

Sermon for the Second Sunday before Lent, year B

Since the dawn of consciousness, men and women have observed the patterns in the seasons and the tides, and the impact on them on the two great celestial bodies, the sun and the moon. As they sought to understand, calculate and predict these patterns, they came to understand their place in the universe.

All tribes and cultures have developed myths and legends about how the universe was created and our place within it, which have been challenged by various scientific disciplines, as they unravel a greater understanding of the arrangement of the cosmos, particularly its origin story.

In the 20th century, the greatest of these advancements meant it was for the first time possible to leave the confines of earth's orbit and on Christmas Eve, 1968, Bill Anders, one of the first of those to do so, and travel to the moon, captured for the first time, an image of the earth from space, rising over the lunar landscape, the iconic 'Earthrise'.

That experience greatly perturbed Anders, as a Catholic Christian, and adversely affected his faith, as he came to the realisation that, in our desire to leave earth, and venture out into the solar system, and beyond, then the earth would eventually shrink in size until it was nothing more than a speck of dust in a galaxy that was itself only one among countless millions. In the face of this ungraspable magnitude he found it virtually impossible to sustain his earlier belief in a God who created the earth and made humanity in his own image.

He is, of course, far from alone in expressing these feelings: of doubt, of insignificance in the vastness of the cosmos, and many of us, too, face similar challenges, that as we explore and grow deeper in our faith, rather than discovering the answers we seek, we actually uncover more questions - that the more we know, the more we find out that we don't know.

Perhaps at this time, as we see incredible pain and suffering around us, with all that we feel we have lost: of those we've loved, of freedom and companionship, and above all, of all those who have died, and are continuing to do so, it causes us to question more than perhaps we have before.

Even as there appears to be signs of hope, new questions arise: When will I be able to see my family again? When might life return to normal? What will normal even look like? When can our children return to school?

We are so grateful to everyone who has contributed to the development of the vaccine, its testing, production and delivery, and that it offers us hope, however, cautious.

The challenge for us as Christians is not to be consumed by fear and uncertainty, but to live in that hope.

Thomas Merton, 20th century mystic and writer wrote:

"You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognize the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage, faith and hope."

Our readings this morning remind us that there is nothing new under the sun. As we look at the troubles we face, and those in the world around us, they are nothing to God, who caused the world to be brought into being, and saw that it was good.

In our Old Testament reading, we go right back to the dawn of everything, before the time of creation, and hear of wisdom personified, present at the Lord's side, "when he marked out the foundations of the earth". And we are reminded of that image of Anders' image of the earth from space, and see the imagination, creativity and beauty that brought it to birth.

We are reminded in both the epistle and gospel reading this morning that that wisdom is Jesus, who was there from the beginning. That magisterial prologue to John's gospel, so familiar from our hearing it at Christmas, that all things came into being through Jesus, and "without him not one thing came into being" - all the good things, and the not so good things.

Paul's letter to the church at Colossae begins with this hymn of praise, rejoicing that in Christ, who is that cosmic, transcendent wisdom, instrumental in God's creative activity, God came to experience all that he had made.

There is so much we don't know, of this time in particular and of the time that will follow, and that causes us anxiety.

We are currently deprived of so much, and of those things, as Christians, perhaps most importantly, is the Eucharist, the sacramental moment in which we participate in that mystery in which heaven and earth are united.

This fast from communion is something many of us have become somewhat accustomed over the last 12 months, uncomfortable though this has certainly been.

In some traditions, such fasting from reception has long been the tradition during Lent, and, of course, in centuries past in this country, reception of communion was limited to the great feasts of the calendar.

Given all that we are enduring, it is understandable for us to yearn to return to church: to worship, to fellowship, to communion. It is hard for us to "recognize the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage, faith and hope".

We will soon be beginning our journey of Lent, with some hope of light at the end. As we do so, may we so engage in what lies in the present moment, while still looking forward to the time that is yet to come.

As he viewed the earth from the moon's orbit, Bill Anders found that the enormity of all that he experienced overwhelmed his faith. Despite the fact that he was well acquainted with the idea of the incomprehensible vastness of the cosmos, at that moment, as it pervaded his consciousness, he found himself unable to embrace that moment in "courage, faith and love".

As we face our own "Earthrise" moments, as we wrestle with our questions, doubts and fears, may we hold fast to the promises of the prologue, that the true light, who came into the world, who had been at the creation of all things, is with us now, and that "to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God".

I want to finish with another quote from Thomas Merton, from his book, *Thoughts in Solitude*:

"My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from

that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.”