

John 12:20-33; Ephesians 1:3-10

18.03.18

The draw of the cross

It has been said that preparing a sermon requires us to hold the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other – in other words sermons need to take into account the context in which they are being preached and what is going on in the world. This week that approach is particularly appropriate in the light of one particular event that has taken place. I refer to the death of the world-renowned cosmologist Professor Stephen Hawking, who died on Wednesday. Hawking was an extraordinary figure. Supposedly receiving a death sentence at the age of 21 by the onset of motor neuron disease, he lived for another 55 years through increasing disability. As a cosmologist he discovered mind-boggling truths that deepened our understanding of the universe. His work included significant research on the Big Bang that exploded the universe into existence 13.7 billion years ago, and particularly pioneering work on the phenomena of black holes. It has been said of him that while his body sat hunched in a wheelchair, ‘his mind roamed the stars’.

Well, with the newspapers reporting Hawking’s death in one hand, what a perfect occasion to turn to the Bible in the other and to discover that the reading set for this Sunday, two weeks before Easter, comes from John’s Gospel. And why is that so fitting? Well, it is fitting because John is surely the most cosmological of Gospels. Think of it: turn to the beginning of Mark’s Gospel and we find Jesus’ ministry traced back to the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. And turn to the opening of Matthew’s Gospel and you find his ministry traced back much further to Abraham. Then turn to the start of Luke’s Gospel and you find it traced back further still to Adam, the first human. But turn to the Prologue of John’s Gospel and what do we find? Well, we find ourselves transported right back to the beginning of the universe. So where Stephen Hawking and his fellow scientists speak of the eruption that we call the Big Bang, John speaks of a Big Word: ‘in the beginning was the Word... all things came into being through him.’ Where Hawking speaks scientifically of an explosion of being out of nothing, John speaks theologically of Jesus as a Word by which God called all things into being.

And for reasons which I hope will become clear I want, before turning to our reading from John and our passage from Ephesians, to stay for a while

with the Big Bang - and I freely acknowledge that I am a complete amateur here with very limited understanding and if I put a few feet wrong then please, someone, correct me afterwards. As I understand it, the Big Bang theory describes the origins of the universe from one highly dense concentration of matter called a 'singularity'. In a massive, high-temperature explosion this hyper-dense matter expanded at a fantastic rate, scattering the dust of stars and planets and forming galaxies, and this cosmic expansion continues today. So the universe is ever expanding like an inflating balloon, and lost in its immensity is our tiny planet earth. But there are of course other forces at work in the universe too. There is gravity, and gravity has the opposite effect to the Big Bang, drawing bodies to one another. For centuries gravity was a mystery. People thought that the earth was at the centre of the universe with the sun revolving round it, and gravity happened because everything was attracted to the centre. But since Copernicus and Galileo we know that is wrong and we have a different explanation for gravity which recognises the attraction that exists between everything with mass. And it appears that because of the effects of gravity and something called dark matter the universe ought to be slowing down and contracting and heading for a big crunch. But it isn't. Due to something else called dark energy it is ever-expanding and accelerating and the long-term effect is that the universe will eventually become ever more dark and desolate.

So this is the cosmos we inhabit, the one Stephen Hawking explored as his mind roamed. And there are other mysterious forces at work in nature. Jesus spoke in our passage of one when he referred to the grain of wheat that must die in order to bear fruit. He's referring to the cycle of life and death, the rhythm that permeates the seasons and the seeds and that perpetuates life. Forces are at work that are far beyond us and in which we are caught, exercising their influence over us.

Well, this is the moment to turn to our passage from John for here we find another, vital force that is above and beyond all the others. Jesus is in Jerusalem for the Passover Festival and we are told that some Greeks are there for the Festival, and they approach two of Jesus' disciples and say 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus'. Now these are Gentiles, non-Jews. They do not belong to Jerusalem and to the people of God and yet what is happening to them? Well, they are being drawn to Jerusalem and to Jesus. Something is attracting them. And we don't hear any more of these Greeks but we have to see their approach

to Jesus in the context of Jesus' towering statement at the end of our passage where he says, speaking of his immanent death on the cross, 'I, when I am lifted up from the earth will draw all people to myself.' You see, for Jesus there is this irresistible force that centres on the cross, a force that draws people to him. And it's working with these Greeks even before Jesus is raised up on the cross. This is the force of grace, at work in the world, drawing, gently pulling people to Christ.

We find it elsewhere in the Bible. Go back to the Old Testament prophet Isaiah and in chapter 2 of the book that bears his name there is a vision. It is a vision of Mt Zion on which Jerusalem is set. This is God's abode, believed to be at the very centre of the earth, the axis around which the universe revolved. And from Jerusalem goes forth God's Word. And what is the effect? Well, the passage pictures all nations streaming to Mt Zion: 'Come', they say, '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.' These people, you see, are feeling the pull. Like bodies once supposedly attracted to the centre of the cosmos by gravity, the nations are attracted to the centre where God dwells and from where God's Word is heard. Only it is not gravity but grace that pulls them.

Then jump ahead from our reading in John to the Book of Acts and what we find described there is the pull of grace as more and more people are drawn to Christ after he has not only been raised onto the cross but raised from the dead and raised to the right hand of God. First we read of the little Christian community in Jerusalem to which the Lord added converts every day: Jewish converts, attracted to this community's life together. But as we read on in Acts the net is cast ever wider as more people are drawn in, some who would have previously been forbidden and barred. Until finally in Acts 10 in a place called Caesarea a Gentile Roman centurion is baptised and people once considered unclean are drawn in to the new people of God, the new Israel. Here Isaiah's ancient vision, relaunched and reinvigorated by Christ's being lifted up on the cross, is being realised. At the heart of an expanding universe, accelerating at ever-increasing speed, there is this force of grace uniting things together, drawing all creation to the one who launched it all in the first place. Hallelujah!

This takes us to our reading from Ephesians and to Paul's astounding vision. He writes of a plan that God has had right from the beginning – before time, before the Big Bang - a plan, as he puts it, 'for the fullness of time, to

gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth'. Here is the big picture! Here is the greatest, widest context of all. Go back to Isaiah's vision of nations streaming to Jerusalem; and then go to those Greeks wishing to see Jesus in Jerusalem that day; and then to Jesus' speaking of his being lifted up and drawing all people to himself; and then go to the little community in Jerusalem to which converts are being added daily; and then to that Gentile, Roman centurion being baptised – all this is set in this widest frame of reference of God's gathering up all things in Christ. And that too is what ultimately frames the Big Bang, and the expanding universe, and all the mysteries that Stephen Hawking delved into so brilliantly – all that is part of this great divine plan. And your salvation is also part of all that. Paul talks here of our being chosen to be holy and blameless, of our being adopted as children of God, of our redemption and forgiveness and of the grace so freely bestowed upon us: all that is part of this cosmic plan for the universe in which all things are gathered up in Christ.

So I wonder where do you experience the draw of the cross, the pull of grace? Well, the first answer we might give to that is to ask you why you are this morning: what has brought you here? You might give any number of reasons but underlying them all are Jesus' words: 'I when I am lifted up will draw all people to myself.' Under all the human causes that have conspired to bring you here, there is the draw of the cross. Maybe your life has taken a turn whereby you are left feeling the need for a new direction. Maybe you feel the need for some spirituality, for some connection with the beyond and you can't articulate it any more clearly than that. Maybe some joy or some sorrow has touched you and is prompting you. But in all the events of our lives we need to learn to discern Christ drawing us ever closer, drawing us to himself. Of course we don't necessarily hear the voice of God speaking through them. There is always ambiguity. I love the bit in this passage where a voice comes from heaven but some people think it's only thunder. We don't always recognize the voice of God. There are always other interpretations. But underneath and woven through our lives there is the draw of the cross, as God's plan, written into creation from before its beginning, gathers us up with all things in Christ. That's what little Marcus' baptism earlier was all about. In baptism we are inserting him into that slipstream of grace which is carrying him to God. And we are placing him into the community which is intentionally and deliberately being drawn into the life of Christ.

‘I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself’,
 ... a plan for the fullness of time to gather up all things in Christ.’ And this
 morning you, and me and little Marcus are all part of that plan. Amen.

In our prayers this morning, when I pray,
 Lord in your mercy,
 Please reply: *Hear our prayer*

Gracious God,
 who has come down amongst us in Jesus Christ
 in order to gather us up and unite us and all things in Christ,
 we pray for the unfolding of that plan.
 We pray for you world, so divided and fractured by
 fear and suspicion and threats between nations and governments.
 O God overcome our inclination to conflict
 and bring the peace of your Kingdom.

Lord in your mercy,
Hear our prayer

We pray for the government of this country, the Netherlands,
 remembering especially this week’s municipal elections,
 and we pray that through these the life of this nation may be
 more closely aligned with your Kingdom.

Lord in your mercy,
Hear our prayer

We pray for the life of the church,
 and in particular this church, that we may all be drawn
 closer to you and learn to live out the salvation
 that is your gift to us in Jesus Christ.
 As we have baptised a child this morning we
 pray for all the children in our church family,
 that they be nurtured in the faith and gathered

up into the life of your Kingdom.

Lord in your mercy,

Hear our prayer

And bless today all who are suffering, anxious or afraid.

We pray for any who are fearful of a diagnosis they have received...

We pray for any with loved ones facing death...

We pray for those whose future is uncertain and who are dependent on the decisions of others...

Lord in your mercy,

Hear our prayer

Living God, gather our prayers and keep them close to your heart and answer them according to your mercy and your will. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.