

Sermon: Midnight Communion, 24 December 2015

This month the news has been filled with images and stories of the exploration of space. It's all about our adventures up there. Tim Peake made an exciting and much covered journey to the International Space Station and we're getting regular updates of his gravity-free life. We have been intrigued by his story of the ordinary boy just like anyone of us who ends up in a rocket heading off into space. And then this week we've watched a rocket take off, eject a capsule into orbit and then return to earth base, downwards. It seems to bring the prospect of space travelling as an everyday occurrence just a little bit nearer. Never mind Star Wars, we've got our real space adventures to get excited about.

This space exploration still captures the imagination of many people. It seems to offer the hope of a new age of exploration and discovery. As it becomes increasingly clear that human activity is bringing an environmental crisis ever nearer, space exploration also carries the vestigial hope that there may some prospect of another possibility somewhere way up there. I'm not one of those who think that all space travel and experiments are a plain waste of time and money. However, it does seem wildly out of touch with reality to think that the answers to the most significant problems that we face down here can be found somewhere out there.

Well, perhaps that sounds like an atheist writing off religion and its heavenly visions of answers to the human condition. Actually it's an affirmation of the belief that this world matters and the most important questions we have about our survival on earth will have to be found right here. Christianity is sometimes characterised as a whole raft of pre-scientific beliefs unreasonably held by people who think that all the answers to humanity's questions exist beyond this world. In reality the essence of the meaning of Christmas is a belief that this world really does matter, human beings matter and all God's creation matters.

Christianity holds, at least in its orthodox form, that salvation is not about an escape **from** the world but the way for the human race to thrive **in** it.

The significance of the baby born in a stable in Bethlehem is that it conveys a message that the God of all creation is inherently interested in us – in what we do and what we create here on planet earth. I'm pretty sure that the God who created the entire universe is not **only** interested in the foibles and lunacy of what **we** humans get up to, but the message of Christmas is that we do matter. It's not about us escaping a hopeless and futile existence in order that we can get to heaven, it's about God demonstrating his commitment to us and leading us into a better way to live together in union with him and harmony with one another on earth and then to live on into eternity.

One of the lesser known Christmas songs that is played in the shops and on the radio at this time of time of year is that pop classic "A Spaceman Came Travelling" by Chris de Burgh. Well, maybe it's not a classic but it is still getting played 40 years after it was written. It contains the lines:

*"Then the stranger spoke, he said 'Do not fear,
I come from a planet a long way from here,
And I bring a message for mankind to hear,'
And suddenly the sweetest music filled the air..."*

This song seeks to convey a Christmas theme of a man who came to earth with a message of peace which of course is wonderful but it is a pale shadow of Christianity because in the song, the message comes from a spaceman who came travelling! What is so important and significant in the Christian faith is that a baby is born who is the gift of God who offers Himself to us. Taking human flesh and form means that God truly identifies with us and shares our nature. The incarnation – literally meaning 'sharing flesh' - shows that God is truly with us rather

than just visiting from planet Zarg soon to return again once he has given his message of peace on earth. Some might be sceptical of the theological proposition of God making himself known to us in the man we call Jesus Christ but it cannot be denied that it has had far-reaching consequences for the welfare of individuals and towards the vitality of communities. In contrast to secularism which is essentially individualistic, Christianity is an ideology of connections and community.

Some contemporary world views competing for our attention are not so much about a flight out of the world into space but a retreat to an inner world and self-sufficiency. This endangers the prospect of a coherent and interdependent society and which leaves us in danger of fragmentation. In this way, everyone is free to do as they wish as long as it doesn't harm anyone else but woe betide anyone who stands in the way of their right to self-expression. To many people Christianity may seem like a series of implausible propositions but despite its many failings it still offers the prospect of an ideal balance between individual rights and corporate responsibilities.

St. John's prologue which was read earlier is an epic declaration of God's determination not to leave humanity to its own devices.

Surpassing the strategy of setting out rules to regulate human behaviour, it describes God's initiative to be the light in our midst. By coming to live amongst us, as one of us, God declares himself irreversibly with us and for us. It is, as it were, a bringing together of heaven and earth. We do not need to go looking for the light, the light has come to us.

Our world today seems ever closer to breaking down along global fault lines or annihilation by consuming itself. I don't need to convince anyone that the world stands on the brink of cataclysmic conflict focused on the Middle East. And despite the hard won outcome of this month's Paris Climate Conference, we must still heed the voice of people such as Naomi Klein who wrote:

“(There is a) truth we have been avoiding: climate change isn’t an “issue” to add to the list of things to worry about, next to health care and taxes. It is a civilizational wake-up call. A powerful message—spoken in the language of fires, floods, droughts, and extinctions.”

Tim Peake is possibly working right now 250 miles above us in the Space Station. If he looked out of one of the port holes he could see Planet Earth looking remarkably tranquil. Yet I’m sure he also knows that appearances are deceptive and Earth is incredibly vulnerable and in need of remedial action to save it from untold damage or total destruction. Perhaps God also looks upon his beautiful creation and wonders why we are making such a poor job of cherishing what he made? Why can’t we enjoy the benefits of this world without wreaking havoc on one another in the process?

The Christian message of Christmas is that there is a God who made and cares for the world. He is not simply out there distant and detached. He committed to us in the life of a human being who is a gift to us out of his love. That life was and is a living and breathing invitation to know God as our Father, to care for and protect the world he made and to strive for the justice, harmony and peace that God has created us for. Whilst on this basis the world may look as if it is a hopeless cause, the message we should go away with on this holy night is:

*“What has come into being in him was life
And that life was the light of all people.
The light shines in the darkness
and the darkness has not overcome it”.*

Amen.