

Christ Church Matins, Christmas Day; 25.12.11. Mt 1;18. B74

From the second reading 'The birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way'. Not my usual ground, but I have been talking to an astrophysicist about infinity. He asked me: 'if the earth is a peppercorn and the sun is like a football over on the other side of the cathedral, where would the nearest star be?' I had a shot or two at an answer: Potters Bar..maybe Edinburgh. No, it's Chicago. Or again, light travels at 186,000 miles per second, and the light from Andromeda nebula takes two million years to reach us; is that infinity? Of course not; the numbers are all finite, yet they are so big that they are beyond imagination.

It's a bit like the European debt; when it gets into trillions, I'm out of my depth. One trillion, ten trillion – all the same to me; just... well... a bit worrying. Back to the universe, which is expanding, but into what? It is getting further away from things, but it is not getting nearer to anything, because beyond the universe is infinite space and you cannot get nearer to infinity. I asked a question: how much don't you know? Impossible to say of course, but in the 1960's they knew about 10% of what they know now, and in 1910 very little at all. They've just begun.

Infinity is vital. It gives us a perspective on our everyday lives; look up into the sky. I

wonder whether astrophysicists live balanced happy lives. I should have asked him that. I will. And we need more of this in church. I love that bible verse which says: 'with the Lord one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like one day' [2 Pet 3;8]. Reaching for infinity. After all, infinity is a characteristic of God, an attribute. A corrective to those who treat God as a kind of errand boy. God is infinitely good, all loving, without beginning, without end and without dimensions. And of course Christians believe that he is responsible for the whole creation of which we are but a peppercorn. Since the big bang, a creation so finely tuned that the sun goes on burning and we and other things can live. We are all made up from bits of exploding stars.

But we die. God and space may be infinite, but we are finite and that may be a good thing, because it gives shape to our lives and to what we do in them. I borrowed a book on infinity from a philosopher and the last chapter is about the obvious fact that we are mortal [A.W. Moore 'The Infinite' Routledge, London, 1990]. Yet it ends on a fascinating note with a discussion of hope and our hopes opening us up to infinite possibilities in ourselves, in relation to others and to the world. He quotes St Paul on faith and love and hope.

Now if you were God, the creator, infinite, all-embracing, all powerful, and you wanted to

demonstrate to people not only what infinity is like, but also that we can hope and love... what would you do? You could try maths, but I am not sure that would work. You could construct the Large Hadron Collider which may tell us the means by which everything in the universe obtains its mass. The Collider somehow reminds me of what James Thurber said after seeing a blockbuster of Moses and the 10 commandments; Thurber said 'It makes you realize what God would have done, if he'd had the money'. No Hadron Collider; God had to make do with the Big Bang.

Or you could try astrophysics, which would work better. Psalm 19: 'the heavens declare the glory of God'. That certainly opens our eyes to infinity and might just enable us to put some of our daily worries in their place. Or you could send the prophets to preach faith and hope.

Yet what God did principally to bring infinity to earth was to send a baby. Now babies express possibility very well. There must be nobody on earth who has not looked into a cradle and somehow almost or actually been moved to tears by what could be, by infinite possibility, by capacity to love and to be loved. Moved by hopes beyond mathematics, beyond reasoning - by a kind of truth which cannot be expressed by a thousand particle physicists labouring away in

Geneva... nothing against what they are doing, it's exciting.

But the birth took place in this way. As the baby grew, some hopes were dashed and others were realized. So the nature of God's wish became clearer and clearer. Some of the truths had been expressed before by prophets and teachers through the ages, but they somehow had to be combined not just in words but rather in a person. Someone who could bring hope to others by the living of a life which started in this way.

This has been an enormously eventful year with the Arab spring (so-called), earthquakes, the royal wedding watched by billions, riots, the Occupy movement, the Archbishop of Canterbury in Zimbabwe, threats of economic collapse. It is a mix, much of it ambiguous: which way will things go? General comment would be trite except to say that we have got stuff to work on – not quite how the Archbishop is putting it, but he is right to call for a re-examination of our morality.

What is far from trite is to point to situations, even the worst ones, being open to God and to him presenting to us finite human beings, infinite possibilities for hope and love. You may think that there is not enough to go round in this often tragic world of ours. But remember the

question of the first child in a family who learns that another baby is on the way, and is terrified that her mother's love will be divided by two. And what if it's twins? The mother rightly says that love is not like that; her love has no limits; she will love each child with all her heart.

And that is the pattern of God's hopes and love. It is the pattern of his constant invitations to us as we are faced with choices every day. It is the pattern of Jesus, whose birth we celebrate. The one who developed, lived and taught, who healed, was killed and rose again. The one who is the pattern for our hopes.

One might say that the infinite God is not much help, though he may raise our eyes above the horizon. But I believe that to be a mistaken view. For infinity is crucial to our understanding of God, whether it be the creator of the universe or the baby in the manger. Hope and love are not quantifiable; they are signs of the infinity of God. And today: infinity come to earth to live among us.

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