

I suggested the theme of Creation versus Darwinism, last year during the celebrations of the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Darwin's birth and 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of his work – the Origin of Species blissfully unaware of what would be involved. Why do I never learn? Although difficult to find a focus, I have found it incredibly fascinating although I do wonder if anyone else does? So I ask: do you have an interest or care in the crucially important debate surrounding the origin of our world and its life? And I am also led to ask: if you are not interested, then why is this so? My aim is not to preach but to provide food for thought about the debate, challenge you and hopefully inspire you, to find out more and make decisions yourself.

“How clearly the sky reveals God's glory! How plainly it shows what he has done. Each day announced it to the following day, each night repeats it to the next.” - words from Psalm 19 that assert God as Creator. In the Creed we state, “I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth of all that is seen and unseen.” But being honest are you sure you know what this means any more? In trying to discover how the world came into being have we come dangerously close to losing our belief, if we ever had it, that it was deliberately and consciously created? Has it become difficult to read the first chapters of Genesis with an open listening heart because in the background of our minds is the theory that everything came into being by chance, by accident or by adaptation to changing surroundings in order to survive.

Yet God endowed you and me with enquiring minds and encourages us to use them! Our desire to understand how our universe came into being is one of his gifts to help us discover more about the Creator and his infinite love. So in this search for answers, if we lose sight of God we will find ourselves floundering and we will find ourselves questioning our faith.

Poor Darwin! I choose my adjective carefully, not because he was penniless but because he unwittingly became embroiled in a battle over which he had little control. Darwin was subjected to religious influence in his youth. Baptised as an Anglican, he was brought up a Christian. He dropped out of the Edinburgh Medical School after 2 years and was encouraged to become an Anglican clergyman by his father but this intention, like his medical career died what he called a natural death. On leaving Cambridge he joined the HMS Beagle, a biology research ship, as an unpaid naturalist. The Captain, Robert Fitzroy was deeply religious, believing every word in the Bible and personally conducting divine service every Sunday at which attendance by all on board ship, including Darwin, was compulsory.

But it was now that Darwin started to doubt the truth of the first chapters of Genesis, mainly because he was formulating in his mind and convincing himself of the theory that species originated by chance and developed by a long course of gradual modification. And the more he tested his theory out with his research studies the more he doubted. As Darwin started to write up notes from his scientific investigations he faced a choice. He could interpret what he had seen either as evidence for the Genesis account of supernatural creation or else he could interpret it in a way that prescribes to the idea that everything in nature has come about by accidental, unguided purposelessness rather than as a result of divinely guided, meaningful intention. In 1859, his Origin of Species was the result – all about evolution and gradual

appearance over geological ages, all about mutual similarities between species, all about adaptation and survival. Before this, in 1844, Darwin wrote to his friend, Joseph Hooker, "I am almost convinced that species are not immutable. It is like confessing to murder." Ian Taylor writes, "Many commentators have pointed out that the 'murder' he spoke of was in effect the murder of God – as Creator."

That was the end of Darwin's Christian faith. Renouncing the Gospels, he wrote: "I am sorry to have to inform you that I do not believe in the Bible as a divine revelation and therefore not in Jesus Christ as the Son of God." And despite stories of deathbed conversions and renunciation of evolution, Darwin died in 1882 an agnostic.

To many, Darwin's unbelief started when he rejected the revelation of God in the Bible and then was unwilling to accept the revelation of God himself in nature. For many people Darwin 'disproved the existence of God'. In one of last year's BBC programmes celebrating the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth, Sir David Attenborough, confessing to be no theologian, asserted that Darwin had refuted the creation account in Genesis saying that man was "not apart from the natural world. We do not have dominion over it." In fact Genesis does not say that man is apart from the world and the dominion that it describes is expressed as a stewardship not as an absolute control. However Sir David was putting the common and currently aggressive view that Darwin killed religious mumbo jumbo forever.

Nick Spencer's excellent book "Darwin and God", published last year in conjunction with the film 'Creation' as part of the celebrations, tries to rescue Darwin from the battle between atheists and creationists. What happened on board HMS Beagle over five years from 1831 rocked the established order of things, worldwide. Yet Darwin had no stomach for a fight. He was mortified by what he thought would be the impact of his work. When it came to his capacity for religious thought and particularly in relation to science he confessed to be 'very muddled'. When his first paper on evolution was presented to the Linnaean Society in 1858 he could not attend because his infant son had died 2 days earlier. "Thank God," Darwin wrote, "he will never suffer more in this world." Unfortunately for Darwin he was unsure whether there was a God to thank and if there was another world beyond the suffering of this one?

How seriously do you take this debate? Where do you stand on this, if you stand at all? As Christians we should not pretend that Darwin was just plain wrong. Surely we would be flying in the face of scientific fact! Nor can it be ignored! His theories did expose a great deal of nonsense so is it enough for us, in a superior tone, to say: "Oh well, the problem is only for people who believe literally in the Genesis account." What should Christians say about the idea of deliberate design or lack of it and about suffering of animal and human creation? Christians had a "narrative" which Darwin, almost certainly without meaning harm, countered with another "narrative." And because of this, as a Christian living in the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century what is your "narrative" now? Surely this is much food for thought as you leave church today.

It is certainly a fascinating and crucial debate. Was the man born 200 years ago, last year, the sworn enemy, the murder if you like, of the man born 2000 years ago, in a stable, and killed on a cross? After years of dismissive ridicule of Darwin, it is fascinating that the Vatican has admitted that Darwin's theory of evolution should NOT have been dismissed, claiming it to be compatible with the Christian view of

Creation. Father Guiseppi Tanzella-Nitti, Professor of Theology at the Pontifical University in Rome has stated that the 4<sup>th</sup> century theologian St Augustine had never heard of the term evolution but knew that big fish eat small fish and that forms of life have been transformed! At the Conference to mark 150 years of Darwin's Origin of Species, the Vatican even played down the argument that a higher power must be responsible for the complexities of life, known as the Intelligent Design. Even the Church of England, officially apologising to him for decades of misinterpretation, is on the band wagon, seeking to bring Darwin back into the fold with a page on its website, paying tribute to his forgotten work in his local parish showing science and religion need not be at odds. However, millions of Christians across the world still firmly reject evolution in favour of an explanation based on a more or less literal interpretation of Genesis.

Here are some awkward questions posed to both you and myself. How literally do we believe in the Bible's version of Creation? If we do believe in the liberal translation where do we stand with the scientific facts of the theory of evolution? Yet if we see a world around us that has come about by accident or adaptation then does God become remote and uninvolved in creation? If we see living creatures as a result of the survival of the fittest at the expense of the weak, then does God become the God of the strong and not a God of love who cares for all his creation and especially the weak and vulnerable? If so does our view of God become distorted and creation become no longer holy, every part loved by God? Is it something to be used and discarded with the weak and defenceless becoming dispensed with and redundant except for their use to the strong and powerful?

Wow! These are awkward questions indeed. I believe that God is Creator and that we see his stamp on creation wherever we turn, As we look at the world around us we will learn about God. And I do not include just the inspiring and the beautiful but the horrible and the ugly! I believe we see his perfection in the extraordinary complexity and intimacy of the design of the universe and in the way everything is interrelated and interconnected. In this I believe that we glimpse his awesome strength and, at the same time, his staggering gentleness. I believe in the science of the chance factors and the accidental nature of the theory of evolution and the Big Bang AND in the cruel natural order of things in survival. Yet when I stand, in those extremely rare moments, and look up at the stars on a cloudless evening I feel I am glimpsing the incomprehensible nature of God's infinite universe. My view is that a Christian should take both Darwin and Genesis together and let the insights of the former illuminate and enhance the Christian teaching of the creation of the world and all its incredible intricacies of life.

These are my views. They may or may not be yours. In this short allotted time I haven't a hope in covering this debate with the detail it deserves. I encourage you to do your own research. I entered Darwin into the search engine Google on the computer and there were 39m entries, for Creation the figure was 149m. This should keep you busy, along with reading a range of excellent books. Based on much debate you can make your own decision on an issue that is at the very foundation, at the very heart of our Christian faith.