

Advent Sunday, 2013
(Isaiah 2.1-5; Matthew 24.36-44)

Jesus said, "you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

I find that one of the most exciting things about being alive today, and of having been alive for nearly 69 years, is that we are living at a time when scientists are starting to unravel the secrets of the universe.

About 20 years before I was born, the 'big bang' hypothesis about the beginning of the universe came on the scene. Since then, huge questions have been raised about the origin and destiny of the cosmos. Having begun with the big bang, followed by several billion years of cosmic expansion, will the growth of the universe gradually slow down and then go into reverse – finally leading to a 'big crunch' – when all the matter in the universe collides again? And, if there is to be a 'big crunch', will it be followed by a 'big bounce' through which another cosmos comes into being? Alternatively, will the expansion of the universe gradually slow down, until it forms a 'steady state'? Or, will the process of expansion continue indefinitely, leading, ultimately, to the heat death of the universe? These, and many other theories have been advanced. During my lifetime, the stuff of science has changed beyond recognition. Often it has been more amazing than the stuff of science fiction.

My interest in cosmology is driven by two things. The first is simple curiosity: the desire to know more about the universe in which we live just because it's there. But my interest goes deeper than this because, being a Christian, I hope to discover more about the character of God through learning about the things that God has made. What an astonishing God God must be. To have created the process that led to the big bang, which – almost literally – threw a universe into being so that, over billions of years, almost every conceivable life form would evolve within it; a universe of such beauty, size and freedom, in and through which conscious life has gradually emerged – life that is destined to share in God's own life, as we believe. God's canvas is enormous, God's creativity almost unimaginable, and God's capacity for risk and readiness to embrace suffering beyond our comprehension. Yet this is the world in which we live. In the words of the old theologians, it is the 'book of creation' in which – could we but read it right – we would learn about the character of God.

These thoughts come to me on Advent Sunday because Advent is the time of year when we are encouraged to think about our final destiny in God. Science is doing its best to explain the cosmic theatre in which our lives are set; but what science cannot do is to suggest the meaning of the play in which we find ourselves the players. In the often quoted phrase, science attempts to explain the 'how', but not the 'why' of life. So, this Advent, what can our faith suggest to us about the end of life – life lived

within the context of a universe that came into being at a measurable time, and is moving inexorably towards its culmination?

The readings we heard this morning offer some thoughts for meditation. In the first reading, Isaiah proffered a consoling vision of all the vast diversity of life gradually being brought into right relationship with God,

In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.' For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem (Isaiah 2.1-3).

Isaiah was writing within his own historical context, not looking towards the culmination of the cosmos. Nonetheless, his words suggest a vision of life on earth gradually being brought into relationship with God: 'Many peoples shall come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob'.

We can find a similar vision, albeit one differently expressed, in the opening chapter of Paul's Letter to the Colossians, where Paul expounds his vision of the Cosmic Christ – God's agent in creation,

In him all things in heaven and earth were created, . . . He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. . . . For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether in earth or in heaven, by making peace through his blood (1.15, 19f).

Paul's imagery differs from Isaiah's, but the underlying thought is similar: in and through this vast cosmic process, the Holy Spirit is constantly working to bring all people and all things into conscious relationship with God.

What a healing vision this can be - to us who live in a world torn by internal and external conflict - to contemplate the possibility of a time when everyone and everything will exist in harmonious relationship with each other, because each and all have been brought into right relationship with God.

But there is nothing easy about the process leading to this goal. In the second reading we seemed to hear a rather different story. There, in Matthew 24, Jesus was suggesting that the coming of the Son of Man at the end of time would be like the coming of a thief in the night – at a time that none expect. Then,

two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep

awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming
(Matthew 24.40-42).

In its immediate context, Jesus' words seem to speak of a process of selection, whereby some people will be saved and others excluded from the life of God. If true, this would seem to contradict Paul's faith, in Colossians, that God has been pleased 'to reconcile to himself all things, whether in earth or in heaven, by making peace through his blood'. If we read Jesus' words in a more symbolic way, though, we might take them as a warning to us, who can so easily feel as if we are two people, torn as we sometimes are between conflicting impulses. When hurt in a relationship, for example, we may feel torn between the impulse to retaliate and our longing to forgive. Yet, however understandable the temptation to bitterness and revenge may be, it cannot be brought into relationship with God. Ultimately, it must be left behind if our lives are to be permeated by the love of God: 'one must be taken and another left'.

Parting from our vices can be hard but maybe, during Advent, if we make time to ponder the great vision of the Holy Spirit working tirelessly to draw all things and all creatures into unity with God, we may find ourselves drawn just a little bit further from our vices into the greater love and freedom that is the life of God.

The cosmos is the matrix within which we have come to birth. But our homeland, we believe, is in heaven, where everything and everyone is in right relationship, because all are in right relationship with God. *Maranatha!* May that day come.

Christopher MacKenna