

THE DARKNESS COMPREHENDED IT NOT

Christmas Day

St Michael's Cornhill

Sung Eucharist

Friday December 25th 2015

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Earlier last week *The Times* included the obituary of Professor Rod Davies, astronomer and Director of the radio telescope at Jodrell Bank from 1988-1997. His most *famous* predecessor was, of course, Professor Sir Bernard Lovell, who also had the vision for and led the construction of the telescope. Completed in 1957 it remains the third largest radio telescope in the world.

This remarkable piece of equipment is capable of gathering data from stars, pulsars and the like, from up to ten million light years distant from the earth. It captures tiny whispers, then, from the far corners of the universe. Indeed it's been one piece of scientific hardware that is helping establish the 'big-bang' theory of creation. The big-bang describes an ever expanding universe, moving ever further apart, piece by piece, at the speed of light. Fascinatingly, both Bernard Lovell and his Australian successor, Rod Davies, were quiet, well-read churchmen – both originally from the Methodist tradition. Their scientific intelligence did not wipe out their Christian faith

So, why begin here, in the complex world of astrophysics? Well, the answer lies in our gospel reading, the *prologue* to John's Gospel. At first sight, it might appear to be in conflict with all the research of Lovell, Davies and Jodrell Bank. But, neither of these scientists saw any clash between these two hypotheses. For John's remarkable prologue does not compete with the mathematically ordered hypothesis of the big bang! Instead the two lie in parallel and even need each other. John's first words are the stuff of Christmas concluding every service of nine lessons and carols:

'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made.'

'The Word', for John, is subtle and many layered. Most obviously and literally, it means the *Gospel* that follows. But *the Word* here also means Jesus; God amongst us in our flesh. The Christian faith is rooted in a person, in a man. But pressing more deeply still, the Greek word underlying all this - *logos*, is the same word that gets knocked together to form terms like *biology*, *anthropology*, *geology* and every other 'ology'. It means purpose, pattern, reason - even *wisdom*. It overlaps with the Hebrew word for wisdom which has similar resonances. At the time of Jesus, Hebrew and Greek philosophies intermingled richly and profoundly.

So, John, in his prologue, speaks of something infinitely more than ten million light years away, infinitely beyond the farthest whispers of the universe – it is a principle which effectively gives birth to the possibility of creation. Springing out of the very heart of God, it is also the Spirit of Jesus. In Jesus, God our Creator, comes among us, as one of us. It is a breathtaking thought, awesome – as the young might say. But we've heard it for so long that its radicalism flashes straight by us. It is far more richly mysterious, even than Jodrell Bank's distant radio waves. It fuels the excitement of Christmas.

But still we're not quite there! Only a line or two further on, John offers another amazing thought, so:

‘In the Word was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in the darkness; and the darkness *comprehended* it not.

Alongside *word* or *logos* emerge *life* and *light*. In Jesus *was* life: In Jesus, God sustains all that is and all that will be in the universe, and ‘that *life* was the *light* of men. All understanding, all creativity, all relationships – everything comes from God; it’s all there in Jesus, and moreover:

‘ . . . and the darkness comprehended it not.’

Comprehended is deliberately ambiguous. Of course, it means the darkness did not *understand* the light. But in seventeenth century English it meant also ‘the darkness did not *overcome* the light.’ Therefore God in Jesus is not only Creator of the universe, he is the Redeemer too. Even the worst is overcome by, redeemed by, the *light*. The light is not quenched.

When Eric Milner-White put together the service of nine lessons and carols he introduced John’s prologue, our gospel for today simply by saying: ‘St. John unfolds the mystery of the Incarnation.’

That is what we’ve encountered in these fourteen compressed remarkable verses of Scripture. This is what Christmas means. It changed our world. In amazingly succinct lines Charles Wesley captures it in one of the most popular Christmas hymns:

‘Veiled in flesh the Godhead seen
Hail the Incarnate Deity
Pleased as men with men to dwell
Jesus our Emmanuel
Hark! The herald angels sing
Glory to the newborn King.’

Amen

Readings

Isaiah. 52. 7-10

Hebrews. 1. 1-4.

John. 1. 1-14.