

Sermon - 9 December 2018

“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said "Let there be light": and there was light.” (Gen 1.1-3)

And from that primordial light, as the Universe expanded, massy particles condensed out. After 300,000 years, the free protons, neutrons and electrons had combined to form atoms of Hydrogen (H) and Helium (He) so the remaining light was no longer absorbed and scattered but remains to this day as what is now called the Cosmic Microwave Background. The Hydrogen and Helium coagulated under gravity and formed stars, which began to shine as nuclear reactions started in their cores under gravitational pressure. The universe began to create its own light. Stars clumped into galaxies - hundreds of billions of them. Big early generation stars quickly used up their nuclear fuel, creating carbon, oxygen and iron; some exploded as supernovae and spread the heavier elements across their galaxies.

After several billion years, these elements were plentiful enough for some newer stars to form with rocky planets circling them.

A very small fraction of these were in stable enough orbits at the right distance from long-lived small stars for liquid water to exist on the surface. Some even had both land and seas. (Gen 1.9-10)

In some seas across the universe, under the influence of their sun's warmth, self-replicating chemicals appeared over a space of billions of years.

In a tiny fraction of these cases, the self-replicating core became associated with an outer membrane and an interconnection between the two - a channel of chemical communication - the beginning of 'information' and, perhaps therefore, life. Life - scattered across galaxies, across the universe.

In a small fraction of cases, means of storing and using chemical energy appeared, and single-celled organisms developed. In another very small fraction of cases, proto-organisms able to use the light from their sun to drive chemical reactions evolved: some of this led to simple green algae-like organisms releasing oxygen and transforming their planet's atmospheres - such that, if anyone were around, they would see sun, moon and stars (Gen 1.11, 14)

In a very small fraction of these cases over billions of years, multi-celled organisms, with different cells performing different functions, appeared.

Now very much more thinly scattered through the universe, on some of these life-bearing planets, the multi-celled organisms even evolved into creatures with motor organs, sensor organs and control organs.

On even fewer planets, circumstances led to the evolution of creatures with big nervous control systems.

And on one planet - just one, now - to a creature with two legs and dexterous hands and a large brain, a strange thing happened - consciousness dawned. The creature became aware of death, other minds, good, evil and hints of God (Gen 3.5, 7).

It left the simple paradise of the hunter-gatherer and entered the hard graft of subsistence farming (Gen 3.17, 19), but it survived; and, in the new, human world, art, language, skills, culture and ideas began to appear.

And the now whole huge story, with its billion year history, takes a new turn and focuses right down: God reveals Himself to individuals on Earth and prepares as it were a patch of space for an extraordinary event - an astonishing new chapter in his creative work - from the huge scale of the immense universe and its billions of suns in billions of galaxies, down to one planet, round one star, and one small village of human beings, and one young woman and one tiny baby in which the unimaginable God, the ultimate reality, is manifested. This is how the huge story is to continue!

What an extraordinary way to create mankind in the image of God - via a universe that co-creates itself. What an extraordinary idea that the future glory of creation is bound up with these funny creatures and that their nature is robust enough to bear the glory of God Himself. How extraordinary that God and His purpose should be with us; and yet....

"In [Bethlehem's] dark streets shineth the everlasting light,
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

We look back to this amazing event with joy and wonder. We look out to this amazing universe which we in our generation have been privileged to learn so much about: and we look forward to a marvellous future that we cannot comprehend, as God's mighty narrative, through His Son and through the work of His Spirit in us, unfolds further.

This is Advent, where we look back in joy, out in joy, and forward in joy;
and where we wait in excited anticipation, where we wait for the Lord, "more than watchmen wait for the morning" (Ps 130.6), we wait for the Lord.