

Readings for the Third Sunday of Easter

14th April 2024

First Reading: Acts 3:12-19

Peter addressed the people, "You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk? The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him. But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you.

And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer. Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out."

Second Reading: 1 John 3:1-7

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.

Gospel: St Luke 24:36-48

While the eleven and their companions were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.

Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.

A Reflection for the Third Sunday of Easter

This week, the death was announced of the theoretical physicist, Professor Peter Higgs. Although he was often described as the 'Scottish' physicist, Higgs was born in Newcastle and grew up in the West Midlands. However, he spent most of his academic career at the University of Edinburgh. He became famous, late in life, for having predicted the existence of a new particle, named the Higgs boson, a theory that he and his co-workers put forward in 1964. However, it was not until in 2012, that the existence of this particle was confirmed by experiments at the Large Hadron Collider at CERN in Switzerland and the name of Peter Higgs hit the headlines.

Higgs and his colleague Francois Englert received the Nobel Prize in Physics in 2013, and he has also received many other awards and honours for his work. But why is the Higgs boson so important? Put in simple terms, it is a particle that allows other particles to have mass, without which nothing would exist as we know it. Due to its nature and properties, it was exceedingly difficult to detect. It took almost 50 years, and significant advancements in the technology available for particle physics, from the original theory to the final detection of the Higgs boson.

Leon Lederman, a physicist who wrote a book about the Higgs boson, called it 'the Goddamn particle', a reference to the frustration physicists experienced in that long period of trying to detect it. This was to be the title of his book, but his publishers shortened it to *'The God Particle'*, a name which has stuck. It was a serendipitous choice, given that the Higgs boson was critical in the first moments after the Big Bang, causing particles to come together to form atoms and ultimately the universe, stars, planets and life itself, allowing the world as we know it to come into existence.

Scientists sometimes refer to the moment of the Big Bang as 'the singularity', that moment that gave rise to our ever expanding, ever evolving universe in all its beauty and mystery, a process that Christians understand as the creative power of God. Another physicist, this one also a priest, John Polkinghorne, compared the resurrection of Jesus to the Big Bang. He said:

From that unique singularity [the Big Bang], the first creation sprang: not only the matter and energy, the stuff of which the world is made, but time and space themselves – and indeed all the hidden laws of nature, all these sprang from that single event, and expanded out to become themselves. So it is with the resurrection of Jesus – that new singularity, that astonishing explosive event from which the new creation springs into being in the midst of the old.

(I acknowledge Malcolm Guite's column in a recent edition of *The Church Times* for drawing this to my attention.)

As a physicist and theologian, he saw the divine purpose and the divine presence in all things, the new creation of God's kingdom bursting forth from that moment of resurrection.

In today's Gospel, the disciples find themselves a matter of hours after that new singularity, that moment of resurrection, as the risen Jesus stood among them on the evening of the first Easter day. This is Luke's equivalent of the passage we heard from John's Gospel last week, as Jesus shows himself to them, albeit this time without the personal experience of Thomas. The disciples are fearful and doubt the evidence of their own eyes, but are reassured by Jesus. And Jesus tells them that this is indeed a new beginning: at the end of today's passage '...repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his [Jesus] name to all nations, beginning from

Jerusalem.’ This is fulfilment of what he had said to them previously and he helped them to understand the Scriptures. In turn, they are to be the witnesses, to take the message forward.

The Book of Acts, volume 2 to Luke’s Gospel, is an account of these disciples and others doing just that: proclaiming the Kingdom of God, proclaiming the saving purposes of God, purposes that stretch all the way back to the dawn of creation, proclaiming repentance and forgiveness of sins, shaping the work of the church. The power for this task will come soon, in the person of the Holy Spirit. It will begin in Jerusalem – the place of Jesus’ pain-filled exodus on Good Friday and his triumphant resurrection and victory over death on Easter morning, the place of that second ‘singularity’ according to Polkinghorne – and it will extend to all nations.

Our passage from Acts today sees Peter, a little later, proclaiming that message of repentance and forgiveness. Peter is speaking in the Temple in Jerusalem after he and John had healed a crippled beggar in the name of Jesus, to the amazement of the crowd. (As an aside here, it is vital that we are clear that, when we read passages such as this one, we should not extrapolate and blame all Jews for the death of Jesus, any more than the current destruction and loss of life in Gaza is not the responsibility of all Jewish people, or the atrocities perpetrated by Hamas terrorists are not the responsibility of all Palestinians.) Today’s passage, Peter proclaiming repentance and forgiveness, is an example of the message starting to expand out from the centre following the second ‘singularity’ of the resurrection.

And we have another example in the reading from the first letter of John. This letter was written to an early Christian community, probably mainly non-Jewish, probably located in Asia Minor, modern Turkey. It shows the continued spread of the Gospel message out from the centre and is a letter of encouragement to the Christian life and of hope for the future. Again, it proclaims the message of repentance in the need to purify ourselves as Christ is pure, with forgiveness implicit in the reference to Christ taking away sins. Of course, it is not that we don’t ever make mistakes but that these don’t set the tone of our lives.

These three passages from Scripture are of the very beginnings of what we might refer to as the Big Bang of Jesus’ resurrection, the beginning of the new creation of God’s Kingdom. And perhaps we could liken those first disciples to the Higgs boson, the ‘God particles’ that enabled the expansion that followed. It’s not a perfect analogy, as I am sure God would have found another way if they had not fulfilled their role. But, since then, approximately 2000 years of the expansion of the Kingdom has elapsed. As John Polkinghorne went on to say ‘In cosmic creative term. 2000 years is as nothing. We’ve only just begun to see its implications, the way it changes everything...’