

## Sunday 14 September 2008 : Holy Cross Day

### A cosmic moment

**Readings: Philippians 2:6-11; John 3:13-17**

*And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*

*And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross.*

*Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name,*

This week physics hit the headlines. It grabbed the front page of the broadsheets, got top billing on the TV news and had a whole day of programmes dedicated to it on Radio 4. You didn't really need to know anything about the science to get a sense of the excitement and anticipation as the Large Hadron collider spanning the French/Swiss border some 100m below the surface was finally put through its paces and beams of sub-atomic particles were sent hurtling along its 17mile long circular tunnel. So far the direst predictions that the experiments would result in a black hole large enough to consume the earth have not materialised but it is early days and you might want to think twice about getting your Christmas shopping done early this year, just in case we don't get that far!

There's no doubt that some of the claims made for the work going on at CERN (the European organisation for Nuclear research) have used language that goes far beyond the world of physics alone and enters the realm of the philosophical and we might say theological. The website of CERN itself says this of the Large Hadron collider:

“It is a particle accelerator used by physicists to study the smallest known particles – the fundamental building blocks of all things. It will revolutionise our understanding, from the minuscule world deep within atoms to the vastness of the Universe.

Two beams of subatomic particles called 'hadrons' – either protons or lead ions – will travel in opposite directions inside the circular accelerator, gaining energy with every lap. Physicists will use the LHC to recreate the conditions just after the Big Bang, by colliding the two beams head-on at very high energy. There are many theories as to what will result from these collisions, but what's for sure is that a brave new world of physics will emerge from the new accelerator, as knowledge in particle physics goes on to describe the workings of the Universe. Only experimental data using the higher energies reached by the LHC can push knowledge forward, challenging those who seek confirmation of established knowledge, and those who dare to dream beyond the paradigm.”

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It will be weeks, probably months before we know if the hopes of the scientists will be fulfilled, and whether it has been possible to capture something of the cosmic moment that is the beginning of the universe has been glimpsed, albeit fleetingly and our groping in the dark has allowed us to creep ever so slightly closer to an understanding of how and when it/ we all began, and what the world really looks like. After all astronomers and physicists tell us that what we see in the stuff of the stars and planets, and we ourselves, accounts for only 5% of the observable universe. Something called dark matter accounts for another 25% and 70% is made up of the even more mysterious dark energy, which the expansion of the cosmos. What we see and touch and observe day by day is a tiny fraction of what there is to discover. And yet the world of particle physics dares to believe that a cosmic collision and its consequences lasting unimaginably small fractions of a second can shed light on time itself.

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*Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name,*

Today the Church marks Holy Cross Day. The origins of this day date back to Helena, mother of the first Christian Roman Emperor Constantine. Helena is credited with discovering a relic of the true cross while overseeing excavations in the city of Jerusalem, and a Christian basilica was dedicated at the site of the Holy Sepulchre on this day in the year 335. Whether what was found had any relation to the instrument of Christ's death is of course debatable, but it is certainly true that death of Jesus on the cross and the symbolism of that death became a focus for the Christian community from its early days.

“Why did Jesus die on the cross?” is a favourite essay title for theologians the world over, and while the doctrines may vary in emphasis, there is consensus amongst Christian believers that the crucifixion of Jesus Christ marks a cosmic moment, it too “challenging those who seek confirmation of established knowledge, and those who dare to dream beyond the paradigm.”

The crucifixion of Jesus Christ is a cosmic moment that also represents a collision – a collision between all that is worst and all that is best about humanity; between the darkness and the light; between that which is known and that which is beyond knowing; between the dimensions of time and space in which we are held in the present and the infinite dimensions of eternity in which we are called to dwell with our creator; between the smallness and meanness of our love and mercy and the infinite generosity of heart of God.

The scripture readings today are like the flickers on the screen depicting those collisions. In their breathtaking wonder, they allow us for a moment to catch a glimpse of what the cosmic moment of the cross represents. They help us to grasp the awesome truth that in the scarcity of a single event in human existence is revealed the generosity of eternity.

*He emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name,*

Most Bible commentaries will tell you that in this part of the letter to the Philippians, Paul is using words of one of the earliest Christian poems or hymns. Where the prosaic fail, poetry leads into the realm of awe and into the heart of worship. God himself limits himself, allows the energy and purpose that drives all creation and time itself to be limited in the human flesh and blood of one man in first century Palestine. In the face of Christ we catch a glimpse of that which is beyond us, and in the self-limiting of Christ, we receive our invitation into that realm of generous ever-expanding mercy, grace and truth.

For John the evangelist, blessed perhaps more than any other of the New Testament writers, what we see in the cross of Christ is the fulfilment of the revelation of God that has unfolded in the history of his people Israel, and of their journeying in the wilderness.

*And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*

For John, the cosmic moment of the cross is the moment of κρισις, the moment of judgement; the moment when the worlds of darkness and light collide. But for John, what emerges in that collision

is not the all-consuming black hole of God's condemnation, but the revelation of glory that is the redemption of God's creation.

*"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him*

The cosmic moment of the Cross is our moment of κρισις and of judgement, too. For here we recognise ourselves in our human limitations, in our sinfulness, in our need for forgiveness, in the darkness that dwells within and without. But here too we recognise the infinitely greater truth that is the mercy and grace and truth and love of God that so often we choose not to see or fail to recognise, but which surrounds us and dwells within us, and draws us, and calls us to dare to dream beyond the paradigm.

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