

Reflections on Ascension Day

A sermon preached by Revd Viv Bridges at St Peter's Wolvercote on Ascension Day, Sunday 29 May 2014

Acts 1.1-11, Daniel 7.9-14, Luke 24.44-53

Most of you know that I used to teach physics, and so will understand that I have been very interested to read recent articles about some extremely significant discoveries.

A while ago we were informed that the 'Higgs-Boson' particle definitely exists, helping to confirm theories about how matter is made up, held together. But more recently it has been proved that 'gravitational waves' exist. This provides almost conclusive evidence for The Big Bang ... that unimaginably tiny moment in which there was an unimaginably huge explosion and '*inflation*' of energy. From this came the formation of matter, our universe. This probably isn't a surprise to us; the Big Bang theory has been around for a long time, but the discovery points to something even more fascinating. It suggests the existence of a multitude of different universes, *parallel* universes, in which there possibly exist identical galaxies/worlds to ours. 'CREATION' may not be just one universe, it may be a MULTIVERSE of infinite size and proportion.

Another article explained the work of a mathematician, Max Tegmark, who proposes that, at the heart of **everything** is *numbers!* Not only do numbers *describe* what we see, what may exist, they actually *make up* what exists. So the hypothesis is - a multiverse composed entirely of numbers! Yes – it seemed way out, bizarre, to me too, especially when this mathematician goes on to announce that human beings are what give this multiverse meaning, without us it's just a waste of empty space !!! Bizarre AND arrogant, perhaps.

But I suspect that the majority of people who read such articles are inclined to accept what is written – even though they haven't experienced any evidence of it themselves. On the whole – especially in this particular field of physics – we accept anything that scientists tell us – because they are scientists!! But, when you come to think of it, the idea of a 'multiverse' isn't really new at all to Christians – or, indeed, to members of most of the world religions. We all profess to believe in another world, 'heaven', if you like. Non-religious people would no doubt laugh at any suggestion that *this* world ('heaven') might have anything to do with the scientific 'multiverse'; but physics, rather than moving towards 'tying things down', seems to be opening things up, discovering that there is far more to discover than we could possibly have imagined. And I believe that the evidence we accept for *our* 'other world' (our experience of 'God', the witness of those who saw the risen Lord) is just as compelling as anything the physicists tell us. I wonder which sounds most weird - our experience of a loving God who created, and who continues to create and who became a human being who had died and rose again, or the suggestion of multi-universes, constantly being created (even within an atom), made up of gyrating numbers, of equations literally coming to life, and that human beings are the only things that give this universe this meaning.

BUT - however it may seem, I'm not trying to suggest that these new theories may hold proof for those events we find hard to explain – Jesus' miracles, his

resurrection, his Ascension into heaven. One day the proof may be there and then the world will see that the special way of 'knowing' things, through the heart and spirit rather than the head, possessed by people of faith is not so stupid after all. Wisdom is far greater than scientific 'facts'. What I am suggesting is that science is beginning to give us more, not less, reason to witness to our faith.

Science is not 'pinning down' everything as it once expected or hoped to, rather it is opening up more and more possibilities and ideas. Many of these will seem bizarre, weird, to the general public - founded on comparatively little observable evidence - and based much on the interior workings of the particular scientists' minds. We can, therefore, take courage and stand up to people (often the scientists themselves) who challenge the things we believe. The evidence we have for our faith is greater and much more widely experienced than much of the evidence those scientists give us.

As I said, I'm not trying to supply a proof of the events that we celebrate today ..Jesus' ascension in to heaven. I'm not suggesting that Jesus was transported by the cloud through to a different multiverse (or maybe I am just hinting at this possibility). But, whenever we read the Bible we look for a meaning and truth that is relevant to 'today', and if you have ever watched one of the programmes about the medieval mind, you will know that, in Western thought, the need to provide scientific 'proof', or even to report something factually, is a comparatively recent development. Writers before this often felt it was just as important to convey the 'meaning' of an event as to give exact historical details. So - the very first biblical account - the story of Creation - is the attempt by someone who lived in an ancient civilisation to express a belief that '*God made the world*'. And we still believe this to be true even though we don't believe that he did it quite in the way Genesis describes. So what might the 'truth' be that Luke (in his Gospel and 'Acts') was trying to convey to us ?

It seemed to me that there were two important images; the description of Jesus being taken UP and of him being hidden IN A CLOUD.

Throughout the ages, human beings have constantly associated 'up' with 'better'. This is certainly demonstrated all through the Old Testament, and it makes great sense to associate 'heaven' with 'up in the sky' if you don't know what is actually 'above the clouds'. After all, this is where the things that maintain life come from - the light & warmth of the sun, the rain, the light of the moon. And our language today still reflects this: we make our way 'up' in the world, by 'climbing' the social ladder, or by possessing 'upmarket' goods; we pray to be 'lifted up' out of the depths of despair, and if we were told that someone was 'walking on air', or 'on cloud nine' we wouldn't look for them somewhere up in the sky, we'd simply assume that they were very happy, in love. So we shouldn't be surprised that a writer who was steeped in the Scriptures used the idea of 'going up' to mean that Jesus was going somewhere 'better'. Jesus 'rose from the dead' and now we are to understand that he returned to the best place possible - to his Father, to the most High God, to take his throne over and above all dominions and powers !

This 'returning to God' is also expressed in Luke's image of 'the cloud'. If we look again at the Old Testament, we find that it's full of images of God being present in 'a cloud'. God accompanied the people of Israel in their wanderings through the wilderness in the cloud, and he spoke to their leaders from the cloud. This expresses

something of the mystery of God – that we can never really know him - and also the fact that we couldn't actually bear to see God in his full glory – we would be overwhelmed, blinded. (Moses was the only person who could speak to God face to face.)

So Luke seems to convey to us the message that Christ was returning to the very best place possible..to the highest heaven, to the right hand of God himself; to the God whose glory will always be hidden in mystery for us in this earthly life, however hard we try to unravel that truth, through science, or through our prayer and contemplation, but a God who loves the whole of his creation and who promises us our own place with him in glory if we keep faith with Jesus Christ.

Let us lift up our hearts and minds in thanksgiving that we know the truth of Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, returned to his Father in heaven, and yet present in our lives today through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen