

TO START YOU THINKING...

The magic of stuff

God saw everything he had made, and indeed it was very good. (Genesis 1:31)

My five-year-old great-niece is staying with us at the moment and she has drawn me a card. It says:

I'm not sure what 'sduf' she is thinking of. Perhaps it is the eggs she gets from the hens for breakfast, the huge bunch of buttercups she has picked, the neighbour's cat she can plague, or the cobwebs she observantly points out all over the house! Perhaps it is the Lego, the toy farm, and the picture books that have come out of long retirement in her honour, the English sausages (she is from the USA), the liquorice allsorts or the carrot cake. Whatever it is, I am getting great enjoyment myself as I watch her delight and wonder at the ordinary stuff of life.

It's something we grown-ups often stop noticing. Preoccupied as we become with schedules and slog, aches and pains, worries and weariness, we forget how much the material world, the stuff of which our lives are made up is absolutely filled with wonder. It is, so much of it, 'Very good'. Still 'Very good', millennia after its beginnings, despite some of humankind's best efforts to spoil it, and despite the second law of thermodynamics which suggests that entropy, or disorder, can only increase if things are left to themselves.

But are things left to themselves? That, according to Stephen Hawking at least, is the overriding scientific view, that if there is a place for God at all, it is as a Creator who, having set things up, 'allows the universe to evolve according to a set of laws and does not intervene'. It is not quite a Christian view. Christians believe that God, having started up the world, did not then simply withdraw to let it happen. Rather, God continues to be intimately involved in it at every level, especially with us human creatures with our remarkable attributes of awareness and language.

This involvement instantly raises the question of whether God actually *intervenes* in miraculous ways. Many people do not believe in miracles because they have never seen one. This is understandable, though not entirely logical. Who would have believed that a man could stand on the moon, or that a device the size of a matchbox could contain all the information in Encyclopaedia Britannica? Many scientists do not believe in miracles because, they say, God, if there is one, would not break natural laws that he has put in place. But this too is not entirely logical, because if God made the laws, why should he not override them if he chose? It does seem logical, however, that this would be a rare event, because if God created an ordered and predictable universe, he must have had good reasons for doing so. But regardless of whether you believe in the leg-lengthening, walls-of-Jericho-falling, or fine-weather-for-the-church-fete sort of miracles, what becomes very evident, as soon as we really think about the world around us, is that even the everyday way it works is absolutely miraculous! Think about the fine-tuning of the universe needed for life to exist on this little planet, think about the workings of the human body, about the interconnectedness of the whole environment, about the fact that buttercups and spiders' webs are not only functional but beautiful, and it all seems quite extraordinary. And surely even more extraordinary, if it just happened all by itself.

But happen it did, and both science and faith are now generally agreed that it had a beginning - at nine o'clock in the morning on 27 October 4004 BC if you believe the calculations of the seventeenth-century Bishop Ussher, or about 13.7 billion years ago according to the estimates of the Big Bang physicists. And beyond that is a common understanding that nature is constantly being recreated, constantly evolving and renewing. Not only that, but it is a world in which humans too are constantly involved in

'Dear Ante
Hilere,
thak you for
the sduf.'




the **Big**
BANG
THEORY

making it better. Made with our own creativity, imagination and often with extraordinary levels of determination, we are truly 'godlike' creatures. And though sometimes through greed, laziness or ignorance, we do indeed spoil the environment around us, very often we do live up to that glorious ideal and actually make our world a better place. At best, we do fulfil that calling that Genesis describes to have beneficial 'dominion', or responsible stewardship of the earth.

So the stuff of our material world (eggs, buttercups, cobwebs, Lego and allsorts) is quite literally awesome. Of course, it is possible to look at the matter and feel the awe, but not attribute it to God. Clearly this is Stephen Hawking's position and the tension between his view and that of Jane Hawking emerges as a central thread in *The Theory of Everything*. For Jane, her sense of awe points her to something far beyond the matter itself. It is the experience described by Wordsworth, who sitting below the ruined Tintern Abbey spoke of 'a sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused'. It is that of William Blake who talked of seeing 'a world in a grain of sand and a heaven in a wild flower'. It is a sense that the whole physical matter of earth is God-breathed, and a belief that therefore it is possible to find within it an all-pervading atmosphere of God himself.

It is also the view of C. S. Lewis, who seemed to find this transcendence in some very unlikely objects and events. In his autobiographical work *Surprised by Joy*, he notes that as a boy he experienced a sense of awe in a toy garden made by his brother, in standing by flowering currant bushes in the summer sun, in reading *Squirrel Nutkin* and in studying Norse sagas. It was not until adulthood that he first began to open his mind to the possibility of Christian faith - he notes that it happened while going up Headington Hill on the top of a bus, and that it was in the sidecar of his brother's motorbike on a trip to Whipsnade Zoo that he first acknowledged Jesus Christ as the Son of God.



God moves in mysterious ways. Sometimes it seems that God creeps up on us serendipitously with something that will delight, or encourage, or release. I remember that at a difficult time in my life, it was not in the highly charged revival atmosphere of our church that I found God's touch. Rather it was in the gift of tickets for us to take our two young children to see the musical *Cats*. Somehow in the magic of the performance and our boys' reaction to it, I found something releasing that lifted me up and carried me through a whole year of tensions and doubt



And it was just yesterday, juggling a heavy workload and a houseful of visitors, that I experienced another unexpected magic moment as my great-niece ran through a field of buttercups at sunset wearing an enormous Mickey Mouse magician's hat! Yes, life is complicated and sometimes tough, but it is also filled with magic moments. The very 'stuff' of life is imbued with wonder, if we only take time out from our adult preoccupations to notice it!

So as we embark on this Lent course, let's hear it for mystery and magic and awe and wonder and looking at life through the eyes of a child!