

Sermon for 2 before advent 19nov202

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord our Rock, and our Redeemer.

This, the last Sunday of Interfaith Week, may well be my last sermon, not that I wish it to be, but I am beset by a weakening voice, small handwriting and slow actions, all symptoms of Parkinson's disease. So, for those of you who have difficulty in hearing me, I will stick close to the text.

There is the prospect of becoming Reader Emeritus, like Gill Cole and Mike before me, as my licence as reader with permission to officiate is due for renewal in January, so this seems the right time to finish after 25 years.

I have a lot to thank Yorkshire for. For apart from my two great Scarborough predecessors as reader, my first encounter with reader ministry was visiting Gill's old home in Formby and being hushed by her dad, a missionary Yorkshireman in Lancashire, who said that a candidate was taking their readers exam in the lounge. He was diocesan secretary of reader, and in those days the readers exam lasted 3 hours and was a bit like A level Theology.

I was originally due to preach next week and was rather wary of doing so. Why? Because, apart from the clergy being at a confirmation (1st catch your bishop) it was Mike's traditional spot. Christ the King was the anniversary of his licensing as Reader.

It is also the last Sunday of the church year, so formally, a week next Saturday we can throw away the old lectionaries. Or, if you have been paying attention to Margaret in creation tide, recycle them.

So, what of the readings?

That from Zephaniah speaks of what I had formerly thought of as the end times, but which sounds very similar to what is happening in Gaza now, to name only the latest trouble spot in a troubled world.

Paul writing to the church in Thessalonica, an important Roman city, tells them that the end times will come 'like a thief in the night'. When people think all is well the blow will fall, as distinct from Zephaniah for whom it sounds to be a violent occasion.

And what of the Gospel? The parable of the talents - does it encourage slavery? I recall finding out that a talent was not a small unit of money, though some have taken a wider view of the meaning of the term. If we identify the Master as Jesus, there seem to be some very

un 'Jesus-like' comments about him in this reading. Such as 'reaping where he doesn't sow' and throwing the 'worthless slave' into the outer darkness. The reference to 'After a long time' may relate to the delayed return of Jesus, the second coming, that readers at the time were expecting.

So, what can a Reader originally trained in the Physical Sciences claim to truly believe?

I think that theology hasn't really come to terms with the scale of the universe, both in terms of distance and time. It's still not quite a century since Edwin Hubble showed that M31, the Great Nebula in Andromeda, was some millions of Light Years away and was coming towards us. Which means that in some few billion years' time it will get here, unlike the other galaxies, which seem in general, to be receding. Until their discovery, it was possible to assume that the Nebulae were inside our Galaxy, which was all there was. The large, but still finite speed of light, means that the universe can't be timeless. Hubble showed that the recession of the Galaxies implied a finite age for the universe. The age of the universe is now thought to be about 13.7 billion years. Our planet is around 4.6 billion years old. If you take it to be a person of mature years, say 46 to make the maths simple, each year of their age is 100 million years for the earth.

General Relativity, our best theory of the largest scales, and of Gravity, and Quantum Mechanics, the theory of the very small, in general don't work well together in relation to the origin of the Universe. However, both have been tested to awesome precision. Your smartphone wouldn't work if Quantum Mechanics wasn't in some sense 'true'. So, the question 'what came before the Big Bang' may not be as meaningless as General Relativity seems to make it, as it assumes that space and time came into existence at the moment of creation of the Universe. How many 'Big Bangs' were there in fact?¹ Our star, the sun, is about halfway through its roughly 10-billion-year life.

With the possible exception of those enigmatic cave paintings, most famously at Lascaux in France, which are considerably older, all we hold dear and regard as valuable: Art, Music, Literature, Science and Religion, are the fruit of the 10,000 years or so since the end of the last Glaciation. The last period of itself lasted 100,000 years, a mere moment against the scale of cosmic time.

I've been known to claim that Theology and Physics are not that different. They both ask questions to which there are no easy answers. In Physics we ask questions, like is an electron a wave or a particle? In Theology we consider God and Creation. In both areas we don't have the correct concepts to give meaningful answers. In Physics it's because of our scale,

we are creatures of medium scale and speed. We are too large to need Quantum Mechanics and too slow to need General Relativity. Moses Maimonides, and I think, Classic Islamic Theology, say that there is that of God which is beyond human comprehension, and I think something similar can be said of Physics. There is that famous remark that anyone who claims to understand the mystery of Quantum Mechanics hasn't done so.

So, I believe in God, to use a common Name for the Deity which other religions know by other names, responsible for all that is, and his son our Lord, and I also believe in mysteries like evolution which normally improves things by small incremental steps (e.g. Darwin's Finches¹), Though there is the question of why humans made the sudden step change from nomadic life to settled urban living.

I have many memories of 25 years of reader ministry. Surprisingly I can recall my first sermon; it was at evensong. In those days we had a robed choir, and there were often more people in the choir than in the congregation! The text was from Revelation, a challenge for any new preacher, and I recall a suggestion being made that I might prefer to change it. I couldn't think of any better alternative, so I persevered,

And I remember taking the second ever interment at the then new Kings Norton cemetery, when I realised the truth that there is no higher ground east between Kings Norton and the Ural Mountains! I still have the white thermal base layer that Gill spotted in Decathlon to keep me warm on such occasions.

I also remember being asked, in 2004, by Bishop Sentamu to become Diocesan Moderator for Reader training.

I would like to thank John Wilkinson, David Monteith and Andy Delmege for their support and kindness in my early years of reader ministry, and David Warbrick for his support and kindness over the last few years of my ministry. I remember commenting to David that there was not much science in the All Saints' Values Statement. He responded by inviting me to take part in an All Age Worship service for a question-and-answer session.

So, thank you to you, the congregation of All Saints, for putting up with all my questions over the years.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Darwin%27s_finches