

DAVID WILKINSON**When faith and science meet**

a sermon preached on BBC Sunday Worship 19th June 2016

Just a few weeks ago here in Durham University a physicist embraced me with tears in his eyes. This doesn't often happen and rarely with physicists! It was the day of the announcement of the detection of gravitational waves by the Advanced Ligo experiment. Neither of us had any involvement in the discovery, but as scientists and fellow Christians we shared a sense of awe at it. A hundred years ago Albert Einstein, in his suggestion that the space and time of the universe should be seen rather like a stretchy fabric, suggested that an event where large masses merged should send out ripples across this space-time – but then said it would be almost impossible to detect. Yet by using lasers we detected the merging of two black holes by seeing a ripple of the stretching of space equivalent to a fraction of the diameter of a proton!

Einstein himself once said, 'The most incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it is comprehensible'. Why does the mathematics of our minds resonate with the mathematics of the universe in such a powerful way? This kind of question does not prove God but raises the possibility of a deeper story to the universe. It is not the only one which connects with theology and philosophy – why for example is our universe so right for life to exist, what Paul Davies calls the 'Goldilocks Enigma', or why do we encounter such a sense of awe that under the complexity of the universe are such simple and elegant laws?

This conversation between science and the big questions of existence is a far cry from popular pictures of science and faith in conflict. Simplistic presentations of Galileo and Darwin attacking the Bible or being attacked by the church may be widespread but do no justice to the complexity of the long history of the way science and faith have both enriched and questioned each other.

In this morning's Bible readings from Exodus 31, Psalm 8 and Colossians 1: 1-20 we get a glimpse of the affirmation of science and technology as a gift from God. The ability and intelligence to be artistic in the craft of producing the ark of the covenant is given by God. The psalmist observes the night sky and this leads to big questions of human existence in the light of a Creator God.

It was in part this affirmation of technology and observing the universe that God had created that led to a rich seam of Christian involvement with science. Here in the north east of England, the Venerable Bede was not only a skilled biblical scholar and historian of the church, but also

made valuable contributions to early astronomy in the eighth century. His interest in the regularity of the natural world is evident in much of his writing, His book *On the Reckoning of Time* is the earliest comprehensive treatment of measuring time and constructing a calendar. He included an explanation of how the Earth was a sphere and how this influenced the changing lengths of daylight. Perhaps this fascination with the natural world underlies his ability to use it in speaking about Jesus Christ, beautifully portrayed his poem 'Christ is the morning star'.

The same fascination has been seen in many scientists in history and today whose Christian faith shaped their view of the world and encouraged their science. From Galileo to Michael Faraday, to the likes of the theoretical physicist John Polkinghorne, their faith in a Creator God encouraged them to observe and experiment with the universe. This basis of empirical science came from the humility that, as God was free to create as God wished, then the only way to find out how he had created was to observe it. But they also had confidence that behind the complexity and sometimes confusing nature of the universe were some comprehensible and universal laws which reflected this one God's order and faithfulness.

That is why for those of us who are scientists and Christians the passage from Paul's letter to the Colossians is so important. Paul says that in Christ 'all things cohere' or 'all things hold together'. This is for me a Christian affirmation of science or, as my colleague here at Durham Tom McLeish, Professor of Physics, stresses, a theology of science. It indicates that the scientific laws, however vaguely we understand them, find their origin and continued existence to the creative work of God in Christ. The unity and regular patterns we see in the universe and by which we work with the universe in technology are there as a gift from God.

That means that to be a scientist or engineer, either in research or in teaching, is a Christian calling. Too often the Christian church has made the mistake of believing that God only calls people to be missionaries or priests. Churches need to rejoice over those students who are studying science, those who teach science in schools or universities and those who are pushing the frontiers of science, whether it be in artificial intelligence, gene editing or the search for extraterrestrial life. Such things may raise important questions for faith, and faith may want to raise important questions back to the science – but I am convinced that the conversation is not to be feared and will be fruitful.

Here at St John's College in Durham University we are currently running programmes to support such a conversation, from helping senior church leaders to encounter the excitement of cutting edge science to awards to local churches to use the expertise of scientists in their congregations to help church and community engage with big questions.

By these initiatives we want to encourage the church to value science.

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As the great astronomer Kepler once said, ‘Science is thinking God’s thoughts after him’. The works of Bede were so important that a monk who no doubt rejoiced in the name of Notker the Stammerer, wrote that ‘God, the orderer of natures, who raised the Sun from the East on the fourth day of Creation, in the sixth day of the world has made Bede rise from the West as a new Sun to illuminate the whole Earth’. We likewise give thanks today for the gift of scientists and science.

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