

"THE VISITED PLANET"

John 1: 1-12

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by

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For a long time we have thought of the universe as if it were an infinite machine with each single part lost in the vastness of it all. Taking this view the earth is hopelessly tiny and insignificant in the face of the remarkable distances, sizes and energy of the universe. But this view is slipping away as the new physics has emerged. In the perspective of Albert Einstein's general theory of relativity all of the sizes and distances of space and the understanding of mass and energy have taken on a completely new meaning: we have come to realize within the past fifty years three things about the universe which have given to the earth more importance than it has enjoyed since Copernicus.

(1) The new Physics has concluded that the universe is not infinite, it has boundaries, and the matter that occupies it is not eternal. The distances remain the same but the universe has become radically smaller when we recognize that it has limits of various kinds. This is a true principle in all forms of measurement. The earth is a lost speck of dust as long as space is computed endlessly but when Einstein proposed the curvature of space theory he introduced the possibility of boundaries and with them the earth and our solar system has suddenly taken on measurement importance.

(2) A second fact about the universe has recently been brought forceable to the front and it also has greatly upgraded the significance of our planet, namely the fact that it is virtually impossible for life to exist in the universe and yet it does exist and thrives on the earth.

"This rarity of planetary systems is important, because so far as we can see, life of the kind we know on earth could only originate on planets like the earth. It needs suitable physical conditions for its appearance, the most important of which is a temperature at which substances can exist in the liquid state.

The stars themselves are disqualified by being far too hot. We may think of them as a vast collection of fires scattered throughout space, providing warmth in a climate which is at most some four degrees above absolute zero -- about 484 degrees of frost on our Fahrenheit scale--and is even lower in the vast stretches of space which lie out beyond the Milky Way. Away from the fires there is this unimaginable cold of hundreds of degrees of frost; close up to them there is a temperature of thousands of degrees, at which all solids melt, all liquids boil.

Life can only exist inside a narrow temperate zone which surrounds each of these fires at a very definite distance. Outside these zones life would be frozen; inside, it would be shrivelled up. At a rough computation, these zones within which life is possible, all added together, constitute less than a thousand million millionth part of the whole of space. And even inside them, life must be of very rare occurrence, for it is so unusual an accident for suns to throw off planets as our own sun has done, that probably only about one star in 100,000 has a planet revolving round it in the small zone in which life is possible."

(3) The third fact is more subtle but perhaps more significant than the others.

"Thirty years ago, we thought, or assumed, that we were heading towards an ultimate reality of a mechanical kind. It seemed to consist of a fortuitous jumble of atoms, which was destined to perform meaningless dances for a time under the action of blind purposeless forces, and then fall back to form a dead world. Into this wholly mechanical world, through the play of the same blind forces, life had stumbled by accident. One tiny corner at least, and possibly several tiny corners, of this universe of atoms had chanced to become conscious for a time, but was destined in the end, still under the action of blind mechanical forces, to be frozen out and again leave a lifeless world.

"Today there is a wide measure of agreement, which on the physical side of science approaches almost to unanimity, that the stream of knowledge is heading towards a non-mechanical reality; the universe begins to look more like a great thought than like a great machine. Mind no longer appears as an accidental intruder into the realm of matter; we are beginning to suspect that we ought rather to hail it as the creator and governor of the realm of matter--not of course our individual minds, but the mind in which the atoms out of which our individual minds have grown exist as thoughts."

--SIR JAMES JEANS  
The Mysterious Universe  
pp. 180-181

However small this planet may be in astrophysical weight nevertheless man lives here and man has been granted the incredible gift of thought and with it meaning. Man, the instinctive mathematician that he is has figured out the universe and gradually everything in the universe of space and time has submitted to his questions. Man has calculated the distances of the universe and can conceive of speeds even greater than what the universe has been able to produce; and what man has achieved mathematically he may yet achieve physically.

Modern science has demonstrated that the energy, mass and gravitation of the earth have their analogy in space. This means that carbon on the earth is identical to carbon a million light years from the earth. Therefore it is possible to duplicate on the earth the immense energy of the sun's nuclear furnace. This has already been achieved scientifically and even more incredible energy utilization lies immediately within the grasp of modern physics and chemistry. We have discovered that the procedural rules of space are applicable on earth and this has sealed our continuity with the whole vast complex of what we think of as the universe. Everything on the earth, even the chemicals found in organic life have their analogy, their parallel in space. This is one very basic and practical argument in favor of space research; its benefits will have direct value to this inhabited oikumene. What I am saying is simply this, modern physics has demonstrated that the whole is necessary to fully understand the parts.

Man is a speck in the vastness of the whole, he is a mere reed along at the edge of a very long coast line but man is the "thinking reed" and therefore the greatest thing in creation, though one of the weakest, a mere drop of water can kill him, yet though the universe should rise up to destroy him he would be greater than the universe because he knows he is being destroyed and "the universe knows naught of that." (Pascal) Let me ask an essential question: If everything on this planet bears analogy to something in the whole vast sweep of things, the universe, then to what does man bear analogy? Certainly not the moon or Saturn or the sun or even Quesar 57. Man only bears analogy to the creator of thought, of feeling, consciousness; we just cannot escape this

fact. Not only this but as the physics of earth needs and dare not ignore the energy and mass of space in order to understand and make sense of our own planet so the principle holds true for man; the one who possesses thought and dreams dare not try to make sense of his own life apart from the creator of all thought, the inciter of dreams, the one who first loved.

The prologue to John's gospel puts it this way:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

"There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light.

"The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God."

-- John 1: 1-12

The one absolutely radical affirmation of Christian faith is this: That at the very center and at the origin of everything is God; he is the creator of thought, of character, of love and this "I am" has spoken for himself to the one and only thing in all of the universe (as far as we know) that bears analogy to him, and that is man, you and I. This speech of God is Jesus Christ our Lord.

If it is true that the conscious core of the whole of the created order has in every fact spoken for himself in Jesus Christ then the logical question is this: What have we discovered about God from Jesus Christ? We have found out what Chardin calls the "tenacious personalism" of God.

"To those who only know it outwardly, Christianity seems desperately intricate. In reality, taken in its main lines, it contains an extremely simple and astonishingly bold solution of the world.

"In the centre, so glaring as to be disconcerting, is the uncompromising affirmation of a personal God: God as providence, directing the universe with loving, watchful care; and God the revealer, communicating himself to man on the level of and through the ways of intelligence. It will be easy for me, after all I have said, to demonstrate the value and actuality of this tenacious personalism, not long since condemned as obsolete. The important thing to point out here is the way in which such an attitude in the hearts of the faithful leaves the door open to, and is easily allied to, everything that is great and healthy in the universal."

-- Teilhard de Chardin  
THE PHENOMENON OF MAN  
pp. 292-293

God can be known by mere man in a way analogous to the way we know our fellow men. This we discovered in Jesus Christ of the New Testament and he promised his disciples that the generations which would follow Peter, James, John, Paul would also know their creator as did the disciples: this was to be their good news for the world.

In Jesus Christ we have discovered that the Almightyness and power of God is not only chemical and physical but also moral. When Jesus of Nazareth grants meaning and worth to a man or woman who has become a moral casualty because of his own failures and disappointments as well as the injuries received from others, in this the Lord has proven his power to a greater extent than any physical, chemical demonstration could affirm; this is because sheer physical energy is not analogous to man, but moral energy is. For this very subtle reason Jesus Christ at his dark moment of Good Friday and his victory at Easter has shared with humanity a power which means more than the speeds and temperatures of space.

As a matter of fact everything but man in the scheme of things operates automatically. The sun is the perfect furnace with no maintenance problems, except for its long range tendency to cool. The sun pours out mass at a constant rate of 250 million tons per minute with temperatures at 50 million degrees farenheit at the core and 10,000 degrees at the surface. But as we all know man is not as efficient or as dependable. This is because to man has been granted a possibility not given to the sun or any other entity of space and that possibility is contained in three gifts: thought, feeling and freedom. This is why the Bible asserts that man and he alone was made in the "image of God."

Michaelangelo is right. Man is the creature who has his hands stretched out above him in search for ultimacy and only God himself is able to fulfill man, nothing else will do.