

GENESIS 1:1-23
GOD AND THE UNIVERSE

Prof Brian Cox – the latest TV star! He is a Professor of Physics, who has been presenting a BBC programme called *The Wonders of the Solar System* and it is just fascinating! He comes with such an enthusiasm to tell us about things we knew nothing about before, about parts of our planet that we didn't know and then telling us about places in the solar system that are even more extraordinary. He's been almost into space in a jet to show us the thin blue line of the atmosphere that keeps earth alive; in the last programme he was at the bottom of the ocean investigating strange fish that live in the dark; and then he has taken us to places like Triton (one of the moons of Neptune) and its seas of methane gas, or into rings round Saturn which are made up of tiny little piece of ice. It is hugely interesting and awe-inspiring to watch.

There were two things that he said in the first programme that I found particularly fascinating. First of all he spoke about what was there before the worlds began; he said that before the universe was created, there was simply chaos and nothingness and my mind went to the words at the beginning of Genesis 1. Then the second thing he spoke about was fact that the universe has order and structure to it, so that not a product of a random coming together but is the product of ordered processes that we can identify now and explore and discover and again my mind when to Genesis 1 with its order and structure. He went no further than describing the universe in these ways, but to describe a universe that came out of chaos and void and to describe a universe that has order and structure, I found immensely interesting.

Over these next 5 weeks, we're going to look at some big questions through the eyes of Genesis 1-3. Today, we look at the universe and God as Creator of everything that is; next week, ourselves, human beings and what makes us unique and special; then our relationship to the planet on which we live; then our relationships with other people and how we are meant to live in community with others; then finally our relationship with God and how that went wrong with what the Bible calls 'sin'. These are big and basic questions about life and the way we live; these are big and basic questions about ourselves and the world, about where God fits into that picture and how we fit into God's view of world. It will not be the last word on anything, but will open up for us some kind of Bible perspective on the world and life and relationships and faith.

What are we to make of Genesis 1? It seems to me that the best answer I've heard is that Genesis 1 is a hymn of praise to God as the Creator of everything. The man of faith looks at the world around him and rejoices that God has created everything and expresses that joy and wonder and faith in the words of Genesis 1. So we have a piece of theological writing that is centred on God the Creator. The mistake I think we make is to make Genesis 1 tell us *how* God created the world; for example, the writer of Genesis 1 would be astonished that Archbishop Ussher in the 17th century should work out that the earth was created in 4004BC, based on dates in Genesis and that the world was created in six days of 24 hours. Genesis 1 is not a scientific textbook and was never meant to be so, but is meant as a hymn of praise to God the creator. The mistake science makes is to look at Genesis 1 and think that the Bible lives in a different world. Genesis 1 tells us *why* the world exists; science is there to explore and discover *how* the world is the way it is.

"In the..." (1:1) This is no accident, nor just a manner of speaking; this is deliberately meant to show us where the focus of Genesis 1 lies; this is all about God; this is something God has done. There are all kinds of other bible pieces that simply reinforce this whole theme: the universe belongs to God because God is the creator

and stands at the centre of the whole thing. So in the New Testament Paul can write about Jesus as *"the image..."* (Col 1:15ff) At the heart of the universe, stands the figure of God and of His Son Jesus Christ; everything was made by Him and for Him. That is what Genesis 1 wants us to see; that is its testimony, a hymn of praise to the One who stands at the heart of all things; God is the source of life and everything else; God is somehow different from the world that He has created, but this is the work of His power.

What was there before? *"Now the..."* (1:2) This is a way of explaining the chaos that there was before God brought His creative power and energy to bear. Two words combine to describe something empty, void, formless, chaotic, what John Calvin described as "confused emptiness". Brian Cox talked about the chaos and formlessness of the gas cloud before the processes began that formed the world. 21st century science and Genesis 1 saying the same thing about the universe; there's something remarkable! Perhaps we should congratulate the insight that Genesis 1 has into the nature of the universe in which we live. God takes what was empty, formless, chaos and shapes it into the universe, heaven and earth, everything that we have and admire and of which we stand in awe.

"Then God..." (1:3) This is the first part in a whole list of the elements of the world: 7 times God speaks and He creates light and darkness, sky and sea, dry ground, plants and trees, sun, moon and stars, living creatures, fish, animals, birds; finally human beings, the crown of creation and more about us next week. By and large, the scientific world would describe the same kind of order of things in its way of explaining the processes that shaped the world, with perhaps one or two exceptions; there are still things we don't understand and perhaps never will understand because of the mysteries of the universe and science is always exploring and discovering new things all of time and none of that discounts the notion of God as creator. The Large Hadron Collider in Cern, Switzerland is trying to find what some have, controversially, called 'the God particle' and understand more about the processes that created the world. Nothing of that can take away from me the notion of God as the Creator and nothing can contradict Genesis 1, and its notion of the patten, structure and order of the universe.

Here's why: *"By faith..."* (Heb 11:3) To call God the Creator of the universe is a declaration of faith; it is faith that understands God as Creator and declares that truth to the world. It is one thing for Brian Cox and Genesis 1 to agree that there was chaos before and that the universe has order and structure to it; it is another step for Genesis 1 and the whole Bible then to say that God is the Creator of all of this. That is a declaration of faith in God and in His creative power; science cannot disprove God; science cannot tell me that God does not exist by explaining the processes at the formation of the world. For all of that explanation, there is still and will always be room for me to say that *"by faith..."* There is and always will be space for us to believe that God created the world and everything in it and that all of this belongs to God. Indeed by explaining to me the processes and intricacies of the world, simply serves to enhance my appreciation of the power and glory of God. Genesis 1 is a declaration of that faith and a way of expressing faith in the creator God.

6 times God saw that "it was good" and once that it was very good! This is God's seal of approval on the universe. Everything was in its place working to make the whole thing work according to plan; everything was reflecting something of the creator who made it. The world that God made was pristine and pure, was altogether good and perfect; there was nothing then to spoil it. All the chaos has gone; what was formless has been given form and shape; what was empty has been filled with the fullness of life; everything has been assigned its place, its meaning and its value. The world takes

its value from the God who created it; it is a precious place because God is its creator; it is a valuable place because God has made it. God has set His seal of approval on all of this and it is good.

So what? As some of you know, I love taking photos and a lot of photos I take are of plants, mountains, sunsets, the world I live in. Someone with artistic ability would paint what they see and catch something of the beauty and splendour of the world on canvas; I can't do that, but for me photography does same kind of thing. All of this should produce a sense of awe and wonder in us, at the beauty of the world and universe, at the scale of the thing, the bigness of it all, or the intricacy of something small; we've lost a sense of awe and wonder so often because we've lost the ability to take time to stand and stare at the world, to lift our eyes and look around us because we're so busy living life.

Then after a sense of awe and wonder, we go a step further and praise Creator of all this. "*O Lord,..*" (*Ps 8:1*) these words capture a sense of awe at the majesty of God who made the stars. Or a New Testament version of this is found in Romans 1: "*For since...*" (*Rom 1:20*) this is not just a sense of awe at the scale of the world or the beauty of the world, but worship to God because His power and glory are revealed in the scale of the universe. I don't profess to understand all that goes on in the Universe; I'm no scientist; but I do understand something of what the Bible is pointing us to and that is that the glory and power of God are revealed to us in the world around us. To the eye of faith, the sky and sea, stars and planets, trees and flowers, birds and animals in all their wondrous variety are telling us of the glory of their Creator.

"In the beginning, God..." These are powerful words, words that say so much about the world in which we live, the universe of which we are a part. There was chaos and emptiness; now there is beauty, order and structure; God the Creator did this; glory be to God. Science will explore this universe and describe the processes and reveal untold wonders and tell us how things happen and come about; faith says "I believe God created all of this." Nothing and no-one can deny the Bible's testimony, nor take away the view that faith gives me that God made all of this. Look at the world around you: at size and beauty of the hills, at the leaves and the bark of a tree, at the intricate beauty of a flower, at the behaviour of the birds and animals, at the stars and planets and find a sense of awe and wonder at what you see; then give glory and praise to God the Creator, for you see His eternal power and divine nature revealed. We did not make this world; it didn't happen by random chance; God is the Creator of all things; glory be to God.