

Bishop John Baker

What can Christianity do for you? - discovering meaning in the mystery of the cosmos.

In the spirituality of the Bible, both Jewish and Christian, the universe is directed by God, and guided to the fulfilment of his own great purpose. He designed it and made it; it reflects his mind and heart. 'The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament sheweth his handiwork' (Psa. 19.1). 'O Lord, how manifold are thy works; in wisdom hast thou made them all, the earth is full of thy riches' (Psa. 104.24). When things run according to the nature he has given them - so we are told - they reveal his mercy and goodwill toward all creatures. The sun and rain produce good harvests. Animals are there to serve human beings. When things, as we see it, go wrong, it is because God is micro-managing them for some particular purpose, most often to teach people that they are sinning against God's law. So the earth and everything in it and everything that happens, rightly understood, is there to do God's will and to make known his power and holiness and love. For 30 centuries this has been the biblical answer to the question 'What is the meaning of it all?'

But even in biblical times there were voices protesting that this simply could not be true. It was not true, for instance, that good people were always blessed and

protected, while the wicked came to a bad end. It was not true that the prayers of faithful worshippers would always be heard. You have only to read Job or Ecclesiastes or many of the Psalms and it's all there. All the objections we think so modern have been there from the start - indeed, go outside the Bible and you will find them in Sumerian literature over 4,000 years old. They are simply the voice of human honesty. And today and every day the hopeless refugees, the mothers watching their children slowly dying of an incurable and painful disease, the parents bereaved of a lovely girl raped and murdered by a psychotic killer, the casualties of fire and flood, AIDS and earthquake, all these and the millions of other victims of some lethal outside chance, all in their own way and their own words send up the same question into an empty sky: 'What is the meaning of it all?' And above and beyond the human toll we should never forget the whole world of animal suffering.

So where, you may ask, has been the voice of human honesty in the churches, which for 20 centuries have gone on trying to prop up what cannot be true, namely that if only people will trust God, and live as he wants them to, and pray in genuine faith, then he will grant their prayers, and all will be well. This picture was, for many people, struck down once for all by the slaughter of the First World War. Since then it has been utterly discredited by the horrors of the 20th century, not only the Holocaust in Nazi Germany but the wholesale massacres in the Soviet Union under Stalin, and the continuing atrocities all over the world since 1945. If

God designed and made us, we cannot write this off as due simply to human evil. Moreover, in today's global village we all know when millions in countries we have never seen are dying of starvation or AIDS. Here, where we live, the notices outside every ward or clinic in our hospitals warn us to sterilise our hands lest some mutant virus, transmitted by an affectionate gesture, kill the very person we have come to see. The Church of England in one of its new eucharistic prayers repeats the old arrogant boast that we humans are 'the crown of creation', but the great globe itself seems set to knock us off our perch by climate change which could make whole countries barren or render hundreds of millions homeless by floods - as indeed is already happening in Bangladesh.

But we should not be too hard on our forebears in faith if they had the mental picture they did of the world and the way God related to it. Their imagery came from societies where a king was someone who laid down the limits of right and wrong, and whose officers executed justice as that was then formulated. Making and creating were activities visualised in terms of the labour of one's hands; and, so far as the world of nature was concerned, even the simplest physical laws were not understood. Their picture of the world was a very broad-brush affair. But we know more, much much more, and we have no excuse for going on using their words and ideas in this area, when we set ourselves up to tell people about God.

The first question to tackle when considering Christianity's claim to find meaning in the cosmos is this. Can we, in fact, talk at all about any material object having a meaning in itself, simply as what it is? If we expect that by studying the physical universe we shall be able to discern in it some moral and spiritual value or purpose, are we not bound by the very nature of things to be disappointed? Yes, there are plenty of material objects which have meaning - a flag, a coin, the sign of the Cross, a building, a work of art. Millions of things have meaning, but only because we humans choose to give it them. Or, to put it another way round, we attach meanings to things, so that they can help us in particular ways in our lives and relationships. One simple example could be engagement or wedding rings. For Christians, a supreme instance at the very heart of our faith would be the bread and wine of the Eucharist. In the natural world, humans have seen meaning in endless things - eclipses, mountains, thunderstorms, shooting stars, trees, you name it - but in themselves these simply are what they are.

The more we learn about the physical nature of the universe, the more we realise that meaning and value are not built into the reality of the things around us, but are products of mind; not the world, but the way we view the world. Take one attribute which has played a large part in religious feeling: beauty. How often have not believers cited the beauty of the world as reason to affirm that there must be a God who created it! As Ecclesiastes puts it: 'He has made everything beautiful

in its time' (3.11) - but is that true? Is everything beautiful in some way or other? Are there not many things which many of us, at any rate, consider ugly? 'Beauty is in the eye of the beholder' we say, and every day much modern art confirms the truth of that.

The same difficulties crop up when we study the living world, especially the higher animals. We do find there examples of intelligence and of affection, of behaviour directed even altruistically toward the good of the family and even of the group or clan. But then we have to take account of the fact that all living creatures survive by preying on one another. We should all be grateful for the wonderful TV programmes made nowadays about life in the wild, which certainly deepen our understanding of Nature; but they don't seem on first acquaintance to do very much for belief in God.

Which brings us to the heart of the matter. The universe being as it is, is there a place in it for the mind and purpose of God, and if there is, what kind of God? A 'Yes' to an effectual moral and spiritual God would give the cosmos a meaning which simply by itself it seems to lack.

There is no denying that the predominant view among scientists, and certainly in the media, is that the scientific view of the universe, as that stands today, rules out the possibility of God. For this state of affairs we who are Christians have to a great extent ourselves to blame. Partly out of the wrong sort of

reverence for Scripture and tradition, partly out of a fear that making any official change to church teaching would lead to fragmentation and disunity, the churches have given the impression that ideas of God and the world which are no longer tenable are the only options for people of faith. If we complain that Professor Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens and others attack beliefs that you and I do not hold, we should remember that their Aunt Sallies are largely of Christian making. If we are serious in wanting to convince the society in which we live that God is a live and worthwhile option, then we have got to take on board the firm findings of science, and to learn from them believable ways of presenting the God we worship. But we have also to learn to distinguish between firm discoveries and jumping to conclusions on the basis of shaky logic, whether we are scientists or theologians!

As it happens, there has of recent years been much more open sharing of ideas between theologians and scientists, thanks to the work of scientists who are also people of Christian faith. Among many other things this has produced one particular point of interest for our topic today, which is an agreement - not universal, but quite widespread - that there is one question outside the scope of science which nevertheless it is proper and reasonable to ask. This is the question: 'Why does anything exist at all?' This is quite different from asking 'How did this or that particular object come to exist?' - this variety of tree, this species of animal, this planet, the solar system or whatever. We can trace the

processes that produced these things within the cosmos itself, so those are questions we can hope to answer by observation and experiment. The question of existence as such is a deeper, more fundamental one. It recognises that nothing has to exist. There is nothing of which we can say that it couldn't not be here.

Existence is a mystery. Too many of us nowadays are so overwhelmed by the multitude of things in our lives that we have lost the knack of being aware of this mystery. Our imaginations have become blunted; we do not look at things with a sense of awe, of how strange it is that they should be there. But take something in the palm of your hand, something simple like a small stone or blossom off a tree, and look at it with this thought in mind. When you have done it once, you can do it again, and it is vital for your spiritual life that you should. If you want a child to grow up open to the idea of God, there is nothing more important than to open their eyes to this mystery.

There are, it must be said, philosophers and scientists who object to this question on the grounds that it cannot be answered, and therefore it is either meaningless or pointless. Some atheist thinkers see it as just another ruse, after God has been ejected by the front door, to smuggle him in by the back. But it is, in fact, not true to say that this question cannot be answered. There is a perfectly simple and straightforward answer: 'If this object didn't have to

exist, but it does exist, there must be something else which gives it existence and holds it in existence.'

This is, in fact, the kind of argument science uses all the time. It is precisely the same argument which has recently been used, for example, to postulate the existence in the universe of realities we call 'dark matter' or 'dark energy', because although we cannot detect them the universe as we observe it could not function if they weren't there.

Unfortunately we cannot use exactly this method to prove that there is a God, because we don't know what God is in himself. That is a basic principle of Christian theology, and you cannot prove what you cannot describe. 'I'm sure there was a cat sitting on the mat - No, I can't describe it, because I didn't see it, but I'm sure', won't convince anyone. But St Thomas Aquinas found a way round. He took a number of spiritual realities which he argued must exist, and then added the words 'And this everyone calls "God"' - or perhaps better 'This is one thing everybody means by the word "God".' Of his five realities the one that has stood the test of time is the one I have just been talking about: a Source sustaining all existence. So we can properly say: 'There must be a Source of existence, and this is one thing we mean by "God".' The Anglican Common Worship prayer book uses the phrase 'Source of Being and Life.'

This doesn't tell us all we want to know, by any means; but Christianity has always said there are two ways to

find out more about God: thinking about the world he has made, and about what he has revealed through the Bible and by inspiring receptive souls. The second of those ways would take us on to ground which my colleagues will be covering in the coming weeks, so I will do no more than point you in that direction when I finish. But let me in the time remaining say something of what our present-day knowledge of the universe suggests.

If God is the source and support of the universe's existence, he might be simply a blind impersonal force, which would be just a fact of life, something to put up with, and certainly not anyone with whom you could have a personal relationship. You can't prove God is not that, but you can explore other lines of thought. If God is not just a blind force, then it may be that he sustains the universe because he thinks it is a good or necessary thing.

One feature of this cosmos is that it has the potential to produce living creatures. Quite astonishingly, study of the Big Bang which started it all shows that all sorts of details - the velocity of its expansion, the temperatures, the elements - were precisely what was needed if life was to emerge. That might be chance or it might not. We cannot tell. What is much more certain is that God must largely leave the universe to run itself. Evidence for this has been seen from ancient times in its regularity. Today, thanks to quantum physics, the picture is more complex. Within the

regularity on the large scale are endless random events on the smallest. In the words of the Nobel Prizewinner Murray Gell-Mann, '... much is fundamentally unpredictable about the entire universe ... each alternative history depends on the results of an inconceivably large number of accidents.'

Nevertheless, for the purposes of daily living, it is the regularity of the cosmos which is crucial. Unless it was regular, behaving in foreseeable ways, conscious, intelligent life would be impossible. God is in favour of thinking, even to the extent of giving creatures like ourselves power to affect the development of our world. This is a new sort of evolution, directed by mind in accordance with values. God is apparently also in favour of co-operation between creatures, without which very little could be achieved but which again only the regularity of the world makes possible. Yet this very regularity is what makes the world dangerous, bringing with it pain and loss. Nor should it be forgotten that the emergence of life inevitably requires death: if we did not die, the world would soon reach a point where life would be impossible, because resources would be exhausted.

If God is a moral and spiritual being, as we would call it, then he must be aware that the cosmos which he sustains is an extraordinary mixture of joy and pain, of triumph and disaster, at least for its more developed inhabitants. People have often used this fact to argue that there cannot be a God - or, at any rate, a good God

- for a good God would never have made a system which carried with it such grief and calamity. But modern science perhaps suggests a different question. What if a universe something like what we have got is the only kind in which thinking, loving creatures could evolve? Perhaps any cosmos worth making would have to have its downside as well as its glory. If so, then the question facing God would be, 'Knowing that this is so, is it better that such universes should exist or not?' It is, in fact, a basic tenet of most Christian philosophy that existence is a good, that it is better to exist than not. What would a vote of the whole human race say to that question? Despite all the pains, I reckon that the result would be a landslide for 'Yes'.

Christianity, as we shall hear in the coming weeks, takes these tentative possibilities of moral and spiritual meaning in the cosmos, and tells a story which confirms them and carries them forward in an amazingly positive way, giving new meaning not only to the universe but to our own human life. As we shall see, the picture of the universe which we can reasonably construct today from our own observation is not at odds with faith, but has an exciting potential to combine with faith to create a more profound and inspiring reading of reality.