IMAGES OF THE BEGINNING

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EVERY WRITER knows that the last paragraph of an article to be written is the first. The reason is simple: we can write an adequate introduction to our work only when we know the total shape of what we want to say. An introduction written before we know what we wish to introduce is a waste of time.

This principle, that every beginning must take account of and make sense of the middle and the end of our work, has a wider application. It explains why, in the stories which we find in scripture and in our personal experience to make sense of our lives and world, the beginning is so important. It is important because it illuminates the whole story, but it remains true that we can understand the significance of the beginning of our stories only when we have a reasonable grasp of the story as a whole. And we appreciate the beginning of stories completely only when we know their ending. Thus, the saints who in earlier times were given credit for refusing their mother's milk on fastdays may well have been suspected of being difficult or of having teething problems at the time; it was only in the light of the larger story of their lives, and particularly of their later habits of asceticism, that this earlier self denial was seen as a beginning. For it both formed part of a coherent story and appeared to embody it. Moreover, despite all the differences in emphasis, our more freudian sense of the relationship between the beginnings of life and its continuation is of the same character. We study the patterns of a life story, preferably from the vantage point of its ending, to make sense of its beginning, and then use the beginning to illuminate the whole story.

If this is common human experience, it should not surprise us that scriptural images and stories of beginnings are often developed when the pattern of the story is well established. The accounts of creation in Genesis, of which most would think instinctively when asked about biblical images of the beginning, were composed after the Israelites had long experience of God's care for them. They used stories of the beginning current in the surrounding world to give an

account of the beginning of the world which was consonant with their larger story. In the development of the gospels, too, the stories which treat of Jesus's birth came later than the stories which told of Jesus's death and resurrection. In Luke's gospel, especially, the stories of the beginning of Jesus's life are so told as to bring into clear focus the themes of the whole gospel. They can be called without exaggeration the gospel in miniature.

The relationship between a story and its beginnings is complex, delicate and — to some extent — unstable. For if we come to understand a story in a new way, we shall also see its beginning in a new light, and perhaps even be led to compose a new beginning. On the other hand, if we are forced to interpret our beginnings in a new way, we shall soon have to adjust the whole story to make it coherent with the beginning. This is true of both our public and personal history. Although we are mercifully not under the same pressure as were the historians of Stalin's day to accommodate our accounts of origins to an ever changing interpretation of our present world, we are all by nature revisionists when it comes to telling our stories. Fairy stories in which all must be told in precisely the same order night after night are strictly for children. In the writing of our australian history, the prevailing anti-authoritarian strand of australian culture has led many historians to concentrate on the plight of the convicts and little people in the beginnings of settlement, in contrast to the emphasis upon governors and great men found in a more aristocratic vision. Here too, the story of the beginning is affected by the interpretation of the whole story.

For this reason, debate about the beginnings is recurrent in the gospels. Because Jesus's vision of the world is so different from that of his opponents, he is very soon forced back to give an account of beginnings. When he presents his demanding teaching about marriage, he leads his hearers back beyond the mosaic legislation to more distant origins when there was no accommodation to hardness of heart. Similarly, in the Fourth Gospel Jesus resolves a conflict over his authority by placing himself before Abraham. Once Jesus is placed at the centre of the story of God's relationship with humanity, the account of the beginnings of the relationship must be adjusted to include him.

It is also true that when we change our understanding of the beginning of a story, we will inevitably change also our interpretation of the whole story. For that reason, it may be dangerous to interfere with the beginning of stories which are important to us.

Fiction is full of cautionary tales of people who against the best advice went out to search for their real parents, only to find their lives shattered by the discovery. What they found forced a traumatic change within their understanding of themselves.

Within the interpretation of scripture, the often heated debates about the beginnings both of Jesus and of the world illustrate the same point. While it is true that in the confused battle between agnostics and believers in the nineteenth century over the origins of the world, both sides were mistaken in believing that there was a necessary tension between religion and science, nevertheless the new accounts of the world's beginning did challenge deeply the christian story of the world. We have moved suddenly from a story of a God who acts very directly in the world to create beings in their several species at a time which can be placed within conceivable memory, to a story of God involved within an evolutionary world which began at a time beyond all human comprehension. This changed vision presses us to depict also God's guiding relationship to the world in Christ in different ways. Most of us are still working at the details of the story that has such a beginning, and find it hard to accommodate imaginatively the relationship between Christ and the vastness of the world of curved space on the one hand, and the vast numbers of people who have lived without knowledge of Christ, on the other. While the christian polemicists who saw in evolutionary theory an attack on the heart of the faith were mistaken, they did appreciate the strain which was placed on the christian story of the world when it was married to a radically new account of the beginnings of the world.

In our own day, the persistence with which the virginal conception of Jesus has been questioned and the vigour with which it has been defended illustrate the same point. The integrity of the gospel hardly stands or falls on the virgin conception. It is an appropriate sign of God's initiative at the beginning of Jesus's human life, but we could believe him to be Son of God and Saviour even if he were conceived in the ordinary human way. Christians continue, however, to feel obscurely that if the beginning of the story of Jesus is found in ordinary human intercourse, the change in the whole christian story would be momentous. It would call into question the role of sexuality in the christian life, and the way in which God relates to us in our sinfulness. And, of course, the questions which Christians have been led to ask about sexuality and sinfulness have led them to reflect on the meaning of the virgin conception. In this case, too, a

change in our sense of the beginning has large consequences which cannot be weighed simply by considering the historical reliability of the story or its original place in the narrative.

The path taken by the early Church also offers us instructive examples of what happens when images of the beginning change. The early Christians saw the risen Christ as the beginning of their faith, of their new lives and of their new hopes. Because Christ marked a new beginning, they were soon led to tell a different story from that of the Jews. Although they shared with them the belief that the world's beginning lay in God's creative power, their sense that the world had begun anew in Christ inevitably led them outside the patterns of the synagogue. They could no longer tell the same story about the world, since the new beginning in Christ had made such an intrusive difference to their lives.

It follows that when we deal with stories and images of the beginning, we have to do with much more than a prosaic chronicle of events. Stories of the beginning have less to do with facts than with their interpretation: they are symbolic in character and are related to a larger vision of the world and of our hopes for it. It should not surprise us, then, that the scriptures contain many stories and images of the beginning, each representing an individual sense of the world. Thus, the first chapters of Genesis present two accounts of creation, each with its own emphasis and understanding of God's presence and interest in human life. The 'priestly' account is more interested in the ritual with which God invests his interest in the world, while the 'jahwistic' account is more concerned to relate God's activity to the contrarieties and ambiguities of human conduct. The two accounts are complementary in that the stories which they tell are broadly consistent with one another, but each retains its own resonances.

The genealogies (literally, beginnings) of Jesus, apparently among the most prosaic and merely factual elements of the New Testament, have the same symbolic character. The gospels both of Luke and of Matthew give a list of Jesus's ancestors, but the details differ, corresponding to the different stories which each evangelist tells of Jesus. Matthew is concerned to develop Jesus's relationship to the jewish people and to their hopes. Accordingly, he makes David central within the genealogy, and traces it back to Abraham as the father of the race. Moreover, because the relationship between Jesus and jewish history is not straightforward, he draws attention within his genealogy to the more circuitous ways in

which God has acted through human sinfulness in Israel's history. David's infidelity with Uriah's wife, the part played by Rahab the harlot of Jericho, and Tamar's deception of Judah to lead him to give her two sons, are all alluded to in the genealogy.

In contrast with Matthew, Luke links the genealogy with his account of Jesus's baptism, and while also stressing Jesus's descent from David, takes his line back to Adam. This is consistent with the wider perspective from which he writes his gospel. He is concerned to develop the universal scope of the christian gospel, and so begins with the father of the human race. We may compare both Matthew and Luke with John, who gives no genealogy but in the prologue to the gospel takes the story back into the life of God before creation. He is concerned to present Jesus as the revelation of God, and the beginning of the gospel gives an appropriate expression to this theme. Like the other gospels, the Fourth Gospel finds a beginning which embodies the story of the whole gospel.

The inclusion of disreputable elements in Matthew's genealogy alerts us to another way in which the images of the beginning reflect the character of the story as a whole. If the story is to be marked by unexpected turnings and the confounding of all our reasonable expectations, we would expect the beginning of the story to have the same character. We do indeed find this quality in christian images of the beginning. The *felix culpa* of Adam provides images for the beginning of the story of the Cross; the births both in Old and in New Testament are often unexpected: old women and virgins conceive. Moreover, some stories are told with a good deal of irony, and their beginnings have the same character. The story of Jonah, an ironic comment on the contrast between God's mercy and human stiffness, begins with Jonah's attempt to escape. Jesus himself appears at times to be sardonic in his preaching of the kingdom of God, if we attend closely to the imagery in which his parables describe it. When he compares the kingdom to a mustard seed which will grow into a great tree in which the birds of the air roost, he makes his point about the contrast between the tiny seed and the larger tree. But in the description of the mustard tree as a mighty tree in which birds will roost, there is surely an element of bathos. Birds may roost in cedars and fig-trees, common images of Israel, but hardly in largish shrubs. The story not only encourages its hearers to look beyond the insignificant present to the future, but gently mocks their pretentious understanding of what the future will be like.

Whatever images are used to describe the beginning, they are

characterized by elements of poetry and of surprise. The descriptions of creation both in Genesis and in the Psalms are vividly and concisely described, while in the New Testament the beginnings of the kingdom are evoked by concrete, pregnant images: the treasure, the pearl, the coin.

These images also are associated with surprise and joy. The scriptural believers were commonly surprised at what they discovered in their world. God himself was delighted with his world at its beginning; the writers of the psalms plainly took delight in creation; the Book of Revelation revels in the imagery of a new heaven and a new earth. When God appears in the world, he makes a new beginning, and this new beginning evokes surprised delight. To find the treasure or the pearl is to see one's previous life in a radically new way, and to discover with joy surprising new possibilities.

It is also characteristic that we move to and from images which embody a wider focus. In the Old Testament, for example, the first important image of the beginning was the israelite deliverance from Egypt. From there, the writings showed an interest in Abraham as the father of the people, and finally in the widest possible perspective of the creation of the world. The way in which the portrait of Christ is developed in the New Testament illustrates the point even more clearly. For Paul, the story of Christ has its critical beginnings in his death and resurrection. This is also the beginning of the believer's story. But as people begin to reflect upon their relationship with God in Christ, they are drawn to relate him to the wider contexts of time and space in which they live their lives. As they relate Christ to these wider worlds, they find ever earlier points at which to begin their stories. When Mark writes of Christ, he makes his story begin at Jesus's baptism when he was manifested as Son of God. This beginning to Jesus's ministry introduces a story whose interest lies partly in the way in which it relates Christ to the other institutions in the believer's world.

Later, Matthew and Luke take the story back a step further, beginning the account at Jesus's birth and conception. This starting-point relates Christ to the whole span of human life. Finally, in the gospel of John and the 'cosmic hymns' of the New Testament, the beginnings of Jesus's story are located in the reality of God who exists before the beginning of the world. The context now is the whole universe as we imagine it spread through space and time, and Christ is thus related to the whole of reality. The significance of the development does not lie in the crude assertion that the moment of

Christ's Lordship is gradually moved further and further back, but in the more subtle point that Christ is so central within faith that we can adequately express our faith only if he is described as active in the beginning of all possible reality. There is no point of space or of time which does not find its meaning, and therefore its beginning, in him.

The urge to find ever earlier beginnings is not inspired by speculation about the course of cosmic history, but is an attempt — and a necessary one — to make sense of more and more of reality. The beginnings are pushed back because the story must encompass the whole of the believer's world. But once we have an image of the beginning which does embody our vision of the world as a whole, it is appropriate to move back to less remote beginnings. It is significant, therefore, that the christian imagination has fixed not on the prologue of the Fourth Gospel — the classical theologian's beginning — but on the story of Christmas. Christmas is a comfortable beginning, for the story which it introduces enables us to find meaning in the human life-span, our normal living space. People of a speculative bent habitually spend their time in a wider space and so need constantly to wrestle with earlier beginnings; we all need to be able to move comfortably in a wider space and occasionally reflect on earlier beginnings, but we can generally live confidently in the space which is begun at Christmas and ends at the Cross, but is given its point as our beginning by the resurrection.

Within the great variety of christian images of the beginning, there are perhaps two which are central. The first is the resurrection. The resurrection itself marks the beginnings of faith, but it also controls our sense of what any beginning should look like. I earlier mentioned surprise and poetry as qualities of all images of the beginning; they are found above all in the stories of the risen Jesus. Because Christ's resurrection is the point at which words inevitably run out into the sand, its significance can be conveyed only in concrete and tangential imagery — the wounded hands and side, the missing gardener, the way in which flesh can be touched by spirit, the joy of recognition, and the fear to ask the self-betraying question. The vision of the risen Christ is beyond words and can be pointed to only through images.

Surprise, too, is the hallmark of the resurrection. Mary's discovery, that of the disciples on the way to Emmaus, the recognition of Thomas, the fear evoked by Jesus's appearance and answered by his message of peace — these responses speak of surprise and delight.

Moreover, the surprise evoked by the resurrection leads to a surprised recognition of the character of the world as a whole. The search within the New Testament for progressively earlier beginnings of Jesus's story — from resurrection back to creation — is not a way of domesticating his story by situating it within a well-known history. It rather marks the recognition that the resurrection makes the stories of the world, hitherto taken for granted, so surprising that they need to be assigned a new beginning. That a common birth could yield such a saviour says something about other births and about commonness; that the world was made in Christ makes us revalue the world. It we take the resurrection as central within our interpretation of the world, we will characteristically find surprise there. It is in showing this, perhaps more than in the speculative force of his thought, that Teilhard de Chardin has been such a good teacher.

The second central image of the beginning is that of fatherhood (or motherhood — if the words suggest different qualities, all are to be applied to God). The beginnings both of our world and of our lives lie in a God who delights in what he makes, cares for it, enjoys it and walks close to us in the cool of the evening. The human history of the world goes back to Adam as its father; the jewish people go back to Abraham as father, and we all go back to the God who is shown in Christ's story to be as close and as involved in our interests as a father. Any image of God which presents him as primarily a judge is false in christian terms.

The scriptural images of fatherhood, however, have elements which cannot be harmonized with the conventional image of an emasculated father presiding with ineffectual benevolence over a scene of domestic comfort. If Adam was our father and Adam was deceived by Satan, that makes us not so very far from having Beelzebul as our father, and we must reckon with the images that suggest we were conceived in sin and born in sin. The story of Christ begins with the suspicion of doubtful parentage, and the story of the Christian constantly reckons with the fears arising from doubtful sonship. Furthermore, even the ideal form of fatherhood, as it is sketched in the scriptures, has the knife in its heart. Abraham is initiated as father of his people by being invited to sacrifice his son. The same sacrificial theme and the darkness at the heart of fatherhood is developed in the story of Christ. At the heart of all fatherhood lie the death and pain which engender life, and we cannot speak of God as our father or our beginning unless we incorporate

these things centrally into our story. This connection between fatherhood and suffering is not new and not exclusively christian, but it is made central and positive within the christian story. Fatherhood is about allowing independence and suffering separation. But the story of christian beginnings is not a simple story of separation, but of closeness found in helplessness, of trust vindicated within apparent desertion, and of life found in the most distressing death. The theme of fatherhood, central to the christian story, takes us back again to the story of the resurrection, which resolves the paradox found in all fatherhood.

All images of the beginning, whether drawn from our own experience or from the New Testament, take us back to a sense of fatherhood. This image is sufficiently darkened both by our experience and by its scriptural representation to make it deeply ambiguous and to justify the fears as well as the hopes which we have of our story. We find God unambiguously as father and our lives as unequivocally graced in the story of Jesus, which for us begins centrally with his resurrection.