

Trinity Sunday 2017

Isa 6.1-8

John 14.8-17

I was on the school run some years ago now, when my grandson was 6 and my granddaughter was 9. She suddenly said You believe in God, don't you Grandpa? I said, Well yes...you'd expect that me being a ... Oh yes, but I mean you really believe in God.

Well, I said, it depends what you mean. God talk is a bit tricky. If you say I believe in sheep I know what you mean. We've seen the sheep, lambs, clean sheep, dirty sheep. But if there is a God no one has ever seen God and there is only one of them. So the word God is a bit like an empty shopping bag. People put things in the God bag which are very silly. Some people put things in which are wonderful and profound. Small silence.

She says, That's really clever, Grandpa.

Thank you, I said modestly.

The voice from the back seat was full of the contempt 6 years old have when they think they are on the intellectual high ground. You are very silly, Grandpa. God isn't a shopping bag. He's Jesus.

Well, we were all right in our own way.

How big is your God?

I am really grateful for science programmes on the telly. I have no scientific background but I still have an inquiring mind so I am really grateful to people like Brian Cox and Jim al Khalili who show me stuff I didn't know. I watched a programme called How Big is the Universe some months ago. This is what I learned. Scientists are trying to make a map of the whole universe - which is bigger by far than we imagined. When Einstein devised the theory of relativity in 1915, he thought the universe was our galaxy and that's all there was. It isn't small. It's 100,00 light years across and has been in existence for about 14 billion years. 20 million stars have been photographed out of a total of half a trillion. But the total universe could contain 10 million million million galaxies the same size as ours. It contains 750 billion universes. It is so big we may never find the edge, especially because it is all on the move outwards. What we see is light, very very old light from the dawn of time.

Astronomers said:

It's a bigger map than you can believe...It makes you feel so small.

So in a few short minutes, we shall stand and say 'we believe in God the Maker/Creator who made the heavens'. I thought it would help to start with a reality check. We are talking about believing in a mind before the big bang, that is separate from all this immensity, involved in all this and will endure after all this. It is not a small thing to believe. That the universe has a purpose other than its physicality. That there is a non-physical mind that is before everything and out which everything comes.

Does the sheer size of the universe make you doubt? It is not an unreasonable reaction, it seems to me. The cosiness of the God, the Jesus, that I was asked to believe in Sunday School was nothing like this. But do we worship because a mind is big? Do we worship power? Well, no actually. We worship goodness. There might be disembodied minds around this weird universe and we might engage with them. But we would not worship them just because they were bigger than us. Even because they were big and good. Remember people in the Bible were strongly inclined to worship angels because they were big and good. Worship belongs to God because He is our maker and redeemer. Isaiah was horrified when he saw a vision of what he believed was God. He was aghast. He said Woe is me. I am a man of unclean lips and I live in solidarity with a people of unclean lips. What horrified Isaiah was not the hugeness of God but the purity, the holiness, the beauty of God.

We should so admire the writers of the Old Testament. Think about the times when they were writing. The vast slave culture of Egypt to the south, the ancient despots. To the north and west warfare, endless warfare. The diggers of ancient ruins wonder how they found the time to grow corn, herd flocks. Grave sites are full of bones of people killed in battle, massacred. Men spent much of their time, it seems, fighting, raping, enslaving, burning and destroying. Oh, and bragging about it. Read Homer. The enslavement of women, Achilles sulking in his tent, the savage warfare, the pathetic gods like powers today fighting proxy wars through others. But in Israel, someone is writing The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. Or importantly for us this evening Ps 102

*Of old you laid the foundation of the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands.*

*26 They will perish, but you will remain;
they will all wear out like a garment.*

*You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away,
27 but you are the same, and your years have no end.*

*28 The children of your servants shall dwell secure;
their offspring shall be established before you.*

They gave us a different world, a world out of which our intellectual world has partly grown. I want to tell you four big things they believed about their incomparably big God:

- He rules with power
- He creates with purpose
- He holds to account with tenderness
- He intervenes in love

1. He rules with power.

When the Jews looked up into the night sky what they saw was order. Differently from many of their superstitious neighbours, they did not see mythology, gods, signs and potents. They didn't do astrology. They didn't do signs and wonders. They saw lights in the sky that God had put there. It might be big but there was nothing to be afraid of.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. 3 And God said, "Let there be light", and there was light. Gen 1

*To whom then will you compare me,
that I should be like him? says the Holy One.*

*26 Lift up your eyes on high and see:
who created these?*

*He who brings out their host by number,
calling them all by name,
by the greatness of his might,
and because he is strong in power
not one is missing. Isa 40*

In the market place of ideas in the ancient near east, Israel's God was incomparable – "to whom will you compare me?" - this God creates out of nothing all that there is and when they are exiled and look up in the night sky, the same stars greet their eyes, the same divine order, the same God. They had been displaced but God had not. They often used the term 'countless' to describe the stars of the night sky but they said the mind of God had named them all. They were all known to Him if not known to us. They saw back of the seasons and the turning of the heavens, the hand of God. At the bottom of it all was a mind, a personality. God rules over all.

2. He creates with purpose.

Scientists say that the most amazing thing about the universe is that it makes sense. There is purpose, design, order all the way down. Equations in fact. There may be stuff we can't measure but we explore believing that it can be measured if we invent the instruments.

What is the purpose imbued through the universe?

The Greeks had two words for work. One just meant work and one meant work informed by, guided by purpose and that purpose transformed the work. It is hard to believe that the craftsmen who build this vast building would have described themselves as brickies. They were proud cathedral builders. They put love and care in the building 1000 years ago. Put another way there are two ways to boil an egg. A place I regularly stay at in London does a pleasant breakfast, one of the component being boiled eggs. You could play squash with them they're so hard. But if I invite you to stay with us because you are having a hard time and I give you breakfast in bed, I would ask Do you like 4 minutes soft boiled? Ah, yes you say, and so shall you have it. Because the boiled egg is an act of love. Same task. Different outcome. They believed the universe was unnecessary to God but he created it out of the joy of creation and to show what He was like.

For his (God's) invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. Rom 1

His purpose is that His created beings especially men and women might know Him and freely love Him, serve Him and live within His love.

Because I live, you also will live. 20 In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you

*God through himself we then shall know
If Thou within us shine
And sound with all the saints below
The depths of love divine*

This is the purpose of all we see. A gift, a world, a universe flushed with divine beauty and glory that we might adore Him and be loved by Him.

3. He holds us to account for love of us .

The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. 14 For God will bring every deed into judgement, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.

This seems to be the one bit of good news in Ecclesiastes which started by saying, 'everything is meaningless, everything is vanity, everything is a chasing after the wind'. It is good news because if God is holding us to account, then life has dignity and meaning. It matters to God what we think, our moods, our desires and actions. How we live really does matter. Nothing is more cruel than for a child to get a feeling from a parent that it doesn't matter what it does because the parent doesn't care enough. The child is invisible. But even our consciences are visible to Him who made them. Of course, this isn't comfortable. C. S. Lewis once said, For the most part God is an acquired taste. He cares enough to hold us to account. Isaiah, you remember found it so. He was horrified at what the presence of God in his power revealed about himself. He wasn't just awed because God was big. He was ashamed because he felt dirty and wanted God to clean him up. I am a man of unclean lips, he cried.

4. He intervenes with tenderness.

When it had all gone wrong for the Jews and they had been, as they thought, abandoned by God for cruelty and greed and vanity, Isaiah promised them it would all come good because God had not given up on them.

*Behold, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
11 He will tend his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms;
he will carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead those that are with young.*

When we pray for God to intervene, we pray for a God who is all powerful, yet gentle, who understands the frailty of our nature, our fears, our distractions, our sadnesses. He has, you might say, a light touch.

So Henry was right. At the back of all the cautious ways we should use language to describe the Christian view of God, the care and the modesty with the words so we shall not put into that shopping bag things which are silly and trivial, there is God finally, at the last, intervening, Himself. Divesting himself of power and glory. Mild he laid his glory by. Emptied himself of all but love.

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. 3 He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. Hebrews 1.

A vast universe.
A vaster God.

A great astronomer said The universe is not only bigger than you think, it is bigger than you can think. God is not only bigger than you think, he is bigger than you can think.

And yet, there is Jesus. Beloved Jesus, the final, tender, gentle word of the Father. Who holds all worlds in His hands and our lives too, if we so desire.

*God through himself we then shall know
If Thou within us shine
And sound with all the saints below
The depths of love divine*