

**Angels and Dust – Psalm 8**

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In 1977, the American astronomer and cosmologist Carl Sagan developed a ‘cosmic calendar’.<sup>1</sup> The calendar is an analogy – it compresses the history of the universe into a single calendar year (from midnight January 1 to 11.59pm 31 December). It’s a powerful way to glimpse the almost ungraspable scale of time since the Big Bang happened around 13.7 billion years ago. Here are some highlights: imagine that the Big Bang happened at midnight on January 1<sup>st</sup> (at New Year). Relative to that event, our solar system was formed on 11<sup>th</sup> August. The first life on earth emerged on 21<sup>st</sup> September and the first vertebrates appeared on 18<sup>th</sup> December. Dinosaurs evolved on 24<sup>th</sup> December, mammals on the 25<sup>th</sup>, and the first primates on the 29<sup>th</sup>. On December 31<sup>st</sup>, the last day of the year, the first hominids emerged 26 minutes before midnight; *homo sapiens* appear 44 seconds before midnight. Agriculture is invented 2.2 seconds before midnight, Abraham comes 0.9 seconds before midnight, and Jesus is born 440 milliseconds before midnight. The whole of Christian history, on this scale, has occurred in the blink of a human eye.

Well, I can’t personally vouch for the exactitude of each of these correlations, but you get the gist. If the psalmist was blown away thinking of humanity and its concerns when set against the vastness of the earth: ‘when I consider your heavens ... what are we that you should be mindful of us; what are we that you should care for us?’, then how much more does this ‘cosmic history’ seem to make our sense of our own

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<sup>1</sup> In his book, *The Dragons of Eden* (1977). I thank Peter Stork for access to an unpublished paper, ‘Coming to Terms with Big History: Evolutionary Timescales – Implications for Christian Theology and Education’, which contains much of the timeline I have used.

significance just comical, ridiculous. It is also deeply theologically challenging. We dare to believe that we matter. We dare to believe that we know (in our puny human lives) something of the reality that creates on this vast scale. We dare to claim that this reality, God, cares about us, dwells within and among us, that the birth as a human being of this God (440 milliseconds ago) has something to do with the meaning of this vast cosmic history. It's enough to give you vertigo! Are we just completely deluded?

In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the English mystic Julian of Norwich received a vision not unlike the cosmic calendar – except for two things. It was a vision in space rather than time; and, whereas in the cosmic calendar we start with our own littleness and experience the vastness of time that precedes us, Julian starts from the point of view of God and sees the fragility, the littleness of the universe. The Lord, she said, showed her ‘a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, on the palm of my hand, round like a ball. I looked at it thoughtfully and wondered, “What is this?” And the answer came, “It is all that is made”. I marvelled that it continued to exist and did not suddenly disintegrate; it was so small. And again my mind supplied the answer, “It exists, both now and forever, because God loves it”. In short, everything owes its existence to the love of God’. And she goes on to say: ‘We have got to realize the littleness of creation and to see it for the nothing that it is before we can love and possess God who is uncreated’.<sup>2</sup>

The calendar and the hazelnut are seen, seemingly, through different ends of a telescope. From one end, we see the immeasurable vastness and independent unfolding of the cosmos; from the other end, we see the whole as fragile and utterly dependent on what is not itself, the hand that sustains it. The Christian doctrine of creation recognises both these perspectives.

On the one hand, it knows that we human beings and our world are insignificant and utterly dependent on a vast web of conditions that we do not generate and cannot

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<sup>2</sup> Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, trans. Clifton Wolters (Penguin, 1966), p.68.

control. We are 'but dust' says the funeral service, our days are like the grass, we flourish like a flower of the field and when the wind goes over it, we are gone. That is not so different a view from the cosmic calendar. On the other hand, the doctrine of creation proclaims that everything that exists, is intended and loved into being by God – and whether this is the three-tiered universe of the psalmist with its earth, firmament and waters under the earth, or the 13.7 billion year old expanding universe of contemporary cosmology – all is held like a hazelnut in God's hand.

But isn't this just where the doctrine of creation gets difficult to swallow, in danger of sentimental anthropomorphism. How do we know that? Isn't this very picture of the way things are just a product of a limited human imagination which still seeks to make human beings somehow central to the whole enterprise. Yes, it acknowledges our vulnerability, our nothingness – yet it also imagines us 'little less than gods', specially called into relationship with the power that sustains the whole cosmos, intrinsic to the meaning of the whole, created in the image of the creator. What entitles us to say that?

Well, what entitles us to say *anything* about God? What entitles us to *any* view of ourselves as more than by-products of a vast and impersonal set of favourable chemical conditions? Our Christian tradition holds that we can speak about God, and about human beings in relation to God, only because God addresses us, God encounters us, God 'speaks'. This is what it means to say that we receive 'revelation'. We don't invent God as an explanation for our situation. Doctrine is like testimony, witness – it is the attempt to put into speech the truth of an encounter with the reality we call God (think of the way the prophets testify). How do we judge its truth? In the end, we can judge it only by whether it calls us more deeply into truthfulness, whether it gives life or deals death, whether it helps us to live more or less attuned to the way things really are. In the end it is a matter of judgement and trust, not certainty.

So where does this leave the doctrine of creation in the context of cosmic history? What difference does it make to affirm that this vast expanding cosmos is *created*, loved, that God ‘wills’ it to be and sustains it – and us along with it? Let me mention two things: humility and hope.

To know ourselves as created, not the source of our own life, is to know our ‘nothingness’ (as Julian expresses it). It is also a huge relief. I did not generate myself and I do not have to. My life comes to me as gift – I am invited to receive it, to rest in it. Humility means resting in the truth of our existence – not self-abasement or false modesty, but the relief of being ourselves. Remember O mortal you are dust, and to dust you will return. Mary Oliver puts it this way:

‘You do not have to be good.  
You do not have to walk on your knees  
For a hundred miles through the desert repenting.  
You only have to let the soft animal of your body  
love what it loves’.<sup>3</sup>

To be a creature is to be *placed* in the cosmos – alongside all the other creatures, *not* God, simply part of what Mary Oliver calls ‘the family of things’. Humility and authentic belonging go together. And although the cosmic calendar can make us feel our own insignificance, our puniness, I’m not sure that is the same thing as humility. Humility, in my experience, follows trust, being helped to let ourselves and others be; it arises when we know we are loved. Without it, we are inclined to snatch at life.

Which brings me to hope. To say that the cosmos is created, is held and sustained by love, is to affirm the ground for hope. Hope is not glib optimism that everything will always turn out well: it is the felt reality of the Spirit of God drawing all things into wholeness – *our* lives, but also (Paul says) the whole creation which is groaning in

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Wild Geese’.

travail. Hope is the energy that empowers us to live open-heartedly in the pain and suffering of the present time, trusting that beyond our pain is what Rowan Williams has called 'a more final fact, God's vulnerable love drawing us forward'.<sup>4</sup>

Is hope a delusion – a human projection onto an impersonal universe? Is creaturely humility and the belonging that goes with it simply *our* way of making the world our home? Maybe. But I think when we know them in our lives we see something more than that. Humility and hope liberate us and others, they deepen our perception, they generate life. And if they are dependent on the experience of *being* loved, then that seems to me grounds for trusting that as strange as it might seem, love *is* the ground of all being; that in some way beyond our understanding, a loving Creator is the Lord and giver of life.

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<sup>4</sup> *Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St John of the Cross* (Cowley Publications, 1991), p.22.