

C. D'Angelo+

29 May 2022

St Thomas's Huron Street

9:30am/11:00am

“I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Well before the pandemic, as an aid in probing the Prologue to St John's Gospel where Christ is presented as the 'Word' in whom all things were created, I once shared the following illustration with those of you who were present here at St Thomas's at the time, although as I say this, it is amazing and wonderful, and truly a sign of the vibrancy and health of this place, that so many of you are new to the parish since then and so will have no idea what I am talking about!

On this, my last Sunday with you, I begin at the same place I did at Christmastime a number of years ago, since I know no better place to start, as we find ourselves invited by our readings today to consider once again the cosmic scope of Christ's presence and work in our midst; he who, as the psalmist puts it, is our 'Lord and King', who is presented by the Revelation to St John as the 'Alpha and Omega,' 'the first and the last', the 'beginning and the end.'

If you ever wanted an experiential way to gauge humanity's humble stature in cosmic terms or if you ever wanted to be astonished at the sheer vastness of the cosmos in which we live then, I know of no more trustworthy place to go than the Cosmic Pathway at the Museum of Natural History in New York City.

The Cosmic pathway is a walkable timeline that lays out the unfolding of the universe according to the discoveries of contemporary science. There, museum-goers are invited to walk the timeline of the universe, 13 billion years, down a winding pathway the length of a football field from start to finish, which is in total length 360 feet.

The pathway starts with the event of the Big Bang, the prevailing physical explanation for how the universe began to unfold as it has, each stride along the way accounting for 3 million years of cosmic history. Walking almost two-thirds of the way through, visitors will pass the marker for the emergence of the earth, 4.5 billion years ago; the beginnings of life on earth are marked 4.1 billion years remaining along the way; the extinction of the dinosaurs and 50% of the lifeforms on earth a mere 65 million years ago; and then at the very, very end, there is the emergence of the human era, a mere 200 000 years ago. Astonishingly, over the length of the football field representing the time the universe has existed, the span of human history is represented by just a hair's width and, of course, the span of any single human life covering only a minute fraction of that single hair's width.

Whether it comes through making a kind of cosmic pilgrimage through something like the cosmic pathway, or from some other source that causes us to reflect (such as that magnificent sunrise this morning with its colours of pink and orange and blue, or even the form and colour of a flower encountered on the way to church), the existence of the universe and our ability to reflect upon our place within it naturally raises fundamental questions about the ultimate meaning and purpose of the existence of all things, and our own lives in particular.

And, to honour this natural human response of wonder and astonishment at the existence of things surely means recognizing that we are capable of not just asking about *how* things came into existence (which, of course, leads us to explanations which are truly astonishing and mind-blowing in and of themselves, as the Cosmic Pathway lays out for us to encounter) but we are capable of asking *why* questions too. And so, the nature of the universe in which we live can point us to that fundamental *why* question that goes above and beyond scientific questions concerned with accounting for physical causes. Why is there something instead of nothing in the first place which allowed for the Big Bang to occur? And, what is the meaning of human life, represented by a hair's breadth of time within the 13 billion years of cosmic history? What are we doing here? Why did we emerge? And why are we the sorts of creatures as human beings who have minds capable of asking these questions?

In most recent times, it has become more and more common for people to believe that life itself is absurd; that there is nothing particularly mysterious to ponder in the fact that the universe emerged: it just did. Ultimately, there is no great mystery behind why human beings came into existence: we just did. And so, we just need to get on as best as we can in the face of this foundational absurdity, focusing on less ultimate explanations and seeking satisfaction at a more immediate level despite our sense of cosmic aloneness which ultimately frustrates our quest for meaning; our desire to ask why.

On the other hand, as we look at the world as we find it, searching for a sense of ultimate meaning we can also become disappointed. Our asking can lead us to form the alienating belief that ultimately things don't hang together with coherence at all; the belief that when we inquire into things much past the surface level, we will only find discordance and disappointment as opposed to some kind of satisfying explanation and underlying unity. Yet, as the Anglican Theologian Eric Mascall commented in the 1960s (*in his book entitled *The Christian Universe*), though it remains no less of an insightful comment in our culture which has grown increasingly secular since then, this sense of absurdity is the expected outcome when we search for our sense of meaning exclusively within the world. What has been lost in our time is a sense of transcendence. And, a sense of absurdity is the expected outcome when we try to look for the ultimate meaning of the world and human life within itself without

reference to a transcendent source because neither the world nor human life do make sense of themselves in and of themselves, on their own terms. Mascall urges us to see that the world and human life will only begin to make sense when we recognize that the universe receives its existence and meaning from a source that transcends the world, from the One who created out of all things, out of the overflowing wellspring of eternal, divine love itself, he who is the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.

But what is most surprising about this divine love is that, even as we acknowledge the smallness and relative insignificance of each of our own lives, let alone the whole of human history, in cosmic terms, realizing that we are but ‘dust and ashes,’ admitting that we are like a flower of the field that is here today yet gone tomorrow; nevertheless, the entirety of the coming of Christ is about God’s unfathomable and truly unimaginable love for humanity, not just as a collective mass; but a love that reaches down to touch and call each one of us as unique and precious individuals so that we can know our dignity and destiny as children of God adopted in Christ, rooted and grounded in the love of God which knows no bounds, nor end. And so, as I leave you in the coming days, my prayer is simply this: that the peace of God which passeth all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God and his son Jesus Christ our Lord, trusting that, the

blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost will be amongst us
and remain with us always. *Amen.*