

The Nativity of the Lord, 2021

The Star of Bethlehem is one of the most well-known elements of the Christmas story, and in a striking way it speaks to the cosmic significance of what was taking place in that little Bethlehem stable. After all, since the origins of humanity, people have been looking to the night sky for guidance and perspective.

Have you ever looked up at the stars at night and contemplated your own smallness? It's a healthy thing to do from time to time. For even though our world and our various preoccupations loom large to us in our day-to-day lives, compared to everything else out there in the universe, we're barely a blip on the map.

For instance, our Sun is more than a hundred times the width of the Earth, such that over a million planet Earths could fit inside the Sun. And the Sun is just one of at least 100 billion stars in our galaxy, the Milky Way. The Milky Way is so big that, even if we could travel at the speed of light (about 300,000 kilometres per second), it would still take 100,000 years to travel across it. And that's just our galaxy. Astronomers calculate that there are at least 100 billion galaxies in the observable universe, each one brimming with stars. In other words, there are more stars out there than there are grains of sand on all of Earth's beaches combined. And that's just what we know of – imagine how much more there is out there that we have no idea about!

So yes, universe: very big; us: very small. And in a similar way to how little ol' us compares to all that, so too the entire created universe—everything that exists—compares to Almighty God. I don't just mean in terms of size—because God is of course beyond the limits of time and space—but more so in terms of essence. God created (and continues to create) everything that exists, and in each moment he sustains all things in being. The very fact that we continue to exist in this very moment is a deliberate decision of God. If he ever ceased to sustain something in existence, at that very moment it would cease to be. So to summarise, us: *small*; universe: *enormous*; God: all-encompassing.

All of this is rather humbling, and the seeming insignificance of our planet and our species has led some people to question why God would bother with us at all. Given the immense vastness and astounding diversity of the universe, why would God care about little ol' us on this insignificant backwater planet? Could it really be that God chose for the great drama of salvation to take place *here*?

A rough equivalent of this objection was actually directed at Jesus himself in St John's Gospel, with his humble origins leading many to question whether he could really be who he claimed to be. When told about the discovery of the Messiah from Nazareth, a sceptical Nathaniel asked if anything good could come out of Nazareth (John 1:46). And later the chief priests and Pharisees told Nicodemus to look into the matter and see for himself: prophets do not come out of Galilee (John 7:52b).

And so part of the scandal of Christmas is that we Christians claim that God—the same God who created everything that is out of nothing, and who sustains all of creation at every moment—this same God chose to become a little baby in a seemingly insignificant patch of land, on a far-flung planet in the middle of nowhere. I mean, it might make for a nice story to tell children, but it's patently ridiculous... or so it seems.

Indeed, to this day, the very idea that God Almighty would lower himself to take on human form and become one of us is downright scandalous to Jews, Muslims, and others. The idea of the creator of the universe having body odour and needing to go to the toilet strikes them as being completely beneath his dignity.

And it's true – what we Christians believe about Christmas *is* shocking. It's been domesticated for so long via carols and nativity scenes that its bizarreness often doesn't strike us as much as it perhaps should. The Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar once put it this way: "Christmas is not an event within history (so much as it is) the invasion of time by *eternity*." The invasion of time by eternity! Almighty God, unbound by the limits of time and space, has entered definitely into human history. It's absolutely remarkable, and scarcely believable. If true, it's the definitive before-and-after moment, in that afterwards things would never be the same. You can see why Christendom felt compelled to take the birth of Christ as the start of our calendar (at least they made their best guess about when he was born with what they knew at the time).

And for those of us who've grown up in a culture influenced by Christianity, the implications of the Christmas event on how we view the world have been immense. For instance, most people in human history have seen existence as being split into two—the spiritual and the material—with the spiritual world being good and the material world being evil. But if Almighty God was prepared to take on human form and walk among us, he not only affirmed the dignity of our human bodies—that this weak and vulnerable flesh is somehow worthy of God—but he also affirmed the dignity of the entire material world.

For us Catholics, an obvious implication of this is the existence of the sacraments. I mean, if God is all-powerful, he could very easily zap us from above and accomplish what takes place in a baptism, and so forth. But instead he decided to have everyday material elements—things we can see, touch, feel, smell—be his instruments. It's as though God knew that in our weakness we would struggle to believe in things we can't see, and so in his graciousness he has chosen to use worldly, material elements—things like bread and wine and water and oil—as the conduits of the invisible realities taking place. But this only makes sense because God has already affirmed the dignity of the material world through his Incarnation, by becoming a human being.

In a similar way, the Christmas event can be seen as God's way of humbling himself so as to make it easier for us to enter into relationship with him. Rather than being an

abstract concept, God was now someone we could see and touch. He is a Person. In Christ we are given the definitive revelation of the face of God, and it is better than we ever dared to hope.

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At the end of the day, our belief that God cares about little ol' us on this insignificant planet, and that he came among us on a dusty scrap of earth 2,000 years ago perhaps shouldn't be that much of a surprise. After all, God's ways are not our ways, and thank God for that.

Our God has a *history* of choosing that which the world considers to be insignificant. The down-trodden Israelites to be his chosen people; David—the youngest Son—to be his great king; a poor peasant girl to be the mother of our Lord.

Ours is a Saviour who had an annoying habit of saying things like, “The first will be last and the last will be first.” Ours is a Saviour who continually turned conventional wisdom upside-down – who chose to be born in a manger rather than a five-star hotel, and grow up in a small out-of-the-way town.

As his disciples, we are called to care for all those whom the world considers to be insignificant, or unproductive, or burdensome, or disposable. As his disciples, we are called to care for the homeless, clothe the naked, feed the hungry, comfort the afflicted, visit those in prison, protect the unborn, offer dignity to the elderly, and be a voice for the voiceless, whether they be in the ghettos of our cities or the slums of faraway countries.

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Every birth of a child is an act of hope – hope, for instance, that this is a world worth bringing a child into. But the birth of Christ 2,000 years ago ushered in an altogether new kind of hope. Hope in the proclamation that the darkness of our world has been overcome by divine light. Hope from the revelation that the God of all creation cares infinitely for every little thing he has made, including you and me. Hope from the source of our salvation not being economic might or weapons of war, but a new-born baby born in a manger. And hope won from that fact that—thanks to the victory over the grave that Christ would win at Easter—death no longer has the final say.

This Christmas, let us strive to open our hearts to receive the hope that only the Lord can bring, and the hope that our hurting world is so hungry for. And with lives made new, may we share this hope with everyone we meet. Amen.