

Sermon on the occasion of the 200th Anniversary of Darwin's baptism

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We are gathered here to commemorate the baptism of Charles Darwin in this church 200 years ago.

Darwin was not just baptised, but even embarked on training for Anglican ordination. There had been quite a tradition of naturalists being incumbents in country parishes – Gilbert White is an early example. Not only would such a career have suited him, but life at Downe in Kent was very nearly like that: he lived in a former country parsonage, was treasurer of Downe's Coal and Clothing Club, which provided for the village poor, he administered funds for the Downe Friendly society, contributed to the village Sunday School and was a member of the Parish Council; he was an Honorary member of the South American Missionary Society, set up a temperance reading room and allowed the room to be used in 1880 for a local evangelist's tent revival meetings, saying 'Your services have done more for the village in a few months than all our efforts for many years ... Through your services I do not know that there is a drunkard left in the village'. The vicar of Downe, his friend, remarked that 'in all parish matters he was an active assistant in matters connected with the school, charities and other businesses, his liberal contribution was ever ready.' Darwin was uncannily like a rural Anglican clergyman with a passion for studying nature.

(Source for the above: Nick Spencer, *Darwin and God* (SPCK 2009), p. 102).

That's not quite the picture the film, *Creation*, gave us. Nor what we might expect given that Darwin's most notorious follower these days is Dawkins, author of *The God Delusion*. Darwin's loss of faith has been much emphasized in this anniversary year. But loss of faith is not the whole story. Darwin was always respectful towards religion, and privately exercised about it all his life. Maybe Darwin's pilgrimage might help us to deepen our understanding of what faith and baptism are all about.

Let's look at three things which emerge from Nick Spencer's book on *Darwin and God*:

- (1) Darwin began as a sort of Christian, and it's important to understand what sort. My reaction at the end of the film *Creation* was – what an impoverished kind of religion it was in the Nineteenth century! And this was confirmed by Nick Spencer's book, which amongst other things examines what Darwin would have read in preparing for ordination, concluding that religion was presented simply as a set of propositions: statements of fact in the creed + arguments for God's existence, notably Paley's famous defence of intelligent design – you find a watch as you wander along a path, and you deduce it must have been designed specifically for its evident purpose by someone intelligent ... by analogy you deduce God from the design of creation. It was a religion of deduction from evidence, a set of intellectual ideas. No warmed heart, no sense of loss as his faith deserted him. Rather a gradual letting go of a framework of idea because the evidence didn't add up. The correspondence between him and his wife before

- they married reveals the gap. She accepts his honesty and integrity, sure that he is acting conscientiously and sincerely wishing to learn the truth – so he can't be wrong. Yet she clearly thinks Darwin isn't giving Christianity a fair hearing – he doesn't give it enough time, he is so obsessed with his researches ignoring other perspectives on life. He has a narrow view of what constitutes evidence and demands proof in an area where proof of that kind is not possible. What we can discern here is the contrast between 'believing that ...' and 'believing in ...' Even as a Christian, Darwin had no deep sense of God or relationship with Christ.
- (2) The kind of rationalist Christianity Darwin had is very vulnerable to rationalist counter-argument. Darwin's detailed cataloguing of different natural specimens and precise observations of nature led him gradually to realise that there is NOT a harmonious, good, beautiful universe, but rather a struggle for survival – as Tennyson had put it, 'nature red in tooth and claw'; or as the child's question still puts it, 'Why did God create mosquitoes?' And in time for Darwin this question ceased to be merely intellectual – it touched his heart (and here the film was good and to the point): the illness and death of his daughter Annie he found very distressing, and it reinforced his sense of the sheer waste and suffering of life on earth. It was not after all the theory of evolution that was the prime challenge – though the then current idea that every species was separately created by a hands-on God did complicate the issue; Darwin recognised that it was not so easy to distinguish what was a species and what a variety – there was a whole spectrum of interconnected creatures, which led him to speculate about the tree of life and the common descent of all living things from one original. But for faith there was a whole series of issues, including questions about the historicity of the Bible and miracles in particular – Darwin was a man of his time, and all these things were in the air. But for him the core problem was the breakdown of the set of propositions that for him constituted Christianity in the face of the evidence, confirmed at the emotional level by the loss of Annie and the problem of suffering – which is after all the classic issue for so many in our own time.
- (3) Darwin's uncertainties about God were also rubbed home by a certain humility of mind, which was reinforced by his own theories. The ape has a brain adapted to know what was necessary for survival. The human mind must in principle be the same, though more sophisticated, i.e. adapted for survival not to deal with issues like God. So Darwin was an agnostic, not an atheist – we may contrast Dawkins on this point – he's sure he's right!
- (i) Now that leads into the first of the ways in which Darwin can help to deepen our understanding, because the proper attitude of the believer is humility of mind. Too often believers behave as if they have got all the answers, but God or Truth must be bigger than ourselves, our Church – even Christianity as a whole, otherwise we reduce God to the size of our own minds and God is God no longer. Faith is an attitude not of mastery but of receptivity to truth, equivalent to Darwin's attention to evidence. I refer you back to that lesson from Ecclesiastes (3.16-22) – I've often thought it was pity no-one remembered that passage when evolution became controversial. It clearly states we are

part of creation, no different from the animals. God is different – utterly transcendent, not an item in the created universe, but the source of all creation. So the Word of God points beyond itself – it cannot be simply literal. God had to accommodate the divine self to our level – not just in the incarnation, but in the language of scripture. The early Christian poet theologian, Ephrem the Syrian, explained it through a parable: it's like someone trying to teach a parrot to talk – he puts a mirror in front of his face so that the parrot, seeing its own reflection, thinks it is talking to one of its own kind. We need humility of mind.

(ii) Darwin's problem was the problem of suffering, of sheer waste – but surely the 'gone-wrongness' of God's creation lies right at the heart of the Christian Gospel; without it there would be no need for redemption. The only possible answer to this perennial problem is a cross-centred faith; most people, like Darwin, never seem to get to that point. My first-born son, Arthur, was born with profound disabilities – we are still caring for him after 42 years. I struggled for years with Darwin's questions, but eventually I moved from the problem of theodicy (i.e. the problem of justifying the ways of God) to recognising that I had privileged access to the deepest truths of Christianity. The French mystic Simone Weil once remarked that creation is an act of abandonment. What she meant was that the infinite God had to withdraw, to make space for something other than God to exist – and that approach allows room for it all to happen through deep geological time, through evolution. Furthermore it is consonant with the cross and its forsakenness – My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? There God was absent, yet supremely present, entering into the abandonment and redeeming it. Do we see here waste, or abundance? Death is surely part of life – there is nothing new under the sun, but constant re-cycling, dust to dust, element to element, new potential. Contrary to the assumptions of Darwin and many of our contemporaries death itself is within the mercy and providence of God, and leads to resurrection.

(iii) Which brings us to baptism – because as Paul reminded us (Romans 6.1-11) baptism is dying and rising with Christ. And because Darwin was baptised he belongs to Christ, as does my baptised son, even though he cannot ever know or conceive of what that means – he is part of something much bigger than himself, as is Darwin, especially as held in the faith of his loving wife (cf. I Cor. 7.14). And because Darwin belongs, his perception of the truth about creation is part of God's revelation: the 'book of nature/creation' has always been respected as revelatory alongside scripture. As baptised, Darwin had the vocation to enlarge and enrich impoverished Christianity through the challenge of his own integrity and humility before nature's evidence.

So to conclude: the Church, at least that which humbly responds rather than becoming entrenched in dogmatically asserted propositional defence of intelligent design, is challenged

- To become more open to reality and its amazing profusion and complexity – from dinosaurs to the plurality and diversity of humanity with its different cultures and religions – after all, if God is truly God the Creator, then all belongs to God
- To be more deeply shaped by its founding-story – cross-centred in its theological perspective on life, the universe and everything.

So I pray that we may know more of God's glory in the beauty of autumn's decay, and something of God's mercy and grace in the blessedness of dying. Amen