

For the last six months, I've been returning again and again to a series of videos covering addresses given at a conference presented in 2014 by the Center for Action and Contemplation. The speakers at the conference were the Franciscans Father Richard Rohr and Sister Ilia Delio, together with the author Rob Bell. The theme of the conference was: A Benevolent Universe. If God is Trinity and Jesus is the face of God, then it is a benevolent universe. God is not someone to be afraid of, but is the Ground of Being and on our side.

I'd love for you to be able to watch these videos with me, but there are ten of them and they're each an hour to an hour 15 long, so I'm going to try and condense just one of them to give you a taste, because there's some excellent material on the Trinity as a Circle Dance of Love.

Most of what I'm going to say is drawn directly from one of Rob Bell's addresses.

What do we mean by God, what do mean by Trinity, why are these ideas central?

If we go to the beginning of the Bible, we start with a poem. In the beginning ... and God said.

The word used for God here is the Hebrew "Elohim" – It's in the plural. We're talking about a singular being who contains some sort of plurality.

We have three elements here: the god who creates, the spirit that hovers, and the Word that is spoken

Creator Spirit Word

And this is not a normal word – this word speaks and things happen; it's energetic, creative, loaded with momentum and creativity.

Now we need to know that there were lots of ancient creation stories. Human need to tell stories to explain things. Why things are the way they are. What we're doing here. What matters and what doesn't.

And to make sense of these, we need to recognize that there are two different kinds of language. Logos language and Mythos language. (Think back to what I said in an earlier sermon about the difference between Chronos and Kairos time – Chronos was the sort we can measure, hence the name for a particularly accurate watch – a chronometer, while Kairos was the proper or opportune time for action). Logos is the language of facts, maths, of what happened and when it happened. It gave us aeroplanes, medicines, iPhones.

Bible mostly written in Mythos, for that which is more than literally true. Mythos is about meaning, about significance. What is it like to be a parent? It's like when your heart leaves your body, and you see a part of yourself that's also separate and external to yourself. Why do you love that woman? I had somehow finally encountered my other half. Where's your data for this? Where's your biological proof? You can't ask those sorts of questions here. Mythos doesn't play according to the rules of logos.

We live in a modern world in which logos thinking has exploded ... but there are whole dimensions of our existence that require another way of thinking. This world gave you these extraordinary logos rules but didn't give you any mythos to go with it.

Evolutionary science does an excellent job of explaining why I don't have a tail, it just doesn't do that well explaining why I find that interesting.

But language can also be destructive. When mythos tries to play by the rules of logos, it loses its mythos power. Perhaps that's why we get into so much trouble when we try to take all of the bible as literally true. We're making it do something that it just wasn't designed to do.

So back to the beginning. The bible begins with a poem. There's a context to this. Every part of the world has its own creation stories.

And when Genesis was finally written down, the local story was the

Enuma Elish (the title came from the first words of the story in Babylonian: **Enûma Eliš = When on High ...** ).

The story, (Rob Bell describes it as one of the oldest, if not the oldest in the world, though I wonder if some of the Australian Dreaming stories would take that title), the story concerns the birth of the gods and the creation of the universe and human beings. In the beginning, there was only undifferentiated water swirling in chaos.

Out of this swirl, the waters divided into sweet, fresh water, known as the god Apsu, and salty bitter water, the goddess Tiamat. Once differentiated, the union of these two entities gave birth to the younger gods. Apsu is upset because the younger gods make so much noise and he plans to kill them all, but Tiamat warns her eldest son Enki. But he then kills Apsu and Tiamat is enraged at the loss of her mate, and she in turn decides to make war on the younger gods.

Out of the younger gods, a champion Marduk arises who vows to kill Tiamat. He shoots her with an arrow which splits her in two; from her eyes flow the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Out of Tiamat's corpse, Marduk creates the heavens and the earth, and later he decides to create human beings from the blood of Lullu, the god who advised Tiamat to make war on the younger gods.

To my way of thinking, this is not unlike the story of Io who brought into being the first gods, Rangī-awatea and Papa-tua-nuku, the male and female principles out of which all things derived. Rangī-Awatea was the god of 'space and light' (wātea and awatea) and the first heaven was created by him on the foundations established by Io. But having completed the first heaven, he looked below him and saw the spirit of Papa-tua-nuku (Mother Earth) and descended to cohabit with her.

Out of this union sprang their first born, Tāne and the other gods after him: Tangaroa, Rongo, Tū-mata-uenga, Haumia-tike-tike, Ru-ai-moko, and Tāwhiri-mā-tea.

But Rangī continued to cling to Papa-tua-nuku and gave up his task of completing the heavens. By this act, he doomed his offspring to dwell in perpetual darkness.

Io the omniscient stirred his activity and sent the spirit of rebellion to stir the children to revolt. After consultation among the brothers they decided, with the exception of Tāwhiri-mā-tea, to separate their parents and allow light into their world. After several abortive attempts, Tāne conceived the idea of standing on his hands on Papa and thrusting against Rangi with his feet. His manoeuvre succeeded and Rangi was flung into the skies.

Io delegated through Tāne various tasks for his brothers. Tāne reserved two departments for himself on earth, the forest and the birds, and the creation of humankind. The first person created was Hine-ahu-one (the maid that emerged out of the dust). Tāne took clay, moistened it with water and sculptured the form of a female. He then infused the breath of his nostrils (hongī) into her and she came alive. (The Woven Universe: Selected Writings of the Rev. Māori Marsden pp17-18.)

A big question always is what was the driving engine behind these creation myths? With the Enuma Elish it was violence, carnage, destruction. The world began with a battle among cosmic forces, driven by anger and grief. The Māori creation story is not that different.

Now a little context goes a long way.

The Enuma Elish was a Babylonian Creation story. And when was the book of Genesis compiled? When the Jews were driven from Jerusalem and found themselves exiled in Babylon, subject to a foreign power.

If they asked any of the locals about the origins of the world, they would have heard the story as told in the Enuma Elish. And when they found themselves confronted with that story, they would have started thinking about their own traditions, their own story.

And it would have been around that time, that the oral traditions that the Hebrews brought with them would have been collected, written down, and edited together into the form we have them today.

Familiarity has brought about a certain laziness. We tend to talk about the Genesis creation story as though it's a single coherent narrative, but you only have to read the first couple of chapters of Genesis to realise that we have two stories there, back to back. We don't have any of the original manuscripts, but we do know that the division into chapters and verses was a later innovation. And of course, none of the early manuscripts had such helpful things as section headings, whereas my NRSV describes the section beginning at Genesis 1:1 as "Six days of Creation and the Sabbath" and then at 2:4a, it very helpfully tells me this is a "Another Account of the Creation."

So while the Jews are living in exile in Babylon, the Genesis poem gets put together and depicts a very different worldview. We're not talking angry gods here. The cosmos isn't born out of violence or fear.

This god is a mysterious oneness and loves to make things. And as the refrain to the poem says "It's Good!"

This poem has a rhythm to it, a pattern, things are separated to create order, various domains are populated.

It's not science, it's mythos. Somewhere between poetry and metaphysics. In this story, we get diversity and we get creativity.

For the Jews, the story as told in Genesis 1 is a confrontative story because it says there's a whole different way to view the world than the story of the Tiamat and Marduk. Is the engine of the universe violence and destruction or is it overflowing joy and creativity?

Let's go off on a little excursion.

Who's got a picture of their children or grandchildren in their wallet or on their phone. Why do you carry that around with you? Are you afraid you'll forget what they look like? I have pictures of Christine on my noticeboard at work. Surely my memory's not so bad that I need to be reminded what my wife looks like?

When you show us pictures of your grandchildren, what do you say? I bet it's something like: "Isn't she adorable?" What is the nature of this question? Your question is an invitation – you find this child adorable and your first impulse is to invite us into your joy. The very nature of joy is that it overflows, and it invites others into it.

The Genesis story tells us that our God creates out of overflow, a divine overflowing of love.

This is the question in the ancient world that the Genesis poem answered. The question is "What's the engine of creation? What drives it?"

When we look at what's going on in the world today, we've had the Occupy movement. Me too. School Strike for Climate. Black Lives Matter. What's driving people? How do legitimate protests against police brutality, institutionalised racism, social inequity, how do legitimate protests descend into looting and burning? What's the driving force? The truth is, we live our lives according to these deep forces within us, and now we're in mythos country. We all have a place we live from, however we present ourselves to the world. When we live integrated lives, our inner drives and our outward behaviour reflect one another. But our inner drives are shaped by the stories that give meaning to our world. Genesis 1 tells a far different story to the Enuma Elish. Genesis 1 tells us that the God we worship, and in whose image we are made, is a God of love, who loves to create, and who has intimate relationship at the core of God's being.

If we look closely at this poem, there are a number of observations we can make.

We see a drive to self-transcend; God creates things, but also delegates the power for these things to create more things. Go forth and multiply was the command not just to humankind but to every living thing. The whole thing is rigged to make more and move beyond itself. This is why selfishness is such a destructive spiritual condition. When your life is more and more about you, then you're moving in the opposite direction from how the universe works. We're meant to move beyond ourselves for the joy and blessing of others.

Being made in the image of God also explains why we love to make things. We intuitively know that we are here to make something beautiful of the world and anything that obstructs or hinders human flourishing should be dealt with so that we might be true to who we were created to be.

In this poem we're created by a creator to be co-creators and create something interesting with the world.

As I mentioned earlier, one of the interesting differences between the first and second accounts of creation, is that God is referred to as Elohim in Genesis 1, but YHWH (often translated the LORD God) in Genesis 2. Although in plural form, and used in places to refer to multiple gods, "Elohim" treated like the "royal we" here. So "let us make man in our own image" is grammatically akin to Queen Victoria's famous "We are not amused."

But there's no reason why we can't interpret it as referring to the Oneness in Community that we understand to be the Holy Trinity.

There are several ways to interpret the first few verses of Genesis. My NRSV chooses to talk of a wind from God sweeping over the face of the waters, though a footnote indicates that it could also be read as the Spirit of God. And as we know, every day in the creation story has the same pattern of "God said ... let there be ... a dome, waters, light, living creatures" etc. In the Gospel according to John, that Creative Word of God is identified as the eternal Christ who would later be incarnated as Jesus of Nazareth.

So we learn of a creator/spirit/word all moving, moving in, moving amongst, making something, characterized by energy, momentum.

There's a Greek word helps describe this. It comes up again and again in modern theology though it dates back to the Church Fathers.

Perichoresis. The two root Peri and Choresis appear separately in the words Perimeter and Choreography. You can think of it as referring to a Divine Dance, where the divine partners move forward but also make room for one another (that's the choresis part) while also going around each other (that's the peri part). Sort of a holy circle dance. A dance of Love, of generosity, of blessing, and of service. The three persons of the Trinity are moving around each other in self-giving love, and always oriented around the other.

It's a much more dynamic vision of God than the previously common vision of an old King sitting on a throne, somewhere up out of the reach of mortals.

Now if you look on the back page of your pewsheet, you'll see a modern version of Andrei Rublev's classic icon of the Holy Trinity. From left to right we see God the Father, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. They're sitting round a table and there's a gap at the front which some have interpreted as a space into which we are invited.

If you hold to the old idea of a static God, seated somewhere up above us, and only occasionally choosing to come down and intervene in the lives of mortals, then you can be forgiven for thinking, why doesn't God intervene more often. How can we persuade him to come down and fix the mess we've got ourselves into. Where was God when such-and-such happened?

That's the sort of God that the New Atheists, Dawkins, Hitchens et al loudly proclaim does not exist. And in that respect, they're right.

But let's look at it another way.

I'm reminded of a cartoon where a young guy sits on a park bench, talking to a Jesus figure in a white robe, and the young guy asks, "So why do you allow things like famine, war, suffering, disease, crime, homelessness, despair etc to exist in our world?" To which Jesus responds, "Interesting that you should bring that up as I was about to ask you the exact same question."

You have to understand that our God is dynamic, and invites us into that circle dance of love. In so doing, he empowers us, energizes us, models that self-giving other-centredness that enables us to love out our vocation as co-creators, good stewards of all that has been created.

God isn't some puppet-master, pulling strings to make things happen.

I like the suggestion that Diana Butler Bass made in her book *Grounded*. I wonder: Is God initiator, presence, and horizon, the one behind, within, and just beyond the cosmos.

Initiator, the Ground of all being and source of everything that is.

Presence, Immanuel, God with us.

Horizon, the one who is always ahead of us, calling us forward into a better future.

May you hear the music of the divine dance and enter into it!