

ALISTER MCGRATH

Paley Memorial Sermon

A sermon preached at a service of Holy Communion at Carlisle Cathedral on Sunday, 23 May 2005, by Revd Professor Alister E. McGrath, DD, FRSA

Th'unwearied Sun from day to day
 Does his Creator's power display;
 And publishes to every land
 The work of an Almighty hand.

Thus Joseph Addison in 1712, concluded an article in the *Spectator* magazine on the intellectual and spiritual excitements of natural theology with an 'Ode' which – perhaps rather to its author's surprise – has found its way into many of the hymn books of the English language. Addison's prose and poetry alike took the form of a reflection on Psalm 19:1 – 'the heavens declare the glory of God.' The words pose a question which continues to intrigue us, perhaps because it has never been definitively answered: to what extent do the wonders of the natural world – whether we think of the starlit night sky that Addison could see so clearly from his rooms in Magdalen College, the rainbows that so excited the Romantic poets, or the biological vistas known to William Paley through his reading and explorations of England's Lake District – point beyond themselves, to something or to someone beyond the world that we can see, hear and touch?

Since history began, people have been enthralled by the wonders of nature. Few have failed to be overwhelmed by the solemn stillness of the star-studded heavens. The great astronomers of ancient Assyria and Babylon traced the slow movement of the planets through the heavens, wondering if they might somehow shape the mystery of human destiny. The ancient Greeks saw patterns in the stars, and named these constellations after their heroes – Orion the great hunter, Pegasus the flying horse, and Andromeda the doomed heroine.

Yet not all experienced a sense of wonder when contemplating the starlit heavens. For some, the lonely pinpoints of light against the dark velvet of the night speak of loneliness and pointlessness. Those same stars have witnessed generations rising and falling. Human empires rise and fall; the same stars shone down on them all. The same stars shone while generation after generation flourished, and passed into the dust. Like Tennyson's 'Brook', they remind us of the brevity of human life:

For men may come and men may go,
 But I go on for ever.

The heavens thus heighten our sense of transience, forcing us to ask whether this life is all that we can hope for. Is there more to life than we know? And can the silent witness of those distant stars help us to find it?

'The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám', one of the finest works of Persian literature, also gives expression to the deep sense of despondency evoked by the heavens. We are powerless to change our destiny. The sun, moon and stars declare both our transience and apparent inability to change our situation.

And that inverted bowl we call 'the Sky',
Whereunder crawling cooped we live and die,
Lift not thy hands to It for help – for It
Rolls impotently on as Thou or I.

The stars can thus be a melancholy reminder of the vastness of the universe, and our utter insignificance within it. Perhaps the slowly orbiting planets are the secret masters of our destiny, influencing us in ways we could not even begin to understand, let alone to resist. The stars may evoke an unspeakable sense of yearning for something that seems unattainable – a sense of longing for something significant, which the night sky can heighten, yet not satisfy. Maybe the stars point to something mysterious, something unfathomable, which somehow lies beyond them. Something seems to lie beyond the whispering orbs of the night. But what? And how is it to be known?

Questions like these have intrigued people since the human race began to think. Maybe these are pointless questions, the musings of people who cannot cope with the sobering thought of mortality and meaninglessness. Yet maybe we are meant to think such thoughts. Maybe the spectacle of the night sky is meant to trigger off such patterns of reflection within us – and by doing so, open the door on a new way of thinking and living. We seem to have been created to ask questions – to try to make sense of what we see around us, and how we fit into the greater scheme of things.

As we reflect on the wonder of the universe, we find questions being raised in our minds that both challenge and excite us. There seems to be some inbuilt longing for purpose which drives us to look for clues to the meaning of the universe. We contemplate the glory of the night sky, wondering if the silent beauty of the stars might cast light on the riddle of human destiny. Is our real homeland out there somewhere, beyond this world? We appreciate the beauty of a glorious sunset, while wondering if the sense of beauty it awakens within us is somehow a pointer to another and more wonderful world that we have yet to discover. Shelley put it like this in a poem of 1824:

The desire of the moth for the star,
Of the night for the morrow,
The devotion to something afar
From the sphere of our sorrow.

We might thus listen as a distinguished astronomer lectures on the remarkable ordering of the cosmos, and wonder if this might lead us to discover the mind of God. The Second World War pilot and poet John Gillespie Magee (1921-41) saw flying high above the earth as an image of a deeper journey:

I have slipped the surly bonds of earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings...
Put out my hand and touched the face of God.

Might our hopes and fears allow us to do the same? Or are we like the moth who feels drawn to the distant light of a star, but has no hope of ever reaching this distant and lonely goal?

That certainly was the view of William Paley, who died two hundred years ago, and who we celebrate and commemorate this morning. Paley, formerly Archdeacon of Carlisle and canon of this cathedral church, is remembered chiefly for one of the most potent images of the nineteenth century – namely, God as a watchmaker. Paley’s *Natural Theology; or Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature* (1802) had a profound influence on popular English religious thought in the first half of the nineteenth century, and is known to have been read and admired by the young Charles Darwin, while a student at Christ’s College, Cambridge.

The opening paragraphs of Paley’s *Natural Theology* set out the analogy for which Paley became famous.

In crossing a heath, suppose I pitched my foot against a *stone*, and were asked how the stone came to be there. I might possibly answer, that for any thing I knew to the contrary it had lain there for ever; nor would it, perhaps, be very easy to show the absurdity of this answer. But suppose I had found a *watch* upon the ground, and it should be inquired how the watch happened to be in that place. I should hardly think of the answer which I had before given, that for any thing I knew the watch might have always been there. Yet why should this answer not serve for the watch as well as for the stone; why is it not admissible in the second case as in the first?

Paley then offers a detailed description of the watch, noting in particular its container, coiled cylindrical spring, many interlocking wheels, and glass face. Having carried his readers along with this careful analysis, Paley turns to draw his critically important conclusion:

This mechanism being observed – it requires indeed an examination of the instrument, and perhaps some previous knowledge of the subject, to perceive and understand it; but being once, as we have said, observed and understood, the inference we think is inevitable, that the watch must have had a maker – that there must have existed, at some time and at some place or other, an artificer or artificers who formed it for the purpose which we find it actually to answer, who comprehended its construction and designed its use.

The analogy, like most of Paley’s work, was borrowed from other sources. Paley had ruthlessly plagiarised John Ray’s writings in his quest for a new natural theology. Though a derivative and old-fashioned thinker, Paley was nevertheless an excellent communicator. Nature, Paley argued, shows signs of ‘con-

trivance' – that is, purposeful design and construction. Nature bears witness to a series of biological structures which are 'contrived' – that is, constructed with a clear purpose in mind. 'Every indication of contrivance, every manifestation of design, which existed in the watch, exists in the works of nature.' Indeed, Paley argues, nature shows an even greater degree of contrivance than the watch.

Now we need to be clear that this famous image is only one of many elements – although by far the best known – in Paley's cumulative argument for the plausibility of a theist world-view. Although his *Natural Theology* is almost entirely devoted to the exploration of the biological world, we also find a brief – and somewhat unconvincing appeal – to astronomy. Alongside this, we find Paley setting out another line of argument – namely, that the existence and shape of the laws of nature points to a lawmaker or a lawgiver. Naturally, Paley interprets this in a theistic direction. While this does not seem to have been his preferred mode of argument, it is nevertheless this line of thought that may prove to be of longer-term significance.

Paley's vision of the specific manner in which God's creative activity was to be conceptualised actually seems to have caused far more difficulties than it solved. Even before the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, John Henry Newman had castigated Paley's approach as a liability that ought to be abandoned before it discredited Christianity. 'I do not hesitate to say', he wrote, 'that, taking men as they are, this so-called science tends, if it occupies the mind, to dispose it against Christianity.' For Newman, Paley's image of God as the divine artificer of the world reduced God to a purely mundane level. Where was there to be found any sense of transcendence, mystery or glory in such a notion of God? Paley's image might appeal to banalities of human reason. But what about the imagination? Or the emotions? A concept of God which failed to excite the human imagination – for example, by moving us to worship or prayer – is seriously deficient. For Newman, Paley tended to proclaim a somewhat cold, distant, mechanical God, a lawgiver rather than a saviour. One might nod one's head in agreement to Paley's arguments, before passing on to some other matter. For Newman, any authentic vision of the Christian God arrested people in their tracks. God, if truly known, compelled a response of worship, adoration and existential transformation. Paley, he believed, left people with little more than a vague sense of intellectual satisfaction, to be compared with that experienced after the successful completion of a crossword puzzle.

Yet the real problem with Paley, of course, came from the biology of Charles Darwin, rather than the rather less accessible theology of John Henry Newman. As Darwin's views on natural selection became increasingly accepted within western intellectual culture, their implications for Paley's approach could hardly be overlooked. Paley's argument depended on a static world-view, and simply could not cope with the dynamic world-view underlying Darwinism. While we rightly criticise Paley for what we now tend to see as a mis-

guided defence of the grounds of faith, there can be no doubt of his effectiveness in shaping broad cultural perceptions. Indeed, as a historian, I might suggest – although I would be very hesitant to go further than this – that the perception that Darwinism undermined faith was shaped to no small extent by Paley’s success as an apologist, which unwittingly (and, I think, unwisely) linked the public credibility of faith with a very specific understanding of the notion of divine creation.

Paley’s most famous recent critic is, of course, Richard Dawkins. In his *Blind Watchmaker* (1987) – the title of which, of course, takes issue with Paley’s famous image – Dawkins relentlessly points out the failings of Paley’s viewpoint, and the explanatory superiority of Darwin’s approach, especially as it has been modified through the neo-Darwinian synthesis. Dawkins himself is eloquent and generous in his account of Paley’s achievement, noting with appreciation his ‘beautiful and reverent descriptions of the dissected machinery of life’. Without in any way belittling the wonder of the mechanical ‘watches’ that so fascinated and impressed Paley, Dawkins argued that his case for God – though made with ‘passionate sincerity’ and ‘informed by the best biological scholarship of his day’ – is ‘gloriously and utterly wrong’. The ‘only watchmaker in nature is the blind forces of physics’. Paley is typical of his age; his ideas are entirely understandable, given his historical location prior to Darwin. But nobody, Dawkins argues, could share these ideas now. Paley is obsolete. And while Paley has his supporters within some more conservative sections of American Protestantism, that seems to be the consensus of the day.

Yet the question of whether reflection on the natural world points to belief in a god remains immensely important. As we commemorate Paley, we are surely right to insist that the questions he asked are right, legitimate and ultimately important. Paley’s argument is that we are unable to offer a convincing explanation of the way the world is without proposing a divine creator. Today, the force of the biological components of that argument, on the basis of the evidence that he offered and believed to be conclusive, is much reduced – some would say to vanishing point, others holding out at least the possibility of restatement, while being aware of the difficulties that it must face. Religious apologists have tended to adopt positions which can be broadly grouped under two headings: the ‘God of the gaps’ approach, and the ‘big picture’ approach.

The first – the God of the gaps approach – which one tends to find in more popular writings, argues that science is unable to offer a complete account of the world. There are gaps in our understandings. These explanatory deficits, it is argued, can be remedied by an appeal to God. Now I have offered a caricature of the approach, mainly because I am so persuaded of its deficiencies that I would not myself care (or dare) to defend it. It is intensely vulnerable, mainly because the inexorable advance of the scientific enterprise means that gaps tend to get filled. This approach inevitably entails that God is squeezed into smaller and fewer gaps.

Paley himself is clearly vulnerable at this point, even though some of his

more generous critics pointed out that at least some elements of his approach could be salvaged through judicious refocusing of some of its aspects. As James Moore has shown in his massive and definitive account of Christian responses to Darwin, there were many who believed that the obvious deficiencies in Paley's account of biological life – most notably, the notion of 'perfect adaptation' – were actually corrected by Darwin's notion of natural selection.¹ Yet as time passed, these views retreated into invisibility. The approach was seen to have failed. And who wanted to be associated with such a failure?

Yet there is a second approach, which I believe to be much more resilient and interesting. This builds on a point which we find in many twentieth-century writers, such as Albert Einstein and Ludwig Wittgenstein, to name but two. It builds on some themes we find within Paley's analysis, even if he does not give them the prominence that we might now wish he had. Paley's emphasis on the regularity of the world, especially its apparent conformity to laws of nature, holds the key to a restatement of his approach, avoiding its weaknesses, while reconnecting it with older, wiser approaches to the question of God's creation of the world. On this approach, it is the intelligibility of the universe itself that requires explanation. It is not so much the gaps in our understanding of the world, as the very comprehensiveness of that understanding, which requires an explanation. *Explicability itself requires explanation.*

The fact that we can actually grasp at least something of the 'big picture' – rather than our inability to comprehend any of its aspects – is the decisive factor in commending the Christian world-view. It does not compel us to accept this viewpoint; indeed, some might raise questions as to whether faith could be based upon such an approach. It is, however, immensely suggestive, taking its place among many other such suggestions which accumulate to shift the balance of argument. For there is no doubt that such an approach to the ordering of the world resonates strongly with the Christian faith, so that one already committed to such a world-view would find it reinforced by what is observed within the natural order. Let us remember, after all, that Thomas Aquinas, probably the greatest scholastic theologian, writing back in the thirteenth century, was quite clear that one could not prove the existence of God by argument (*demonstratio*). What one could do, according to Aquinas, was to identify 'reasons' (*rationes*) which suggested this, or which provided an explanatory framework for these observations. And that is surely what we find here – *post hoc* confirmation of a faith which is elicited on other grounds by other factors, yet finds its validation partly in its capacity to explain what we see around us.

This second approach is, in my view, much to be preferred. It avoids the apparently fatal problem of historical erosion: what apparently cannot be

¹ Moore, J. R. *The Post-Darwinian Controversies: A Study of the Protestant Struggle to Come to Terms with Darwin in Great Britain and America, 1870-1900*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1979).

explained today, can be explained tomorrow. But my reasons for preferring this option are not ultimately pragmatic: they are rooted in my fundamental conviction, rooted in and energised by Christian theology, that belief in God is possessed of immense explanatory vitality. 'I believe in Christianity,' wrote C. S. Lewis, 'as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.'² In concluding his essay 'Is theology poetry?' with these words, Lewis was highlighting one of the many difficulties associated with a scientific world-view – that it was, in effect, obliged to presuppose its conclusions. The ordering of the world and our capacity to discern and represent this demands to be explained, certainly; it is also a fundamental assumption of the scientific method itself. For Lewis, the Christian faith offered illumination of the world which permitted it to be seen in a certain way – and by being seen in this way, to open up ways of exploring and examining it which resonated with reality.

I must conclude. In this sermon, I have sought neither to make Paley out to be a fool, nor some kind of academic hero. I believe that he was neither. As I read his works, he was a rather pious, socially conservative person, who enjoyed reading books written by other people about the sciences, and thinking about the deeper implications of what he read. He sought to make connections across disciplines, and above all, to link the quest for knowledge with the quest for wisdom. And at least in that, he has much to say to us today. Yet perhaps Paley's significance is best summarised in a slogan: 'It's OK to ask the question "Why?"' In an age which rules this question out of order from the outset, Paley insists that we must be free to ask why things are the way they are. Or why there is anything there at all. One can see immediately why some wish to exclude any such thoughts. Yet being able to ask them has the potential to open doors on some of the most important questions of life – questions that might just have answers with the power to transform and transfigure human existence.

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² Lewis, C. S. 'Is theology poetry?', in Lewis, C. S. *Essay Collection*, London: Collins (2000), p. 21.