

Wheatley United Reformed Church
Sunday 5 January 2025
Jer 31.7-14; Ps 147.12-20; Eph 1.3-14; John 1.10-18

Light-bearers

My two little great-nieces, aged one and a half and four, came to visit just after Christmas. No sooner were they inside than they began to run around the house, picking up things then dropping them on the floor, trying outdoor handles and generally checking the place out. As I watched them, I thought how amazing it is that curiosity about the world around us begins as soon as children can get around under their own steam. It is a source of constant wonder and a new place itches to be properly explored. No matter how old we are now, we were all like that once, however little we remember about it. Such insatiable curiosity seems inbuilt in us from our earliest days. On the same day of their visit news came that the NASA Parker solar probe had successfully flown through the sun's corona, passing closer to the surface than any previous mission. Launched six years ago, it has reached a speed of 430,000 mph, making it the fastest human-made object in history. Its aim is to help us understand more about the sun – why its corona (or upper atmosphere) is hotter than the surface and how it influences our own planet and the solar system. The curiosity about the world around us which begins as soon as we can propel ourselves along continues and inspires countless forms of research and exploration, about our own earth and the planets and stars beyond. Without it we would stagnate. It is, or should be, the very bedrock of education.

From the beginnings of recorded history people have wondered about how the universe came into being and what our place in it is. They have told stories, created myths and legends, gazed at the heavens and tried to understand why things are as they are. The first chapter of Genesis gives us the Bible's version. Its purpose isn't to write a scientific treatise, it's to tell a story which communicates theological insights. In a world where there were many competing gods it proclaims there is but one God, and in one in which the religions of surrounding cultures saw creation as an eternal battle between good and evil with no certain outcome, it tells us that creation is good. In his rewriting of Genesis

1 John famously borrows the concept of the Logos, or Word, from Greek philosophy, the universal principle of reason inherent in the created order, only to make a claim which flies in the face of the Greek view that the world of spirit and the world of matter can never coexist: that the Word has become flesh and we have seen his glory, full of grace and truth.

We know a great deal more than the ancients did about the universe and our planet, though there are still many things for which science is yet to find an explanation. The Big Bang has become scientific orthodoxy. But how can a universe come into being out of nothing? Or, as people sometimes say, why is there something rather than nothing? And where do we fit into all this? If the laws of physics were a fraction different life could not exist as it does. Our curiosity will keep impelling us on and there will be new discoveries which astonish us. But I don't suppose you lie awake at night fretting about these vast questions. There's enough in the everyday realities of our lives to engage our energies. And that, I think, is where the Prologue to John's Gospel begins to touch us, as it seeks to connect our questions about how everything began with that other quest, for meaning and purpose in our lives. After five verses about the eternal, cosmic realm of the Word, creation and the light which shines in the darkness, John changes tack abruptly: 'There was a man sent from God, whose name was John'. A tangible moment of history breaks into all the abstract theology, and we begin to sense that the light of which John speaks isn't the same as the sun and moon and stars of Genesis, it's something more mysterious, more a quality of being than a celestial phenomenon. This John, whom we know as the Baptist, bears witness to a light which has come into the world, has not been welcomed by it, has been rejected by the people for whom it was meant, but which has the power to make new creations, not of the world but of us. Though he does not name him here, that light is, of course, a person, the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth who, John tells us, is also the divine Word, revealed to us in human flesh and blood.

In a world as full of chaos and misery as we know it to be, does any of this make any sense? Lots of people believe that the world we live in is a random place with no

meaning to it that could ever be discovered. Humans have evolved to become the dominant species, but the time will come when we too will disappear and some other form of life take our place. AI, maybe? It's all what the zoologist Jane Goodall, best known for her work with chimpanzees, calls 'the chance gyrations of bits of dust'. But as far as I can see most people who subscribe to this view don't live as if it were true. They may argue that it's simply an evolutionary advantage to co-operate, live in communities, as some animals do, or to love our families and friends, but they still weave patterns of meaning around them and hold to moral principles, such as believing that social and economic injustice needs to be fought and all forms of oppression resisted. They don't live in a selfish and meaningless bubble, and I guess if you asked them to choose between the light and the darkness, between naked self-indulgence and caring about others, their answer would be the same as I hope yours and mine would be.

Fifty years ago Jane Goodall found herself in Notre Dame listening to Bach's famous Toccata and Fugue in D minor. Many years later she wrote this: 'I had always loved the opening theme; but in the cathedral, filling the entire vastness, it seemed to enter and possess my whole self. It was as though the music itself was alive. That moment, a suddenly captured moment of eternity, was perhaps the closest I have ever come to experiencing ecstasy, the ecstasy of the mystic. How could I believe it was the chance gyrations of bits of primeval dust that had led up to that moment in time – the cathedral soaring to the sky; the collective inspiration and faith of those who caused it to be built; the advent of Bach himself, the brain, his brain, that translated truth into music; and the mind that could, as mine did then, comprehend the whole inexorable progression of evolution? Since I cannot believe that this was the result of chance, I have to admit anti-chance. And so, I must believe in a guiding power in the universe – in other words, I must believe in God.'

The Prologue to the Gospel of John begins with God, with philosophy and theology, but is careful to connect it with our reality: a human called John who bore witness to the light which the darkness cannot put out, and the meaning and purpose of human life which shines through the Word made flesh, the eternal God fully present to us in the man Jesus.

To find meaning and purpose for our lives, to discover how to live creatively and fruitfully, we don't look to abstract ideas and ideologies, but to a person. As we come to learn about that person in Scripture, at worship and in acts of love which follow his example, we are reborn, bit by bit, from being slaves to uncontrolled passions and appetites, to becoming more open and generous, more compassionate and committed to the building of justice and peace wherever they are denied. We know the power of the darkness. We see it at work all around us and sometimes it all but engulfs us. John will set before us the story of a man who was a light-bringer for all kinds of people who felt forgotten, lost, rejected, as if they were of no account to those who seemed to have made it in life and even to God. He shone his light into the dark places of pain and suffering, pride and selfishness, hypocrisy and hatred, in individuals and in society, and called them to be reborn in love. There came a moment when his light, too, appeared to have been put out for ever. But no human power can do that to the light of God. So I invite you to come with me as the year moves on, not just to listen to the story but as it unfolds, but to make it your own; to receive this light and yourself become a light-bearer. That light comes to us this Epiphany, to little children learning their way about the world, to scientists who search for truth among the stars, and to all of us in between, who long for it to shine wherever the human heart cries out of the darkness for a better world to be born.