

Reflection - Understanding the Bible in an Age of Science Ian Fisher

I'm sure that many of you will have been surprised at my choice of reading this morning. With the title 'Understanding the Bible in an Age of science' and knowing my background as a geologist you might well have been expecting me to have picked something from the creation story so that I could compare the chronology of Bishop Ussher from the early 17th Century which gave the date of creation as 23rd October 4004BC with modern science that gives the age of the Earth as some 5000 million years or the universe as some 13.5 thousand million years. Yes, Bishop Ussher got it wrong, but he used the best scholarship available to him to make his calculation. Throughout history biblical scholars have used the best scholarship available to them to interpret the scriptures whether that is, science, social sciences, history, archaeology, languages philosophy or whatever. So rather than rehash arguments about creation versus evolution I wanted to think about science and more core, Christian beliefs. So I picked this story where we have one of Jesus' greatest miracles and one of his most important statements 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.' Also I have to admit that when I was looking up the readings for Lent 5 in my lectionary, I happened to light on the year A readings first, which means it was either serendipity or crass inefficiency.

The first thought is that different sciences would have different takes on the story. From a geological point of view the only thing we might comment on is the tomb and the nature of the rock formation it is in. Medical science might be interested in how Jesus brought Lazarus back from the dead but is more likely to point out that such things don't happen in the natural course of events, so we have to either classify it as 'a miracle' or claim it never happened at all. People in the biological sciences might be interested in the definition of life and by what Jesus might mean by saying he is 'the resurrection and the life'. The point is that science is a very broad category, even if we exclude the social sciences, psychology, sociology and the like we still have physics, chemistry, biology, geology, material sciences, computer science which are in turn broken down into sub-disciplines. I specialised in sedimentary geochemistry so wouldn't claim any great expertise in palaeontology (so don't ask me any detailed questions about dinosaurs). So if you hear that a statement has been made by a scientist you need to ask what sort of scientist and are their comments related to their area of expertise. Just because somebody has a degree in a science doesn't mean that they are qualified to comment on the spread of viruses, or climate change. We need the relevant science for the relevant question.

The relevant questions that the story of the raising of Lazarus and of Jesus identifying himself as 'the resurrection and the life' raises are about what it means

to be alive. Are we just a matter of chemical reactions, electrical impulses, is all that we are and do reducible to an equation? Can all our thoughts and feelings be mimicked by an algorithm? Is it at all possible that that we can distil down the essence of creativity and so program a computer to paint an original masterpiece or write poetry? Well you can find computer generated poems online and AI generated art has been sold at Christies. But are they any good? The one thing that those researching artificial intelligence agree on is that the human brain is an incredible bit of kit, some think it can be replicated others don't. And an AI brain would it be alive? Well it depends on how you define life and there is currently no consensus definition.

When Jesus says he is 'the resurrection and the life' we know that he is talking about a life which is about more than science does or could say about life. At this point we go beyond science we ask questions about what life is for, why are we here, what is the purpose of the universe. If the physicists find a grand unified theory which combines relativity and quantum mechanics that enables them to express the universe is an equation it won't tell them 'why'. Nor does evolution have a goal as the Palaeontologist Stephen J Gould pointed out in his book 'Wonderful Life' if we re-ran evolution it would almost certainly turn out differently. We humans may be more complex, but we are equally as evolved as a horse a dog, a fly or a bacterium.

When Jesus bought Lazarus back to life the Lazarus was subject to the laws, laws of science, his feet stayed on the ground, he couldn't walk through walls if you pricked him, he bled and he was destined to get sick and die once again. They knew all this in the first century, we are lucky that in our time we know more about gravity, about the composition of matter, about human physiology about disease and it causes. Each year science advances our knowledge of the world and the universe. In the broadest sense we know of how the Universe developed from the start and we have some ideas of how it will end, and (warning plot spoiler) none of the end scenarios looks good for the human race. We certainly don't know everything like what 85% of the universe is made of. But the gaps in sciences knowledge aren't the places where we go looking for God, because God is beyond science and that God can still be found in the pages of the Bible.

Questions

- 1 What do you understand a scientist to be?
- 2 My scientific studies affect the way that I reflect on the scripture, what aspects of your life colour your interpretation of scripture?
- 3 Are there such things as miracles?
- 4 What does Jesus being 'the resurrection and the life' mean?

