

I am preaching this evening on our passage from Sirach for two reasons. The first is that I preached on the story of Jesus in Nazareth and the quote *A prophet is not without honour except in his own country* in the Gospel of Mark some weeks ago. The story is the same with no significant differences. The second reason is that I love this passage from Sirach. I find it truly to be scripture with an especial message for our time. As I read through Sirach, I was immediately transfixed in chapter 1 by verses 14 to 20: *To fear the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; she is created with the faithful in the womb. She made among human beings an eternal foundation, and among their descendants she will abide faithfully. To fear the Lord is fullness of wisdom; she inebriates mortals with her fruits; she fills their whole house with desirable goods, and their storehouses with her produce. The fear of the Lord is the crown of wisdom, making peace and perfect health to flourish. She rained down knowledge and discerning comprehension, and she heightened the glory of those who held her fast. To fear the Lord is the root of wisdom, and her branches are long life.* To understand this quote the key is understanding the word “fear”. In the Biblical context “fear of the Lord” was not understood to mean terror, or apprehension or danger, rather it means reverential awe at all God has created and how much more there is than we can imagine, leave alone understand

For much of the last two hundred years science and religion has been presumed to be at odds. Think of the reaction to Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* in the 19th century, the Scopes Monkey Trial 100 years ago, and any number of fundamentalist who still prattle on that there is nothing in the Bible that is not literal truth, all evidence to the contrary. Insistence that everything literally happened just as it is in the Bible trivializes and renders God irrelevant. It attempts to contain God into a straight jacket of ancient tales, the devisers of which never for one moment were concerned with literal truth. It is the most insidious form of blasphemy because it imposes boundaries around our God who is everywhere beyond boundaries.

Let us take the creation story. According to Biblical record, creation happened in 6 days approximately 6000 years ago in 4004 BCE. This interpretation of the Biblical to actually set dates was done by James Ussher Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of all Ireland in 1650. He actually said that creation began on Sunday, the 23rd of October, 4004 BCE and that it was completed within 6 days. It is a pity we just missed the anniversary.

We now know that the creation of the cosmos and all that is in it began about 13.8 billion years ago when the Creator instigated the big bang. Out of that one act all the stars and planets were created including our sun. Some 4 plus billion years ago our planetary home the earth came into being out of dust within our universe from exploding stars. The earth was initially a molten mass which as it cooled new life forms emerged over millennia. Bacteria, the plants and in time the creatures including ourselves. The first hominoids precursors of homo sapiens emerged around 4 million years ago, and the first humans between 200 and 300 thousand years ago. Humans began to move out of Africa into the rest of the world between 70 and 100

thousand years ago. We also know that every atom in our bodies, in the rocks, in the trees, in the plants, in the animals, insects, fish, , etc. is material that came into the cosmos in the big bang. It is God who created all that material and God who breathed life force into that material to create everything including us. When God's animating breath leaves us at the end of our earthy lives, the material will not be lost. It will reemerge into the pool of material from which our God continues to create and continues to breath new life into existence.

All this we know because of various scientific areas of research including but not limited to archaeology, anthropology, biology botany, minerology, and let it be said theology. There are many among those who call themselves Christian that pronounce all we have learned in more than the last millennium as delusion and heresy. But God did not ask us to check our brains at the door when we come to church. Gods asks to use all our talent and all our power mental and physical to advance heaven on earth. In the middle ages theology was known as the Queen of the Sciences. The Queen is ever more served by the other sciences to inform understanding of creation that can illumine further our understanding of God's creation and our place in it – that is the purpose of theology. All the sciences are handmaids to theology in creating understanding that calls us to honour, worship, and praise God's Creator Spirit, in other words fear the Lord.

So we come back to the reading from Sirach. Why do I like it so much? Because it celebrates the greatness of God without attempting to limit or contain it. Within the passage we heard read: *We could say more but could never say enough; let the final word be: 'He is the all.'* *Where can we find the strength to praise him? For he is greater than all his works. Awesome is the Lord and very great, and marvellous is his power. Glorify the Lord and exalt him as much as you can, for he surpasses even that. When you exalt him, summon all your strength, and do not grow weary, for you cannot praise him enough. Who has seen him and can describe him? Or who can extol him as he is? Many things greater than these lie hidden, for I have seen but few of his works. For the Lord has made all things, and to the godly he has given wisdom.* .I think this is one of the most healthful statements of a human relationship with God. Rejoice, praise, glorify, exalt and extol, but do not imagine that you can know all that God is. Have the humility to avoid the blasphemy of containment. Humans are often tempted to throw up barriers to further perception because to see more opens one to discomfort and a compunction to try and understand which can be exhausting. When we cannot understand, we are terribly prone to dismiss, and sometimes to belittle, and sadly, sometimes to persecute. This passage and much of the text before and after it gives us a picture of the magnitude and the breadth of the creative power of our God, but tells us that we shall not know or see it all, but we have to live and celebrate that there is more beyond our sight and beyond our comprehension. Amen