

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON
Reflection – 3rd Sunday after Trinity – 20th June 2021

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A few weeks, ago David and I were watching Brian Cox presenting “Aliens: Are we alone?” He was exploring the possibility that we humans are the sole form of intelligent life in the universe. Given the mess we seem to be in at the moment, perhaps “intelligent“ might be taken with a pinch of salt - but that said, the programme raised some very interesting questions.

Professor Cox talked about the endosymbiotic theory of evolution: the idea is that complex life emerged from the primeval swamps when an aerobic bacterium was accidentally engulfed by another, larger anaerobic version. What struck him about this theory was the idea that a single, accidental and almost inconceivably rare event could possibly have given rise to an evolutionary chain which in turn led to the emergence of human beings on Earth. The chance of this happening elsewhere in the universe seems to be microscopically small. Perhaps the answer to the programme’s title might be, “Yes, we are alone”.

Nowadays it’s not only *“Those who go down to the sea in ships and ply their trade in great waters”* who *“see the works of the Lord and his wonders in the deep”*. Biologists and particle physicists also marvel at the wonders of this universe - though perhaps not too many are ready to *“give thanks to the Lord for his goodness and the wonders he does for his children”*. In looking at today’s first reading I was struck by how so many of us are like Job: overly sure that we have life sorted out. But God confronts Job’s self-assurance – and I make no apology for re-reading from that powerful passage:

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: ‘Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?’

Job was petrified by God's sudden appearance - he must have been trembling before him:

Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

Then follows a series of impossible questions:

'Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

Tell me, if you have understanding.

Who determined its measurements—surely you know!

Or who stretched the line upon it?

On what were its bases sunk,

or who laid its cornerstone

when the morning stars sang together

and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

'Or who shut in the sea with doors

when it burst out from the womb?—

when I made the clouds its garment,

and thick darkness its swaddling band,

and prescribed bounds for it,

and set bars and doors,

and said, "Thus far shall you come, and no farther,

and here shall your proud waves be stopped"?

These are wonderful questions – and around 2,800 years later, our greatest minds are still seeking many of the answers. In his commentary on the final chapters of Job, John Rogerson writes: *"... humans are not able to see things from God's viewpoint. They would not be able to make any sense of reality even if they could. This means that while the human quest for knowledge and for answers to the most perplexing questions of human existence must never be discouraged, humans must never forget that they represent a tiny speck in an immeasurable universe; and that God deals compassionately with humans in spite of their inhumanity to each other."*

At the end of the Book of Job, having listened to God, the prophet realizes his limitations:

Surely I spoke of things I did not understand,

things too wonderful for me to know.....

*My ears had heard of you
but now my eyes have seen you
Therefore I despise myself
and repent in dust and ashes."*

I had a conversation recently that made me reflect a good deal on the nature of faith. I was speaking to a woman who regularly comes to services, recites the Creed, takes the sacrament. I'd naturally assumed she was Christian. But I began to wonder. "I don't believe Jesus knew he was going to have to die", she said. "He was just like all the other people who've given their lives to help others - he simply committed himself, right to the end. Yes, he died, but all the other stuff was just made up after the event". There was a terrible certainty in the way she said this: one that left no room for argument, and no room for the mystery of God or doubt of the correctness of *her* perceptions.

Now Brian Cox says that he has 'no personal faith', yet he doesn't like being labelled an atheist. His enquiring mind leaves space for searching for the truth. We just heard today's gospel story: Jesus calms the storm and the disciples say: '*Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?*' How did you react as you listened? Does this account have any basis in fact, or is this a mythical or symbolic story that had built up over the last 30-40 years since his crucifixion? Why did Mark put it in his, the earliest gospel? Do you believe this is a story written down to create faith?

We can never definitely know what happened on that day - but we can reflect on what it reveals about faith. Let's look again at words from the end of the reading:

A great gale arose, and the waves beat the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?' He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?'

Jesus had been fast asleep in the boat, untroubled upon a stormy sea. Unlike the disciples, he was at peace, fully confident, trusting in God. What's interesting is that even after he had stilled the storm (and you'd think that the sudden 'dead

calm' would have been enough to convince any of them!) the disciples are still afraid: *'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?'* Jesus has just saved them all from perishing, but now their fear is compounded with awe.

In last week's reading from 2 Corinthians, St Paul declared: *"we walk by faith, not by sight"*. Christians have confidence in Jesus because *"even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way"*. Faith in Jesus as the Christ is a leap in the dark, a willingness to trust what has been made known to us through his life, death and resurrection. Faith changes everything: *"if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"*

Reading on today, in chapter 6, Paul talks of all the hardships he's suffered to spread the gospel. How disappointing and frustrating it must have been to arrive in Corinth, to what seems to have been a pretty lukewarm reception: *"We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us"*. Nevertheless, Paul's faith has completely changed him. His passion for spreading the word remains intact: *"As a fair exchange—I speak as to my children—open wide your hearts also"*.

Accepting Christ shouldn't be a half-hearted affair, he says: faith in Jesus Christ our Saviour should work fundamental change in us. Paul reminds them: what they have received has come through God's grace. It's not something to be taken lightly. These aren't philosophical notions we can set aside to look at later. No, says, Paul: the time to change to a life directed by faith is here and now: *"As God's co-workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. I tell you, now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation."*

Paul saw those Corinthians hadn't really changed; they'd failed to open their hearts to God. They had no solidity, no real trust. Being open to God brings a faith that keeps us steady, *"living in in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love"*. Others may see us as *"having nothing"*. In reality, with faith, we possess *"everything"*.

Amen.