

Donnybrook

11 July 2021

Introduction

Welcome again everybody. Once, I spent a week camping in a desert, in the Negev, south of Jerusalem. It was all very simple: we slept on the ground, without tents (it was warm) and we spent the days exploring archaeological sites and geological wonders. One night, I woke up about 2 a.m. and the sky was brilliant with stars – many more than you can see from here, because in the desert there is no pollution of light or moisture. Even though I knew in my head that the universe is beyond calculating, somehow everything felt near, as if could just reach up and touch a star.

Topic

I hope we all have moments of wonder – perhaps you can recall your own.

Steps

For those of us not scientists, that sense of wonder is sustained by generous geniuses such as Steven Hawkins or these days Carlo Rovelli, who take the trouble to speak to the ordinary person in the street. Under a starry night, it can be breathtaking and even a little unsettling to realise the age of the cosmos: 13.8 billion years. The number of galaxies has been revised: it used to be somewhere between 100 and 200 billion; the current estimate stands at 2 trillion. Lots of zeros. At our own level, we can throw around terms such as these Big Bang. In fact, that was not its original name. It was originally called “the hypothesis of the primeval atom”, by Georges Lemaître, a Belgian mathematician and physicist and, it also happens, a Catholic priest. English has a kind of genius in brevity and Big Bang is what we all call it now.

Another person who comes to mind was also a priest and scientist, a Jesuit, called Teilhard de Chardin. He was in his day a renowned paleontologist – he was involved in research into what was then called Peking Man. Teilhard, a deeply reflective man, made a concerted effort to join the dots of what he knew as a scientist and what he believed as a Christian. He developed a kind of spiritual vocabulary for evolution. The beginning he called cosmogenesis. The evolution of the human species he called anthropogenesis. In humans, matter becomes self-conscious, for which he developed the term noogenesis. Finally, the spiritual evolution, quest and identity he called christogenesis. His generous vision continues to inspire today. Writers such as our own Dermot Lane from Balally or the Franciscan sister and theologian Ilia Delio would both freely acknowledge their debt to Teilhard de Chardin.

You may wonder why this amateur digest of faith and science is being landed on you today. There are two reasons. First of all, it is on account of our second reading today, where we heard:

*Blessed be God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
who has blessed us with all the spiritual blessings of heaven in Christ.
Before the world was made, he chose us, chose us in Christ,
And it is in him that we were claimed as God's own,
chosen from the beginning.*

The reading invites us to a grander, more ample and thrilling vision.

Secondly, our faith does not ask us to live in two worlds. On the contrary, faith and reason go together. We all have different narratives in our heads, including a scientific narrative. What we know about the birth of the cosmos and the evolution of *Homo sapiens* will indeed challenge the biblical narrative but not ultimately contradict our faith. Instead, like every generation before us, we have the task of integrating the world of faith and the world of science, philosophy and reason. It is perhaps not generally known that there is wonderful reflection and writing going on precisely on such questions. In a word, you do not have to be a creationist to be a Christian. It is always good to remember for argument's sake that the discovery of the Big Bang was made by Georges Lemaître, a Belgian Catholic priest.

Conclusion

To go back briefly to the desert and that night of wonder in the Negev. My lasting memory was a feeling of both awe and being held. Awe before the awesome cosmos and the ever more awesome creator. But at the same time, a feeling that this God was holding me in being, in love. Amen.