and the holy ones shouted for joy.*

If only we had been there  
when the vast cathedral of the skies first soared aloft  
perhaps the music of the stars  
would have soothed our spirits,  
and played their harmonies into the lyrics of our lives,  
perhaps we too might have learned by heart the great psalm of peace  
*If only we had been there*  
*When the morning stars sang together, and the holy ones shouted for joy.*

If only we had been there  
when people could meet God face to face, in garden or in whirlwind,  
perhaps it would have been easier to live with questions,  
knowing God didn't want us to stop asking them -  
perhaps we might have understood they can't all be answered - at least this side of eternity  
—  
*If only we had been there*  
*When the morning stars sang together, and the holy ones shouted for joy.*

If only we had been there,  
when the lamb of God was offered before the world's foundation,  
perhaps we would have grasped the texture of our universe's strange fabric,  
still being woven through with love and sacrifice,  
perhaps we too might have learned obedience, treading the path of the servant Son,  
*If only we had been there*  
*When the morning stars sang together, and the holy ones shouted for joy.*<sup>i</sup>

In the weeks after the Asian tsunami I found myself coming back to this reflection. It helped me to reflect on why it was that people, both in the Bible and other ancient religious literature, told creation stories.

For such stories are told not primarily to satisfy scientific or intellectual curiosity, but to help bridge the gap between God and humanity, between God's ways and our own, that Job experienced so painfully. They are there, in effect, to make sense of the disordered chaos that we sometimes feel our world to be, to suggest that humanity was present – even if only as a glimmer in God's eye – when the process of construction of our world and universe began. The gap is perhaps not so totally insuperable after all. 'If only we had been there...' And in the biblical story of creation there is a sense in which we are.

It is no accident that human beings, and their place in relation to God and to the rest of creation, feature prominently in the two creation stories of Genesis. In Genesis 1 the creation of human beings is the final act of God after six days of working. Their special place is emphasized by the detail with which their creation is announced. God speaks in the plural, 'Let us...' almost as if consulting with his divine council before taking this momentous step (Christian tradition has regarded this as an allusion to the involvement of the Trinity in the creation of humankind). They are described as being created both male and female: a description that is unique to humanity as far as Genesis 1 is concerned. Above all they – we – alone are made in the image and likeness of God. What does it mean for humans to be in God's image? Much pen and ink has been spilt over many centuries in offering suggestions. But the essential implication seems to be that we are intended to be a visible reflection representative of God in the world. The Greek word 'icon' means 'image' – so one helpful way of understanding it is that we intended to be 'icons' of God. Eastern Christians believe that the invisible God can somehow become present to people through the visible icons honoured in churches: similarly to make God present to others is the awe-inspiring task that God has bequeathed to human kind. Implied however within this concept of image is the need for relationship – with the God whose image we are, with each other and with the rest of

creation. There seems to be an intrinsic connection between the plural verb (Let us...) used by God as he creates human beings and the vocation of human beings to live in his image. God desires to live in relationship rather than isolation. In so far as human beings then image or mirror God they too need to be in relationship, with God and with one another – and perhaps there is even a hint, since male and female are specifically mentioned, that the ‘image’ of God is most fully reflected when it encompasses the interrelationship between the sexes. It is telling that the only point in Gen. 1 where ‘male and female’ is referred to is in the creation of human beings. Does this mean that our sexuality is an essential part of what it means to be human? It is a source of pleasure and delight for us, but can also be a source of pain. For both individuals and the human race as a whole, our ‘growth’ into mature human beings requires us to learn to use this gift with wisdom.

Though the saga of Gen. 2 is very different, the position of human beings is equally significant within it. The intimacy with which the creation of humanity is described is startling – with God giving a form of mouth-to-mouth respiration to coax the human being into life, and then seemingly creating a myriad of other creatures primarily in an attempt to alleviate human loneliness. In spite of the fact that human beings are ‘dust of the earth’ – a connection strengthened by the pun between *adam* = human being and *adamah* = earth which runs through these chapters – the garden seems to be a place where God and humanity can converse together, if not on equal terms then perhaps as a lord might talk with a retainer who is also a friend. The language of ‘image’ is not used of human beings in Gen. 2, but perhaps the story is seeking to show how we have the potential to be in God’s image, although taken as a whole Gen. 2–3 suggest we may still have some way to travel.

Even when the woman is created – to be greeted with a cry of glee from Adam, who from this moment is more clearly identified as male – the relationship between human beings and God is not, to begin with, jeopardized. God seems to need humanity just as much as humanity needs God. One of the features of the Genesis story of creation is that because it is written from a monotheistic perspective God does not have a galaxy of other divine beings to interact with – to eat with, sleep with, fight with, play with. In the cool of the day this God walks in the garden, and the question, ‘Where are you?’ is not, initially at least, an accusation but the voice of one who is looking for company.

How did it all go so wrong? Or did it? The traditional view of what happens in the Garden speaks of it as a ‘fall’. It was all flawless to begin with – and then it went pear-shaped! Through their disobedience and decision to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge the first human beings irrevocably altered the perfect relationship they had with God, and we, their spiritual descendants, have been paying the price ever since (*see for example Romans 5.12-14*).

But us that really what the story is trying to tell us? The great theologian and martyr Irenaeus of Lyons reflecting on this story in the second century AD commented that initially Adam and Eve were like young children, and what we are hearing about is their growing up. Can Genesis 3 be read therefore as an allegory of the maturing of human beings? Isn’t their quest for knowledge and their gradual desire to make their own decisions, characteristic of the way that human children gradually seek autonomy and independence from their parents? As they grow up they need to learn the difference between good and evil, and how else can they – and we - learn except by experience, by trial and error?

Writing when she was a mother with a young child Christine Odell captured this need for children to be exposed to danger in order to realize their full potential

The apple shone among the leaves  
Glinting in the sunlight.  
The new-made world smelt soft and fresh.  
All was relaxed,  
Nothing to strive for,  
Totally laid back.

The apple glinted like a knife  
Just out of reach on a table-top.  
Don’t touch, child Adam, child Eve,  
That hard sharp knife,

Though of infinite use,  
Can cut and scar and maim.

The apple shone among the leaves.  
Its radiance burnt into their hearts;  
Its fragrance excited their very thought.  
Child Eve reached up,  
Picked it, ate it.  
And it was very sharp. <sup>ii</sup>

And given the double sense of the word 'knowledge' in Hebrew, where it is used to describe sexual intercourse as well as intellectual learning, does not the story perhaps describe the sexual maturing of human beings, which changes their relationship with each other and with the world around them? There are certainly hints in the story that this is so. Remember the sudden need of the man and the woman to conceal their nakedness. Those of us who are parents are familiar with the way that our young children who up till a certain time have run happily around the house in various states of undress suddenly start to demand an absolute personal privacy. The connection between knowledge and sexuality is made for us by the story: it is only after they have eaten of the tree of knowledge that Adam 'knows' his wife (*Gen. 4.1*), and in anticipation of their future offspring can name her Eve – the mother of all living.

Of course there are negative consequences to this knowledge as well. As human beings grow up we learn about our mortality. We know enough to know that we are going to die, but we do not know enough to prevent it. That is both our glory and our tragedy. Another result of which the story is all too aware is how the initial unity of the human being is replaced by a distance. In *Gen. 2.23* the human creature had exulted, 'This at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh' but now with the differentiated roles of the adult man and the adult woman, there is rivalry and an alienation between men and women. And the distance between human beings echoes the new distance that there now appears to be between God and human beings – as they are forced out of the garden. That original harmony between God, human beings and the earth appears to be fragmented: the three no longer seem to be bound together.

Yet this is not exactly a fall – but rather perhaps the consequence of a too abrupt rise, an over-hasty transition from naivety and innocence to maturity. We are, along with our world, in the process of 'becoming'. It is a process that may involve the labour pains of new life, but to become more fully what we are meant to be – people in the image and likeness of God - is a vision we still have the right to hold before our eyes. Joy Cowley's evocative reflection on caterpillars and butterflies catches this:

Suppose we're not a fallen people a all  
But people on the way up;  
Not caterpillars that once were butterflies,  
But actually the other way round.

Just suppose we have this wonderful God  
Who is so much in love with us.  
He has drawn us out of the animal kingdom,  
Giving us the divine spark of his love  
To grow into a fire within us and eventually  
Bring us to oneness with him.  
Just suppose this wonderful God  
So totally, crazily in love with us,  
First becomes one with his beloved,  
Taking on a human likeness  
To join us in our growing pains,  
Suffering everything we might suffer,  
To show us the truth of the empty chrysalis.

And just suppose that our worlds of fear  
Like disobedience and judgement and condemnation,  
Belong not to a God who is total Love  
But to a half grown people  
Trying to explain their incompleteness.

Suppose that the only ultimate truth  
Is that God is the source  
And destiny of every soul.  
Suppose that everything we are,  
All our light and shade, our sin and celebration,  
Belongs wholly in God's love.  
Suppose no one is ever lost to that love.

Wouldn't that be Good News?  
(Joy Cowley)<sup>iii</sup>

In the Gospels, and particularly the Gospel of John, we see what such 'becoming' might mean. For the Gospels take us through a process of 'beginning over again'. This does not invalidate what has happened before, but rather acts as a kind of lens bringing into sharper focus what was always there but somehow we failed to see. Yet at the same time we are building on what we already are, and what we have already learned from Genesis about the human condition. As a writer I often find myself (particularly since the days of word processors began – which has revolutionized the way I work!) going over and redoing earlier drafts of an article, a talk or a book. I am sure that many others – writers, musicians, dancers, scientists – find themselves doing the same. That does not mean that my first draft was necessarily wrong, and I am also aware that my second attempt would not be possible without the work and effort I had already put into the first. But by going over what I have already produced I find myself seeing some things more clearly and being led to discover new insights. That is, in fairly rough terms, a comparison of the relationship between Genesis and the Gospels. Another analogy would be to reflect on the task of therapists – who work with their clients through the remembered and unremembered events of a person's past to assist them to greater integration and to a healthy future. In a similar way I would like to encourage you to take a fresh look at the Gospels, in the light of Genesis – and in the light of your own experience of what it means to be a human being.

It is in fact impossible to read John's Gospel without being immediately aware of the resonances within it of Genesis, and in particular Gen. 1–3. Even a quick glance at the first few verses of the Gospel (*John 1.1-18*) shout out the deliberate echoes of Gen. 1. Both of course begin with the same three words, 'In the beginning', both are reflecting on how life came into being, both remind us of the fundamental place of light in the story of creation. The Gospel tells us that creation came into being through the 'Word', and according to Genesis it was by the act of speaking that God's work of creation proceeded. But we also find the echo of Genesis continuing to the conclusion of the Prologue in verses 14 and 18. For as we hear of the 'glory' of God that is revealed in the Word become flesh (verse 14) there is, half hidden, an allusion to the concept of 'image' that introduced humanity's vocation in Genesis 1. The best understanding of what the word 'glory' meant to the biblical writers – and certainly to the writer of John's Gospel – is to describe it as 'the visible presence of God'. We are very close here to the language of image or icon (The connection is even clearer in Hebrews 1.3.) In the Word becoming flesh in Jesus Christ, and showing God's glory, humanity has at last come into its birthright as the image or icon of God: what human beings were always meant to be. This cannot be said too strongly. So often we see the fact that we are 'human' as something negative – the opposite, if you like, of divinity. Yet our problem may be not that we are too human – but that we are not human enough. As the glory of God, Christ is humanity's perfection – and its goal. In this Gospel, whose stated purpose is to help us have life (*John 20.32*) we are going to have enfleshed for us the statement of Irenaeus, 'The glory of God is humanity alive - and the life of humanity is the vision of God.' As Irenaeus' words suggest, the health of God and human beings seems to depend on their being bound closely together. Each needs the other. Yet another of the church fathers, Clement of Alexandria, expresses what this might mean, using the metaphor of song:

'A beautiful breathing instrument had God fashioned man,  
after his own image,  
for divine Wisdom, the heavenly Word, is himself God's instrument,  
harmonious, apt for all melodies,  
delicate and holy...  
What is it, his new song?  
To shed light on blind eyes,  
To open deaf ears,  
To take the limping and the strays by the hand and lead them aright,  
To stem corruption and conquer death,  
To reconcile disobedient sons and daughters to their Father.  
For God's instrument is in love with humanity.'<sup>iv</sup>

And of course John's portrait of the involvement of the Word in the work of creation answers the plea implicit in the book of Job 'If only we had been there when the earth was born ....' For according to John's cosmic portrait there is a sense in which we are there, that the universe is not alien but was – is – shaped with a texture not beyond our comprehension, with threads into which love and sacrifice are being woven. It is intriguing to notice how John's Gospel begins with a series of references to 'days' (*John 1.29, 35, 39, 43; 2.1*) If you count them up carefully they appear to add up to seven days. The echo of creation is probably deliberate. The pattern of the days is a sign that in the life, ministry and eventual sacrificial death of this human being, Jesus Christ, we are being given a privileged gaze into the heart of God's purposes in creation.

But if Genesis clearly shines through the beginning of John's Gospel it is also etched into the final chapters. As Jesus breathes the Spirit into his disciples after his resurrection (*John 20.22*) he reiterates the action of God in Gen. 2.7 when life was first breathed into humanity. In doing so, of course he reminds us that that a Gospel which has up till now focused almost entirely on Jesus, will only reach its ultimate goal when all human beings can fully reflect the 'glory', can image God in such a way that the ripples spin out to entice and excite others with the transforming vision.

And the story of the Gospel between its beginning and its end treads out the path that makes this possible. It is a story in which Genesis' themes of life and death are revisited, as we discover that in fact life comes through death. It is a tale to which knowledge will be the key – but not knowledge sought for power, independence and control. Rather it is the truth, and Jesus who is the truth, who is to be the goal of this knowledge. Above all it a love story, which will retread the original vision of creation, of man and woman both made in the image and likeness of God, and will encourage the full maturity of 'becoming', of a relationship between men and women which will go beyond the imbalance and the distortion of love with which we were left at the end of Gen. 3. Let us get the love story right this time, John seems to be saying. For it is only love that is as strong as death.

One of the special features of John's Gospel is the important roles it gives to women throughout the story. At times the writer of this Gospel seems extraordinarily daring. For example twice in this Gospel we are offered a parallel between the action of Jesus and the action of a woman – Mary. Could there even be a hint that the action of Mary at the feast in Bethany (in chapter 12) in anointing Jesus' feet and wiping them with her hair helps to prompt Jesus (in chapter 13) to wash the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper? And then there is the parallel in the way the tears of Jesus and of Mary seem both to be able to raise the dead. Jesus wept for Lazarus his dead friend (*11.35*) and loved him and Lazarus rose from the tomb. Mary wept and loved Jesus (*20.11*) and suddenly a strange and elusive gardener stood before her and her tears were answered. That curious and daring parallelism has echoed for years around the recesses of my mind: in some sense Mary's love for Jesus doing what Jesus himself had previously done for Lazarus.

What does this mean? I believe that the Gospel of John is choosing to take us on a journey ... Not just a geographical journey traveling from Jordan, Cana, Samaria, Bethany, Jerusalem, but a journey in which women play a central part, for it is a journey about women, about their capacity for love, for being the agents of new birth and life. It is a journey which is not afraid of sexuality, for love in all its forms is what will make possible the gift of life which is the treasure offered by this Gospel.

CS Lewis and his book *The Four Loves* has quite a lot to answer for! The word most normally used in the New Testament for 'love' (*agape*) is a word which is far wider in scope than Lewis' book allows. Comparing the way it is used in other Greek texts from around the time of the New Testament makes it clear that *agape* can include the welter of feelings which form part of our sexuality, *agape* does not reject such feelings, but rather seeks to embrace them and use them to bring about a reverencing for the whole human person. In fact the very first time the verb love appears in the Bible (*in Gen. 24.67*) where it describes the meeting of Isaac and Rebecca, future husband and wife, the word used in the Greek translation of the passage is closely linked to *agape*. For the writer of John's Gospel Christ is the bridegroom of humanity (*John 3.29*), and it is as men and women, even more so, respond to his love from the depths of their being that the life and love lost in Eden can be regained.

The ministry of Jesus in the Gospel begins with a marriage at Cana (*John 2.1-11*) – something significant in itself, especially if Christ is indeed the bridegroom. But if Christ is the bridegroom, where is his bride? She is strangely absent from this tale: The Gospel never mentions her, perhaps the ultimate statement of the invisibility of women in a world, where as in the New Testament era, men dominated and a woman's marriage was seen as little more than the moment when, as a chattel, she passed from the custody of father to husband. The hour of change has not yet come. There is a woman playing a part in the drama, but she is mother, not wife, and addressed curtly by the title 'Woman' reminiscent perhaps of the title the first Adam used for his first Eve as she was taken from his side. 'What have you to do with me?' Jesus demands harshly (*John 2.4, literal translation*), in a phrase that is elsewhere only used when he has conversations with the demons – for the old secure relationships are a temptation to hold on to – and yet if this bridegroom wishes to enjoy with his bride the wine of new life, those old patterns must be superseded, for the truth eternal can only lead to life through change. One cannot enter into one's mother's womb and be born again, certainly not at one's wedding feast! Such an attitude would be characteristic of a refusal to accept new and adult relationships, relationships where men and women exist in equality and true *agape* with each other. It is only as Jesus distances himself from the maternal symbol of the old ways and attitudes that the good wine of marriage can begin to be served.

But if the Gospel refuses to let us meet the bride at Cana, with exquisite artistry – and irony – we are introduced to her in the shape of the raddled old woman that Jesus meets in Samaria (*John 4.5-42*). It is a story set in a traditional mould: there are tales in the Old Testament (*eg Gen. 24.10-21, Gen. 29.9-12 Exod 2.15-22*) where a hero journeys to a foreign land, meets a beautiful virgin at a well, asks her for water, meets her people, and makes her his bride. So Jesus journeys to the alien territory of Samaria and sits down thirsty by a well and asks for water and there the story goes wrong. For the water is drawn not by a young and innocent maiden, but by a woman used and abused in a system in which men set the rules for 'nice women'. Five husbands down she is now: thoroughly soiled goods living with a 'protector' – the only thing left for such a woman outcast from her society. Nice men don't talk theology with a woman like this – bantering question and response almost as equals – they protect their own virtue and shun her - just like the Book of Proverbs dictates (*Prov. 7.5-27*). Otherwise a man might leave himself open to misunderstanding, for the narrowing of love and sexuality into sex has led to women being regarded as mindless objects, sources of potential danger. The disciples indeed, good Jews to a man, wondered that Jesus was talking to a woman – for you can't really just *talk* to women can you? – and their response hints at the undertone of sexuality which runs throughout the story. For by going wrong, by not quite running true to the old tales, John's irony has indeed given us a love story. But this is a love story consummated for this bride not by the act of sexual intercourse, which for her had become merely a sign of dehumanising subjection, but by her restoration to full personhood, and the sharing of his love with others. 'Woman', he had called her, still with echoes of Eden revisited, but now he states that the hour of change is beginning to happen, and that the old ways will soon be redundant. She who had known the bitter agony of Eve's curse, who had surely sorrowed greatly, becomes the one who sows the seed of new birth and eternal life for her people, and will reap in joy.

Gradually as the bridegroom approaches Jerusalem the fullness of the image of womanhood is beginning to be restored. For Jesus was not afraid to love Martha and her sister Mary as well as their brother Lazarus: they are indeed the first people in this Gospel described as the recipients of Jesus' love (*John 11.5*). Two women, no longer anonymous shadows, but central

actors in the drama which restores life to their brother. Martha, the woman of sure faith, the one who without Thomas' doubts, confesses Christ as Son of God, Mary, the woman of love, whose grief for her brother moved Jesus' heart and acted as the catalyst of his own tears. Agape is returning to human history and bringing life in its train: it is because of the depths of grief and love that Jesus shares with the two sisters that the mechanism of mortality which has ruled the world for so many generations begins to be shattered. Mary and Martha can indeed be called – and perhaps without the ironic tone of Genesis – 'mothers of all living.'

Man and woman, restored to their total agape: it is surely time then for a wedding banquet, and this time with woman playing her part. Yes, that is almost what we have for there is a supper (*John 12.1-8*), and Mary shows her love in an erotic gesture as she wipes bridegroom's feet with her hair – and anoints him for his burial. For we know, as Adam and Eve in their first paradise did not, that love and suffering and death belong together: love in its sweetest and most intense form must invoke the thought of mortality. True love cannot avoid suffering and death even if it will eventually defeat it. And that is what Mary too must learn; not for her merely a return to Eden's childhood, but as a mature woman her love is consummated by her anguish. This pledge of new life and new birth of which the Gospel speaks must be born in pain and travail – as the Farewell discourses state in words that evoke yet revoke Eve's first curse. 'When a woman is in travail she has sorrow, because her hour has come' – but now that is not the end of the story, for pregnancy and birth lead on to the joy of new creation – 'when she is delivered of the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world (*John 16.21*).

Yet before the day of new creation can dawn the labour pangs will be bitter. The echoes of Genesis are perceptible as the story of Jesus' passion unfolds. 'Here is the man' (*John 19.5*) proclaims Pilate as he produces a Jesus mockingly clad in purple robes. It feels like a perverse echo of the joy of the Creator when God celebrated the new life of humanity and entrusted us with the royal responsibility of caring for his creation. Yet – this indeed is the man, this is the man who is most fully alive, most completely human, even at his apparent hour of death. This is the man whose words 'Woman, here is your son' (*John 19.26*), showing her care and compassion even as he hangs on the cross, seemingly echo the cry of greeting made by the first man (*Gen. 2.23*). This is the man whose final words, 'It is finished' (*John 19.30*) may suggest that the climax of creation has at last been reached (*compare Gen. 2.2*). Yet the tense of that closing cry is a reminder that we can never consign Christ – or creation – to past history. The word in Greek is *tetelestai*. It is what is technically called a 'perfect' verb. In the Greek language the perfect tense is used to describe an action which has been completed – but whose significance ensures to the present. As he utters the words, 'It is finished', Jesus is not simply offering a sigh of relief that finally his suffering is over. He is not even merely proclaiming with a shout of triumph the goal (Greek *telos*) of his earthly ministry. He is also asserting that the impact of what has happened will endure for all time. This is the 'Word' that completes creation – and has shown us what it was always meant to be.

And the picture of the resurrection we are given in the following chapter shows us just what this really means. We return once more to a garden and to a meeting between a man and a woman. And just as Jesus' tears had been the prelude to the raising of Lazarus, so now with a breathlessly daring analogy Mary's tears seem even to raise the dead. Surely love *is* as strong as death. At the very least the Gospel seems to be saying that the love of a woman, this woman for the man Jesus, is the truest sacrament there can be of the love of God for his human creation. And at last the love story of the Gospel can reach its completion and fruition, for at last a woman is known to the very core of her whole being. 'Mary' said Jesus, for the very first time in the Gospel calling upon a woman by her name. In this garden man and woman recognize each other once again as lovers in a love that does not seek to dominate or depersonalize. Once more they embrace and cling to each other. But this love learned so hardly through the pages of history and the chapters of pain has learned to eschew power and possession. Mary's wedding feast is one that she will share with all humanity. 'Do not continue to embrace me', asks Jesus, or else my love cannot embrace the whole world.<sup>v</sup>

## Questions for group discussion or individual reflection

1. John's Gospel seems to imply that our task is to share in the ongoing work of helping to create our world. How do you think that we can achieve this?
2. What do you think it means when Genesis says that human beings are made in the image of God, or as God's 'icon'? Do you think it helps to sum up what it is to be a human being?
3. How can Christians reflect on and articulate their sexuality responsibly and with confidence? What can we learn about this from the ideas expressed in this chapter?
4. What images come to mind when you think about God as creator? (You may find it helpful to have some well known examples of art available to stimulate people's thinking, see suggestions in *The Well is Deep* study guide.)

## Prayer

Loving Creator,  
You made humanity for yourself  
With hearts that are restless till they rest in you.  
Male and female,  
You made us as your glory,  
To reflect and fulfil your longings for our world.  
In the life of Jesus Christ,  
You offered us a vision of yourself,  
A pattern of your generous and profligate love.  
Entice us by your Spirit,  
The kiss of God renewing all creation,  
So that we become more fully human,  
More truly what you would have us become,  
And discover our beginning, continuing and ending in you. Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> Published in *Companion to the Revised Common Lectionary, Volume 3: All Age Worship – Year B*, edited by Judy Jarvis and Donald Pickard. Epworth Press, 1999.

<sup>ii</sup> Christine Odell, *Companion to the Lectionary Volume 5*, edited Peter Sheasby, Epworth Press, 1994.

<sup>iii</sup> Joy Cowley, *Aotearoa Psalms*

<sup>iv</sup> Clement of Alexandrai, *Protrepitikon 1*, in Maria Bouling, *Marked for Life*, Triangle, 1979

<sup>v</sup> In this chapter I have drawn in amended form on material originally included in an article written for *The Way Supplement*, 1992.