

## Readings

Daniel 7: 9–10, 13–14

Revelation 1; 4b–8

John 18: 33–37

I don't know how the word *kingdom* strikes your ear, but to mine it always has an air of fantasy and fairytale. It belongs to the realm of storybook and has all sorts of connotations – wealth, hierarchy, a certain orderliness, even enchantment. It has kings and queens of a kind that we certainly don't have now, and probably never did. It's long way from the messy, modern world with its political rulers and machinating powers.

Recently, at COP26, we've seen those world powers "conspiring together" to try to combat a threat to all peoples and nations – a threat that, of course, has arisen from the actions peoples and nations themselves. As we know, there were *some* positive outcomes. But it did feel like watching the rearrangement of deckchairs on the titanic – when the iceberg has already hit. Some seemed unable or unwilling to see the bigger picture. Here we are, at a turning point in the story of humankind, but there were those who seemed not to acknowledge that there *is* a *bigger* story, or to consider how it might end.

One attempt to tell a bigger story unfolded on our TV screens a couple of weeks ago. The astro-physicist Brian Cox began his new series – called simply "Universe" – with an extraordinary account of what what he called "The greatest story ever told" . It was a story of how the stars were formed, how they evolved, and how all the stars and the universe itself will eventually die. Assisted by astronomical production values, the power of BBC CGI, and a magisterial soundtrack, he told us a story on the grandest scale imaginable. Well, actually – completely and utterly *un*imaginable. If you didn't see it, we were talking here about billions of stars in a single galaxy and trillions of galaxies spread out over uncalculatable numbers of light years. The stars of this episode were the actual stars, of which our sun is one. Brian explained how they are the source of the elements of life and in that sense – he bravely suggested – they *are* gods. And so, through the life-giving properties of our own star-god, human life was eventually born. Life with consciousness that can work out what's going on, and wonder and appreciate it all. And that, according to Brian, is what gives *meaning* to things. And, he went on, even when, in ten trillion years from now, the very last star has fizzled out and all is cold and dark and without form, the meaning will still be there, because at one time, aeons and aeons ago, *we* had been there to appreciate and understand it all. It was hard to envisage how disembodied meaning might persist when there are no sentient beings around to make it, but still, Brian, in permanent wonderment mode, chirpily presented this idea as a kind of saving grace.

Well, the end of the universe is still quite some way off so needn't trouble us just yet. But, as Josh reminded us so wonderfully last week, the end of the story matters. The ending can change the whole story. The beginning of the story matters, too. Both matter because they enable us to peep around the edge of the curtain, as it were, to see what might be behind the whole show. Is THIS really the whole story?

In our gospel reading, Jesus tells Pilate that the world he sees is not the whole story. There is a bigger one. "My kingdom," says Jesus, "is not from this world." In the King James version and some more modern translations, that's rendered as "my kingdom is not *of* this world" and that version has become the familiar quotation. That's unfortunate as it rather suggests that the kingdom of God is somewhat otherworldly, in a completely separate realm. But the Greek word is better translated— as in our reading — as *from*. This means that Jesus is not saying not that his kingdom is in a completely different and separate place, but is that it doesn't originate *in* the world that we see before us.

As with all of John's gospel, we can get a greater appreciation of these verses if we read them in the light of the prologue: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God. Jesus is not *from* this world, but was before it and it came into being through him. And as we heard in our other readings, he is not only first but also the last.

In our weekly Tuesday Bible study group, we usually focus on a book of the bible or a theme. But this month we have been thinking about the lectionary readings for the previous Sunday. Sometimes, like last week, it's a bit like a game of spot the link. Who can fathom the ways of the lectionary compilers. But this week there is a clear thread, and so that's why I thought it would be good for us to have them all.

And so in Daniel we heard about the kingdom of God as an everlasting dominion to which all earthly powers are subject. We hear about the one who is given the kingship — but also "like a human being" or "like a son of man", depending on your translation. And Son of Man, is of course a name picked up by Jesus to refer to himself.

Finally, the reading from Revelation offers a view of the finale. Not the end of everything — but a culmination, in which the meaning of all the earlier parts of the story not only persists but is transfigured. The rather truncated reading misses out verses 13 and 14, in which we would have heard a clear echo of Daniel:

I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden girdle round his breast; his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters;

So, we have two very big stories. Both on a cosmic scale. Both putting the story of humanity onto a much larger stage. In both we are made of dust and to dust we return. But the second story is a bigger one. For *before* the swirling of undifferentiated hydrogen atoms, and *after* the fizzling of the very last star – if such is how this universe ends – there is life. Not just any life, but something which, though not human, would seem wonderfully recognisable. This is not only a bigger story, but it is a deeper one. From beginning to end it is shot through not only with energy, but with life; not just with relativity, but relatedness; not only with magnetic force; but with love.

Love is the grain of the universe. If you slice it open at any level – from the hydrogen atom to the web of chemical and biological complexity that is the human body – love *is somehow* at the heart of it. If this sounds more like my storybook kingdom than an empirical reality, then we would do well to remember that the universe is not only bigger than we can imagine, but is stranger than we can imagine. The more physicists delve into the workings of the cosmos, the more it appears like an *Alice Through the Looking Glass* kind of world, where time is *not* constant, where things *can* be in more than one place at once, and where, it increasingly appears, relatedness is at the heart of everything.

None of this is to do away with the story of the stars. It is a thrilling and awe-inspiring story, that has the power to shake our minds out of their tiny boxes. It reminds us that our view of God is inevitably way, way, way, WAY too limited. But the kingdom of God is a bigger story. The kingdom of God is on the scale of both the milky way and the mustard seed, and in the timespan of both star and the sparrow. And the *light* of the world is not merely photon particles, but is the particular person of Jesus Christ, who is not only the beginning and the end, but is the one who loves us, frees us from our sins and – makes *us* to *be* a kingdom.

Again as Josh reminded us, the stories we live by make a difference. What difference does this story make? Like the off-the-scale story of stars and galaxies, it can seem quite remote, as we potter about our little life rounded with a sleep. It is perhaps even more unimaginable. But perhaps, that glimpse of the bigger story in all its richness and strangeness at every level – that change of viewpoint – what Paul calls being seated in heavenly places – might just change the way we encounter the world and each other. It is the voice of one who spoke about a kingdom in terms that could not be more down to earth. Germinating mustard seeds, dying sparrows, a cup of water, a piece of bread. As if to show us that the kingdom of God may not be from this world – but it is *of* this world, and we can be part of it.

*And so we pray, may the Word of God open our minds to ponder his truth.  
And open our lives to walk his way. Amen.*

*Debbie Whitton Spriggs, 21st November 2021*