

‘Chaotic Myths and Monsters’ – A homily for the Baptism of the Lord

Genesis 1.1-5

Mark 1.4-11

In the world out of which the Book of Genesis was written, the Imperial Power of Babylon was at its peak, a power that dominated the globe through political and military might. Think Trump’s America, but with slightly less despotic madness. Like all imperial powers, this empire had its own religion, and this religion had its own stories of creation. Babylon’s can be found in what historians call the *Enuma Elish*, and it reads like Aesop’s Fables on steroids. In the *Enuma Elish*, the creation of the world is framed by a cosmic struggle between the ancient chaos mother Tiamat and a younger god called Marduk. Cloaked in radiant, godlike dragons, a rabid dog and a number of other terrifying combinations of animals, Tiamat rages out of control after hearing that the younger gods have killed Apsu her lover. In the battle that ensues, Marduk finally defeats Tiamat by dispatching a fierce storm wind against her. As she opens her mouth to swallow the storm, she swells like a giant balloon, and Marduk pops her with a giant spear.

After her death, Marduk proceeds to use her body to create the world. Slicing her serpentine corpse in two, he uses one half for the earth and the other for the sky. Her primordial chaotic waters are channeled into rivers and springs, and her spittle is made into the clouds. Finally, Babylon is created as a great city at the centre of the universe, and the home of the great gods. And even though in this story Marduk's defeat of Tiamat appears to be final, on a deeper level there is always the threatening possibility that the watery monster of primordial chaos might stir and rage out of control yet again.

In creation myths such as this, violence and chaos are placed at the heart of creation. More than this, the gods who defeat the chaotic monsters and allow creation to emerge, are themselves dangerous and vengeful beings. Marduk is not just a fertility god, but one who

brings storm and lightning, himself turbulent and chaotic. In these myths, creation is brought out of violence, and is constantly threatened by the nihilistic forces of chaos and death.

Even as Babylon reached to the ends of the known world, holding its peoples in thrall to its mythical understanding of fateful violence and chaos, pockets of resistance affirmed a different vision about the world. One of these was the priestly writer of Genesis. Exiled in a foreign land and within a foreign imaginative landscape, this writer created an entirely different cosmos, not one built upon the chaotic violence of the pagan gods, but a cosmos created for love and by love, a cosmos spoken out of peace and blessing, a world in which all living things could find a home.

This is the story we hear in our first reading today. Surrounded by imperial violence and with their city and temple in ruins, the ancient people of Israel wrote a new creation story about their God, not as a rival to the other gods, but as the One God motivated to create out of nothing from his commitment to beauty, goodness and truth. In Genesis chapter one we see no cosmic battle with divine beings being ripped apart and the threat of chaos engulfing the world. Rather we see a God peacefully speaking the world into being, bringing light out of darkness and shaping the formless void like a master potter, drawing out of it beauty and form. This is a liturgically ordered world of day and night, evening and morning, a world of rhythmic sense and season, a world of homely abundance and delight.

What a different vision of the world this is to the chaotic and violent imaginings of the pagan mind. And how extraordinary that this vision emerged in a time of exile and fragmentation for the people of God. Just as their political and religious world was falling apart, they had the courage and the faith to see things differently, to recast the violence and exile of their existence in terms of peace and blessing.

Us moderns like to think we're too subtle for myths and too sophisticated for monsters, but this last year has really given us a battering. Gone is our neatly ordered world in which we feel we can find a home, shattered is the stability that we felt we could

trust, defeated is our vision of progress in which the world simply gets better year on year. With visions of mobs storming one of the main symbols of democratic freedom in the last week or so and reports of new strains of coronavirus that once more threaten our health systems, economic security and community life, it feels we are once more at the mercy of the fates, with chaotic waters threatening to engulf and drown us. In the words of Paul Tillich, we feel keenly ‘the insecurity and homelessness of our social and individual existence... the attacks on our power of being in body and soul by weakness, disease and accidents.’ At times like this our belief in a world of light, beauty and blessing begins to falter and like the prophet Jeremiah we see a world undone as order dissolves into chaos and light is swallowed into darkness, ‘I looked on the earth,’ says the prophet, ‘and lo, it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light.’

As we turn to our Gospel reading today we get a retelling of those ancient creation myths, this time in the light of Jesus’ baptism in the river Jordan. This is an apocalyptic vision indeed, with the ‘heavens torn apart,’ the creative power of God’s Spirit alighting on Jesus like a dove and the voice of the Father speaking words of trust and love. In many iconographic renderings of this story, the swirling waters of the Jordan are inhabited by the chaotic gods of the pagan imagination, those divine monsters we heard about earlier. But this time God in Jesus confronts the chaos and the violence, immersing himself right into it, and emerging from it as a new creation. As the early church fathers imagined it, this is the divine fire immersing itself in the water, the Light descending into the darkness, Life seemingly engulfed by death. But just as the dove in Genesis spoke of the ending of the flood and the beginning of a new creation, recast in love and peace, so Jesus affords us a glimpse of a new world, not a world lost to the twin fates of chaos and death, but a world reconciled, a world renewed, a world risen from the dead. But do we have the eyes to see?