

Snowdrops and Stardust: A Sermon for Passion Sunday

MARCH 18, 2018 ~ PARSONJOHN

“Remember to look up at the stars, and not down at your feet. Try to make sense of what you see and wonder about what makes the universe exist. Be curious.”

Words, of course, of the late, great Stephen Hawking who died this week. There are so many ways in which the life and achievements of Professor Hawking were something quite extraordinary. One of the things that I had not properly appreciated until reading the tributes and obituaries was his brilliance, not just as a mathematician and scientist, but as a communicator. The loss of his physical voice, the result of a life-saving tracheotomy in 1985, did not take away his ability to express in words the sense of wonder and curiosity that drove his research. For example, this quotation about human beings:

“We are just an advanced breed of monkeys on a minor planet of a very average star. But we can understand the universe. That makes us something very special.”

So, look up at the stars, in wonder, and ask the deep questions about the universe, and the way it works, and our place within it. Stephen Hawking was not a religious man, and although he sometimes used phrases like “the mind of God”, did not himself believe in a Creator; and yet there seems to be a parallel between his words and those of the Psalmist three thousand years earlier: *“When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?”*, or in another

psalm, *“The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork”*.

Hawking’s faith was a faith in science, and in the human capacity to probe and to divine the laws that govern the universe. Some of you will have seen the terrific film “The Theory of Everything”; so titled because of Hawking’s ambition to come up with a single unified theory that would apply to the tiniest particle and the most massive star. Underlying his work was the conviction that written into the very fabric of the universe was a consistent and rational set of laws, to which all things conform.

Science and religion, and even atheism and Christianity, are by no means as far apart as fundamentalists on either side sometimes make them out to be. Both the psalmist and the physicist can look up at the stars and discern the patterns and reflect upon the laws that are the basis of our existence. And perhaps some of those laws are the same. A voice of wisdom in the Old Testament declares, *“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die”*. All things have a beginning and an end, even time itself. Nothing lasts forever, not even the stars. In the hymn, “All my hope on God is founded”, we sing, in the second verse:

*“Human pride and earthly glory,
sword and crown betray his trust;
what with care and toil he buildeth,
tow’r and temple fall to dust”*.

All things must pass. We are born, and we die. Stars are born, and they die. It’s the way things are, a law of the universe. On Ash Wednesday, we received the symbol of mortality as the ash upon our foreheads,

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return”. We are dust; stardust, to be sure, but still dust. That is our beginning and our end. “Look up at the stars”, said Stephen Hawking, “and not down at your feet”. But hey! Why does it have to be either/or? The mysteries and miracles of the universe are to be found above us and below us; when we look down at our feet, there are also things of wonder to be found, laws of the universe to be discerned. In our Lent groups this week, we were asked to share signs of life that we had seen in the world around us; and for more than a few the answer lay in the ground at our feet. The snowdrops and the daffodils blooming in the churchyards, emerging through the soil and even through the snow; signs of life, of spring, after the death of winter.

It is the other side of the law of life and death, written into the fabric of the universe. It’s there in the words of Jesus, heard in our Gospel reading, *“Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit”*.

In this reference to the seed that is buried in the ground, in which its outer shell decays before new life can bloom, Jesus is talking in the first instance of his coming death on the cross. Good Friday is now just less than a fortnight away. Today, on the fifth Sunday of Lent, we begin the season within a season of Passiontide, as we focus increasingly on Jesus’ journey to the cross, on his suffering and death. But Good Friday is not the end of the story. Beyond is Easter, the festival of resurrection and of life.

In pointing to the seed in the ground, that decays and dies as a prelude to new life, Jesus shows his disciples that his resurrection is not some one-off breaching of the laws of nature, the law that all things die, but rather that there is a greater truth and a profounder law, what C.S. Lewis will call a

“deeper magic”. It is not just death, but resurrection life, that is written into the fabric of the universe. Good Friday and Easter reveal the shape and destiny of all that is.

Look up at the stars, yes; but look down at your feet as well. See the snowdrops, and rejoice in the truth they tell. Winter is an ending; but it is also a beginning, as deep in the earth new life is waiting to break out in glory in the spring.

All things have a beginning and an end; but not necessarily always in that order. The end of the universe, in Hawking’s cosmology, looks an awful lot like its beginning, as all things collapse into a point of singularity; but if so, then there is the tantalising prospect that from that point, that seed, a new beginning may erupt, and a new universe come into being.

Tower and temple falling to dust was but the second verse of the great hymn of hope I mentioned earlier; but listen to the words of the verse that follows:

*“God’s great goodness aye endureth,
deep his wisdom, passing thought:
splendour, light and life attend him,
beauty springeth out of naught.
Evermore, from his store,
new-born worlds rise and adore.”*

So, look up at the stars, and look down at your feet; and in the snowdrops and in the stardust marvel at the works of your Creator, whose way it is to bring life from death, and from every ending a new beginning.