

**Consider the heavens: Job 38: 1-7, 31-33 Psalm 8 John 1: 1-5 -
Preached on Sunday 25/08/19
8.00 & 11.00 at Christ Church, Tettenhall Wood
9.30 at Good Shepherd, Castlecroft**



‘Consider the heavens,’ the Psalmist invites us, ‘the moon and the stars the Lord has set in place.’ With the 50th anniversary of the first lunar landing, this year there’s been a lot considering of the heavens, and re-engaging with the ‘great quest’ to explore worlds beyond our own. Some have questioned whether the ‘one small step’ has really been a ‘giant leap forward,’ or just another dead end: no one else has visited the moon since 1972.



However, there have been new ways to consider the heavens – unmanned probes heading to the outer solar system unlocking mysteries of the silent spheres; the Hubble telescope penetrating distant galaxies and giving us pictures full of beauty from furthest reaches of space.



There’s still much to be said for considering the heavens, but perhaps the most important new insight from 1969 came from looking back at the earth from space and seeing it in its beauty and vulnerability, and sensing, for all the millions of other worlds out there, this is our one true and fragile home.



When the Psalmist says ‘consider the heavens’ it is to evoke awe and wonder, and then to look back to the earth and ask, ‘What is man?’ (to use language as in the 1960s) or ‘What are human beings?’ (in these more inclusive times). This translation of Psalm 8 began by addressing ‘O Lord our Governor,’ which may sound odd, but it directs us to the government of God both in our lives and in all that he has made, and that God calls us to govern on his behalf.

God gives us ‘dominion’ which is what kings have: Biblical kings were called to use their dominion not to exploit their people but to care, tend, nurture and protect them – to be a shepherd for them. What are humans called to do as they consider the heavens? We are called to shepherd all things living on earth.



The Lord spoke to Job out of the whirlwind, asking, “Who is this that clouds my design in darkness, presenting arguments without knowledge?” Job, in his suffering, had challenged God over the ordering of the universe, demanding moral laws that reflect the physical. In response God takes him on a whirlwind tour of the earth and the heavens, asking if he really thinks he knows better. It’s a sharp rebuke – a challenge to the hubris of human beings who think they know everything. On the other hand, the tone of these remarkable chapters is full of delight in creation, encouraging wonder and inviting investigation and exploration.



We'll hear more in future weeks: today we have just a few verses about morning stars 'singing' at their birth, and of the constellations of Orion and the Pleiades and the Bear being held in their shape.

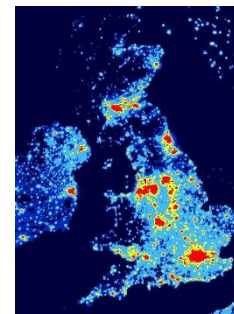
Look. Consider. Observe. Don't worship the stars (obvious to us, but a common danger in the ancient world). Be amazed at the order with which they're held – changeless, relative to each other, but appearing in different parts of the night sky. Worship the God who holds them there. The answer to 'clouding design with darkness' is not to sit with your eyes shut but to open them wide in search of the light of knowledge. In this respect the passage can be treated as an invitation to scientific investigation, to asking fresh questions and seeking fresh knowledge – to coin a phrase from another chapter of Job, 'to bring hidden things to light.' I believe the notion of an inevitable conflict between religion and science is a massive fallacy: both need the other if a full account is to be given of the earth and the heavens.



'In the beginning was the word,' John's Gospel famously begins, and it's a brilliant conceptual move. The Greek word for 'word' is 'logos,' which has huge philosophical background, but most helpfully the Word is the ordering principle behind the cosmos. 'Word' also stands for the Hebrew idea of Wisdom, [*hokma*] personified in Proverbs (and elsewhere) as a female figure at the side of God in creating the world. The Gospel writer sees Word and Wisdom embodied in the person of Jesus.

When I use the word 'creation' rather than 'nature,' I want to be clear, in case of any confusion, it does not imply any idea of seven-day creationism or any literalistic understanding of Genesis 1. Many Christians do believe that and I respect (although disagree with) their opinions. For me, seeing the hand of God the Creator is to recognise God's as the organising principle and underlying wisdom of the way things are. In Romans 1: 20, Paul says: 'For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and the sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature.' For a believer, to study how the world is made is to study the things of God. And I am reminded of the Einstein's comment: 'The most incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it is comprehensible.'

Consider the heavens, and we discover more about ourselves, about our planet and about the God who is behind all things. In this series on creation we'll be very keen to identify practical actions we can take to care for it better.



Today, I would commend doing a bit of stargazing! There's so much to see! But there's a problem: it's very hard to 'consider the heavens' when there's so much artificial light on earth. Light pollution is one of many forms of pollution that needs tackling. Theoretically, on a clear night and a wide horizon, in this country you should be able to see about 4,000 stars. In fact, round here, you do really well to see 100 or so.

Our towns and cities are flooded with vast amounts of outdoor lighting much of which is excessive, misdirected or inappropriate. Our urban areas have that constant glow, or halo effect: we're so used to it we don't notice until we're on holiday under darker skies, and are awoken to the great array above us. Light pollution has other negative effects: it disrupts eco-systems and confuses wildlife, disturbing migratory patterns and animal hibernations, and upsets the metabolisms for humans and animals alike. And of course, lighting up the sky is simply a waste of energy which otherwise would not need to be generated: one estimate said 50% of outdoor lighting is wasted. What can we do? 'Turn that light out' (to coin a phrase). Use lower energy bulbs. If you've got outdoor lights, make sure they're well directed (downwards) and turned off when not needed. If the council or Highways Agency save some money by reducing street lights, instead of complaining, think of all the ancillary benefits.



Consider the heavens: have an enquiring mind. Be inspired to make a difference on earth: turn out the lights!