

The James Webb Telescope and the Lens of Baptism

Whilst we were all preparing our Christmas turkey something really important was taking place in French Guiana in South America. NASA, the US space agency launched the James Webb telescope. I'm not really into astronomy, if I'm honest, it is all a bit beyond me but the launching of the James Webb telescope on Christmas Day is going to be a good news story for 2022 and the images of space that we will see will broaden our understanding of the heavens in ways which we cannot yet comprehend. The telescope, which at the moment is about halfway on its journey, will stop about one million miles from earth and if everything works as it should, it will be able to detect small amounts of infra-red light which originated soon after the Big Bang occurred giving insight into a period of time when the first stars were created. It will reveal to us new secrets of space and over the next ten-year period will transmit images of space back to earth which we have never seen before. In 2022 our knowledge of space will be transformed as we discover new information on the formation of stars and planets and a myriad of other material as yet unknown to us. The heavens will communicate with us in new ways that will change our understanding and our thinking about the universe, the beginnings of life and everything.

It is worth reminding ourselves that in ancient times, astrology, the reading of the stars to foretell the future, was taken very seriously and understood by many as a way in which Almighty God communicated with humanity. In the words of Haydn, "The heavens are telling the glory of God..." But not just the glory of God, the lunar calendar was used as a tool with which to give meaning to life. The Magi who travelled to Bethlehem are part of a complicated narrative within the Gospel text, found only in Matthew, they would have been versed in astrology being influenced by the Zoroastrian religion of the East. If you hold to the tradition of the Church that they each came from different parts of the globe, Balthazar from Ethiopia, Melchior from Persia or modern-day Iran, and Caspar from India – then following the astrological calendar, they would have set off on their journey on different days. The Christmas card depiction of the three travelling together on their camels is at odds with the astrological principal that there are good days and bad days for travelling depending on which direction you are coming from. So, if you are travelling north from Ethiopia, it would be better, according to the stars if you travel on a Monday or Wednesday. But if you are travelling east then you might be better to travel on a Saturday. You get the idea that astrology impacted upon daily life. It was, and for some still is, a determining tool for ordering daily activity. For our Hindu brothers and sisters, astrology continues to play quite a big part in translating the divine plan for human beings.

Within the Church's calendar, during the liturgical season of Epiphanytide, we celebrate the baptism of Jesus. John the Baptist pours water over the head of Jesus and in doing so signifies the beginning of Jesus's ministry. From now on Jesus will begin to teach those around him and those he encounters in the public square about a pattern of life that fits more within keeping with that which God requires. His baptism symbolises the dying to self and the rising to a new way of living that emphasises the place of mercy and forgiveness of ourselves and of each other. Water itself symbolises life and the gift of life emphasises the value of the gift with which each one of us is blessed and which we treat as sacred – respecting this God-given gift within each other. We link our own baptism with the baptism of Jesus – and in doing so we take a stand to do our best to form our lives in a Christ-like shape. Baptism is our telescope through which we see the world in which God has set us.

The James Webb telescope is going to transform our way of thinking. And we must give thanks to God for the work undertaken by NASA in bringing this about. The stars and the reading of stars to predict the future were used by the Magi and the Gospel writers as a way of interpreting the significance of the birth of the Christ-child. Today we use the lens of our baptism as a reference point to help us to determine how we should live and be in the today and in the tomorrow.

“...and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven. ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’” (Luke 3:22)

Our prayer must be that as God the Father was pleased with God the Son, so God will be equally pleased with the way in which we live out the promises made at our own baptism. As the James Webb telescope reveals new facts to us about space so we must be challenged to discover new ways in which God is calling us to live out our lives.

The heavens are telling the glory of God. Lives lived through the lens of baptism tell the glory of God too.

Revd Mark Bailey

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