

Windsor Conference on Faiths and the Environment, Nov 2-4, 2009
Many Heavens: One Earth

Speech by the Bishop of London, Rt Revd Richard Chartres, to the Windsor Celebration, Nov 3, 2009

“I was breasting a hill near to the coast. When I reached the summit and saw the fields stretched out below and a village nestling in a hollow and beyond, the sea, such a weight of glory overwhelmed me that I was forced to my knees. I was being addressed and was a part of the glory and I broke into spontaneous praise.

One of the priests of the English Church, Thomas Traherne, declared that “You never enjoy the world aright till the sea itself floweth in your veins, till you are clothed with the heavens and crowned with the stars... Till you can sing and rejoice and delight in God, as misers do in gold and kings in sceptres, you never enjoy the world.”

Genuine religion arises from Annunciation, being addressed by the Other, rather than making an idol of some projected idea or emotion of our own. Adam where are you? Abraham leave your household gods and begin your journey to a land you do not know. Moses, put off your shoes, this is holy ground. He was addressed from the bush which burned but was not consumed. The boy Samuel called when the rumour of God was very faint. Hail Mary full of grace the Lord is with thee. The bible is full of annunciations. God speaks through His Word and through his book of nature.

I believe that we are being addressed in our generation by the glory and the distress of the earth.

The Bible sets the human story and the sacrifice of Christ against a huge cosmic canvas.

In our own day we have been given a vivid account of the cosmic drama by contemporary science. We seem to be involved in a five act drama. In a series of irreversible transformations the history of the universe has unfolded from its beginnings about 13.7 billion years ago. Act I is the galactic story. Act II is the formation of planet Earth just far enough away from our sun to avoid frying and not so far as to become a sterile rock. Act III is the story of the birth of life on Earth with Act IV concerned with the story of homosapiens as we emerged some 160,000 years ago from Africa to colonise the globe.

The evolutionary story has a material and physical aspect but also a psycho-spiritual aspect. We are as the Bible and Darwin agree creatures of the dust – star dust in fact; we are participants in a web of life; humans are the universe reflecting on and celebrating life in conscious self awareness.

The problem is that the knowledge which has delivered such great power over the earth has been generated from an “objective” way of observing the world which has tended to divorce us from a sense of inner connectedness with nature. Dominance has been substituted for interconnectedness and we have come to see the earth in a god-forsaken way as a mere theatre for human willing and exploitation, with a diminished awareness that our well being is involved in the well being of the earth.

Act V of our five act drama is just beginning and it will decide whether humanity is yet another dead end in the unfolding story of life or whether promise will predominate and peril will be surmounted. The President of the Royal Society recently published a book about the prospects for

the human race worryingly entitled “Our Final Century” – without a question mark – although he has ascribed this to a publisher’s error.

Shall we develop the wisdom to channel the power we have acquired from the scientific knowledge and discoveries of the 20th century? Where indeed, to quote T.S.Eliot, is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge and the knowledge we have lost in information?

In the book of Revelation, great multitudes, from all nations and kindreds, people and tongues, stand before the throne and cry out “Salvation/deliverance belongs to God”. Too often we have seen salvation exclusively in terms of individuals. That is of course vital but the Bible shows us the individual person realistically as someone always involved in relationships with other human beings and with the world of nature. We can perish in a world and a human community that is atomised but we are saved together.

It is especially good to be involved in an initiative like Many Heavens: One Earth which builds unity between faiths as we look together in the same direction at a common human challenge.

At the end of the Divine Comedy, Dante describes his vision of divine reality – “all the scattered leaves of the universe bound by love in one volume”. ”

End.