

Sermon – Jesus College – Trinity Sunday 26th May 2013. Ps 139:1-18, Genesis 2:4b-17, Revelation 21:1-7, 22:1-5.

Thank you, Megan for the invitation to come and speak here this evening on the theme “God, Science and Time”.

I want to start with the last two aspects of our theme, science and time. The most commonly accepted scientific description of the beginning of the Universe remains the singularity known as the Big Bang, which began a period of time we can hardly imagine, currently 13.8 billion years and counting. By comparison, our planet is a mere 4.5 billion years old and we have a better idea what made it the way it is as it was shaped physically by the creeping processes of geology, while life evolved by a process of natural selection.

It’s not just that the Universe has existed for a very long time, though, and it’s not just that the Earth is itself very old and evolution very slow. The very stuff of the world is *space-time*. As General Relativity maintains, *time* is an inherent aspect of *things*. As a result speed and frequency are fundamental concepts of reality – for example the speed and frequency of light, and the increasing speed with which the Universe is expanding. Furthermore, the Universe has a lifetime, as do we, and whether it expands faster for ever and ends up cold, diffuse and entirely devoid of life, or eventually slows down in its expansion and then starts to collapse again, it has a finite term.

At a more mundane level, many of our measurements in science relate to time, our data are in units of rate and speed because different kinds of elements and molecules behave differently *in time*. Biological molecules themselves have their own evolved lifetimes, each one different, at each level of complexity.

Where does our scientific understanding of time leave belief in a God who creates and saves? A God who is everywhere and always, who as our Psalm put it, knitted us together and is with us beyond our end. To look at that question I want to shift our focus from the time measured by science to the time of our lives.

Time in our lives is a very uneven experience – long periods of time can seem relatively insignificant, and short moments can be the experiences we most value. We value them in particular because they were, for example, the moments we realised we understood something we had never quite seen before, or the moment we heard or saw something beautiful, or the moment we realised we loved someone. And in fact, *love* turns out to be the key word, because when we understand something, or when we appreciate beauty, we do so because we have come to value what we study, or what we are looking at, just for itself. In other words, we are in a sense loving what we study or what we are looking at, when we understand them or are affected by their beauty. When we love someone or something we value them for themselves and in a sense *give* ourselves to them, focus our selves on them; similarly in science when we study something we give ourselves to it, we celebrate it for itself – in a sense, we love it.

The odd implication of this is that our subjective capacity for love takes us closest to understanding what is real around us while also being central to our understanding of what it is to live a human life. I believe our loving momentary experiences of beauty and understanding underlie our arts, our mathematics, our music, and our science. They are the stimuli that make us creative and give us understanding. This is why we live in a world of what get called beautiful molecular structures and beautiful equations.

How was it that our appreciation of beauty and our capacity to love turned out to be more than subjective phenomena? How was it, in other words, that we came to value the beauty of something *for itself* and not for how it can benefit us? I think the answer to that lies in two things: the freedom of creation, the fact God didn’t so much make the world as set it free, and our discovery of what is ethical, of what is good.

The story of how we were called to live a good life is bracketed by our Old and New Testament readings for this evening, from the beginning and the end of the Bible. They are examples of two very different literary forms, different genres, found in the Bible, and I think it is helpful to remind ourselves about that. Just as natural science has its own distinct forms of expression, its own genres – the research paper, the mathematical equation, the cartoon or schematic drawing, and the referee’s report – so does the Bible.

Our first reading was a story about God’s creation of the world. Not, for example, the seven days of creation found in chapter one of Genesis, but a completely different and older story found in chapter two. The version we heard concerns one day of creation, not seven, yet the two stories were placed together by the compilers of Genesis and that fact alone reminds us that to try and think of them as an attempt at a modern kind of scientific description is now and was always a category mistake. In fact, it is just *anachronistic* to think of the first two chapters of Genesis as attempts at scientific explanation – they should never have been treated in this way because that is not their purpose or style. These are stories about *why* there is a world, not *how* it came to be that there is one. They are rivals not to a scientific explanation of the world’s origins but to those who thought the world had always existed. They are rivals to the claim that the world is a plaything of the gods and demons, because they assert that the world was created free, because they seek to *demythologize* the world. That is, these stories are part of the imaginative revolution in human beings that made science as we understand it today possible. In our reading, humanity in the Garden of Eden is faced with every kind of tree that is good to eat, and the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This story tells us that to know right from wrong deprives us of our innocence, and makes of us ethical demands because we are free to choose. Among the products of this freedom asserted by the book of Genesis are science and technology.

The Book of Revelation, from which our second reading came, was written about a thousand years after our first reading, and it was written quite self-consciously in response to it. The writer of Revelation structured his text around images from the Old Testament. He was trying to make sense of the revolution in human thought caused by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, in terms of the whole tradition which had come before: make sense of it as the culmination of the assertion that humanity, like the world, is created free.

The writer of Revelation takes the ideas and the imagery of the Old Testament and *exhausts* them in an attempt to speak about God’s kingdom. We heard it said that God is the light of the heavenly city and, in deliberate contrast to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, we heard about the trees of life with their leaves for the healing of the nations. The Book of Revelation is a technicolour explosion of symbolism, not speaking about a place in the future or a geographical reality but all the saints of God in union with God – and they, in principal, can be all of us. It is talking about our union with God and our eternal life in him.

So far I have said that as we have evolved, humanity has discovered a capacity for discerning the truth which has been empowered by an appreciation of beauty and a capacity to love. I have also said that this discovery is enabled by our radical freedom and underlies our scientific ability and knowledge. I have said that God gave us this freedom, and I have said that the story bracketed by our first and second readings, from the day on which God made man to the day on which the home of God comes among mortals, is a story about what God has to do with time.

What do I mean by saying God has made man? What do I mean by saying that God gave us our freedom? Because what I am asserting it that to say God created the world is absolutely not in contradiction to saying that the Universe arose from a Big Bang. I am saying that to describe the evolution by natural selection of all forms of life is absolutely not in contradiction to the claim that God also created them. And I am saying that the immense emptinesses of the times of our Universe, its unfathomable history up to now and its possibly

endless future are absolutely not in contradiction to the claim that God loves the world and came into the world.

Why are these not contradictions? They do not contradict one another for the same reason that the book of Genesis does not contradict the *Origin of Species*. They do not contradict one another because the scientific description is an attempt at a mechanical description in the world's own terms, whereas to speak about God is to speak of the *reason* for the existence of anything, and the *value* that it has, not the *mechanics* of how it came to be. The Christian assertion is that the *reason for* something and the *value* it has are more fundamental to its existence than the mechanics of its production. To speak about God is to say that the world is *loved*, and in other words that it is created. This assertion is what can make sense of the odd way in which our subjective experiences of beauty and love are guides to what is true – in the beautiful equation and the beautiful molecular structure, for example. This assertion can make sense of the trustworthiness of our emotional response to the beauty and wonder of creation.

But *why* would anyone feel the need to make this kind of claim? Why can't we be happy with a mechanical description and leave off talk about love as if love had a reality independent of us?

To answer that we need to turn again to the time of our lives, and talk about God in time. I spoke before about humanity's discovery of the beautiful and the ethical and how they are the way to the truth – for example, in the practise of science. This discovery was hard won, but I want to claim that it was enabled by God making himself known in creation – by God revealing that the world is *given* existence, by God revealing that the world is *loved* and by God calling us to live lives of radical *goodness* as well as radical *freedom*. We were reminded how hard won this discovery was just this week, in which the murder of Drummer Lee Rigby showed again the evil and ugliness of the world – an evil and an ugliness which the Jewish, Christian and Muslim faiths together oppose because of their fundamental belief in the creation of the world, its beauty, its good and the *realisation* of love within it. The *realisation* of love in our world was borne witness to this week, for example, by Amanda Donnelly and Gemima Donnelly-Martin, the mother and daughter who stopped their car and cared for the body Lee Rigby while his murderers walked around. That realisation lies behind the extraordinary transformation of imagery from the tree of knowledge in Genesis chapter 2 to the trees of life in Revelation chapter 22. This realisation of truth, beauty, goodness and love in the world is the realisation of God in time.

Christians believe that God has made himself known to us most particularly in Jesus, and that Jesus has shown what human life could be like – that it could be wholly generous, wholly open to the needs of others, wholly loving. In Jesus's life and teaching, death and resurrection God revealed the way in which our physical nature could be freely transformed in this way in the fullness of time. The fullness of time, whether for us personally or our whole world, is something which we have to talk about in metaphor and imagery, as in the extravagant language of the Book of Revelation. But the fullness of time is also something of which we can simply say that since God has revealed himself as personal love, in Jesus, he will personally love us for ever, and we will personally love God. The writer of Revelation, fed by the symbolic tradition in which he had been formed, was simply using more evocative language to say the same thing when he wrote: "I am the Alpha and the Omega; see I am making all things new." And "they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign for ever and ever."

One of the odd things about time is that it mismatches our understanding of our lives. It's not uncommon to hear people in their 80s or 90s say that they feel no different from when they were 17. The questions we ask as children are no less pointed or worth taking seriously than the ones we ask as adults. I look back

sometimes and think that I understood myself and the world much better when I was 18 than I do now. So I will finish with an example of a question that cuts to the heart of what I have said, and an answer that meets it brilliantly.

A little girl called Lulu wrote a letter to God, which ran like this:

“To God, how did you get invented?”

Her Dad sent the letter around to various religious leaders, and one of them was Rowan Williams. This was his response:

“Dear Lulu,

Your dad has sent on your letter and asked if I have any answers. It’s a difficult one! But I think God might reply a bit like this –

‘Dear Lulu – Nobody invented me – but lots of people discovered me and were quite surprised. They discovered me when they looked round at the world and thought it was really beautiful or really mysterious and wondered where it came from. They discovered me when they were very very quiet on their own and felt a sort of peace and love they hadn’t expected. Then they invented ideas about me – some of them sensible and some of them not very sensible. From time to time I sent them some hints – specially in the life of Jesus – to help them get closer to what I’m really like. But there was nothing and nobody around before me to invent me. Rather like somebody who writes a story in a book, I started making up the story of the world and eventually invented human beings like you who could ask me awkward questions!’

And then he’d send you lots of love and sign off. I know he doesn’t usually write letters, so I have to do the best I can on his behalf. Lots of love from me too.”

Amen.