

How do you look at stars and end up with a baby in a manger?

Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Today we are celebrating Epiphany. The word comes from the Greek verb *epiphainein*, meaning 'to reveal'. The fully name in the Old Prayer book for the feast of Epiphany is 'The Epiphany, or the Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles.' 'Manifestation', or 'revelation', or 'epiphany'.

The birth of the Messiah has already been revealed to God's own people the Jews. The angels said to the shepherds: 'Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.' Today, we celebrate God's revelation of the Saviour of the World to gentiles, wise men 'from the East'. These folks did *not* have the Jewish scriptures - they knew nothing of King David, or God's promise to bring forth a Messiah out of his descendants. So God had to do something else. Interestingly, God used the stars.

Scholars have long debated the story of the magi. Some say it's an edifying fable. Others suggest that there was a factual basis, and have spilt a lot of ink trying to establish the identity of the star. Either way, this story is part of our Bible, and we are invited to reflect on its meaning each year at Epiphany. So let's do that.

The word 'magi' was used to refer to many classes of people in the ancient world, from those who we would call scientists today, all the way to conmen who peddle recycled horoscopes to gullible customers. I think of these magi as ancient scientists who study the stars. In that case, their story invites us to reflect on what it is that we can learn about God by pondering the physical universe scientifically.

Men and women have, of course, gazed at stars from time immemorial. But star-gazing started to become science when people noticed that starry motions were *regular*, so regular that they were *predictable*. Astronomy was unquestionably the first science to develop. The ancient Chinese and Babylonians knew how to predict eclipses, and made accurate astronomical calendars. Later, in the 16th century, astronomy gave birth to the modern scientific revolution. Galileo and Newton discovered laws from which they could deduce the regularities in stellar movement using mathematics as a tool.

All of that is, of course, commonplace. Everyone, scientist or not, knows that the world is regular, and predictable by scientific laws. If the world is not regular and predictable, science would not be possible, and neither would the whole gamut of gadgets and technologies we have come to depend on. The regularity and predictability of the world is so commonplace that we seldom stop and ask what it means. Why? Why is the world regular and predictable? Does it have to be like that? Could it have been otherwise?

Imagine, for example, that the universe were created by the the Greek god Zeus. Would we expect such a world to be regular and predictable? The answer is 'No!' The Greek pantheon was totally capricious. Zeus lops a thunderclap here and throws a lightning strike there more or less according to his whim - for the odd bit of fun, or to revenge the latest feud. No, Zeus would not make a predictable world: he wouldn't want to limit his personal freedom by letting the world be predictable!

More seriously, a significant number of Jews, Christians and Muslims have always believed that since God is absolutely powerful, there could not be any real regularity or scientific laws, because that would limit God's freedom to act. The tongue twisting word for this belief is 'occasionalism' - I'll explain it in just a moment.

We do, of course, perceive *apparent* regularity. For instance, every time I drop something, such as this ball from the pulpit - someone please catch it! - it will fall about 5 meters in one second, 20 meters in 2 seconds, 45 meters in 3 seconds, and so forth; every time, the distance increases as the square of the time. Instead of offering a scientific explanation based on Newton's laws, the occasionalist would say that the apparent regular, law-like motion from one moment to another - or 'occasion by occasion', hence 'occasionalism' - is actively willed by God. Every moment is a fresh miracle, directly from the hand of God. There is no reason to expect regularity and predictability. Indeed, any attempt to predict is impious, because it would be tantamount to second-guessing God's mind. God could, when the ball is half way down from the pulpit, cause it to reappear right above the cross at the high altar if God so chooses.

If all this sounds medieval, let me tell you a true story about a teacher in an inner-London primary school. When this teacher announced that the topic next week would be weather prediction, a certain group of religious parents withdrew their children for the week. Why? Because predicting anything would be blasphemy. Occasionalism is very much alive and well in the 21st century. The parents concerned happened to have been Muslims. But occasionalism is thriving amongst Christians, too. Creationists are occasionalists by another name: they insist that God made the world in 6 lots of 24 hours, and refused to have any truck with the law-like regularity of evolution by natural selection.

But that is not mainstream Christian belief. Mainstream Christian, and indeed Jewish, theology teaches us that God created a world and gave it a law-like regularity, and therefore autonomy. Listen to what God said to himself after the Flood; I quote from Genesis:

The LORD ... said ... , 'As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.' (8:21-22)

In other words, regularity, and therefore predictability, and therefore the possibility of science, was, and remains, part of the divine intention.¹ Furthermore, the occasionalist is right. For God to make such a promise *does* limit God's freedom. But the key thing is that this is a *self-imposed limit*.

God, in creating a world that has law-like regularities, indeed has to impose a limit to God's own power; to withdraw godself sufficiently from the world of created beings to give these beings a degree of law-like autonomy - for stars to run according to Newton's laws of motion, and the biological world to evolve according to Darwin's law of natural selection.

How do we know that that is true? The Christian answer is given by Saint Paul in his letter to the Philippians, where he says of Jesus

who, though he was in the form of God,
... ,
[he] emptied himself,
... ,
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death —
even death on a cross. (2:6-8)

God *emptied godself* to become a baby, to grow up to die on a cross. But this self-emptying, this self limitation, was already apparent when God made that promise to humanity that this should be a world of regularity and predictability. So indeed, we should be able to look at the regularity of stellar motions and arrive at the baby in Bethlehem. The love that made it possible to study the stars scientifically is the same love that we see at Christmas, at Epiphany, and on Good Friday.

In the middle of her life, the 14th century English mystic Julian of Norwich fell very ill. She thought she was going to die. Her curate gave her a crucifix to meditate on in what she thought was her last hour. She then saw a series of visions. During her first vision God 'showed [her]', and I quote

... a hazelnut in the palm of my hand, and it was as round as a ball. I looked upon it ... and thought, "What may this be?" And it was ... answered thus, "It is all that is made." I marvelled how it might last, for

¹ Interestingly, I cannot find any corresponding saying in the Koran.

I thought it might suddenly have fallen to nought for littleness. And I was answered in my understanding, "It lasts and ever shall, for God loves it." And so all things have their being by the love of God.

From the bleeding head of Christ on a crucifix, God takes Julian to a small nut, a symbol of 'all that is made', and shows her that 'all things have their being by the love of God'. The self emptying that led to the autonomous, law-like existence of a nut is the very same love that is manifest by Jesus on the cross.

That, to me, is the modern message of Epiphany, of looking at the stars and arriving at a revelation of the birth of the Messiah. God is both power and love; but the power is circumscribed by the love. In the words of a Graham Kendrick song, 'hands that flung stars into space, to cruel nails surrendered'.

Amen.