

Joy: The Joy of Wonder, Simplicity & Love - 5th March 2023

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 05 March 2023

Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] So it's been really good to be able to baptise Beatrice this morning and as we said the fact that her name means bringer of joy. I figured it makes sense for us to actually slightly extend this Sunday series that we've been doing for the last couple of months if that's okay.

Maybe into next week too but we're going to think about a bit more joy this morning. But to kick us off for today, I don't know if you've seen some of the spectacular scenes of the night sky that were across our lands this week with the aurora borealis or northern lights which is slightly easier to say. These charged particles in our atmosphere are a result of solar flares erupting on the sun no less and we get the cracking fallout I guess from those.

So yeah this kind of view on the screens which is taken from the Outer Hebrides this week. And not too uncommon perhaps to see this kind of site that far north but unusually this week and that's why it's been in the news.

The night sky was lit up much further south as well giving us views like this one in Shropshire not too far from here. And even further down south there was this one taken in Dorset and even classic sites like Stonehenge the night sky was turned up to 11 for them as well.

[1 : 14] I don't know if you tried to look out in the sky around here. I don't think there was much to see around here was there? Too much light perhaps, too much cloud on the night. But the good news is that didn't stop one joker on Spotted Burntwood on Facebook sharing his own image that he took which was nicely done.

Nicely done. That aside though, that aside and the others I guess are all genuinely spectacular sites though.

And for many of us you know that the night sky above even we could say I guess the universe as a whole is the main source of amazement and joy and wonder for us.

And so with this kind of view above us you can see why some of the writers of the Bible perhaps like King David says things like this in the Psalms. He says the heavens declare the glory of God. The skies proclaim the works of his hands. And it's not that the skies perhaps in the universe prove without doubt that there is a creator God who's behind it all.

[2 : 22] But rather I think as it almost says here that God is revealed. That God's qualities can be known through what God has made. And then the Apostle Paul much later than these Psalms he writes this when he puts it this way.

He says since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities, his eternal power and his divine nature have been clearly seen being understood from what has been made.

Now the privilege I guess that we've got of living some 2,000 even 3,000 years on from when the Bible verses like we've just seen were written is that we now know far more about the universe than the writers of the Bible ever did.

And in some ways I guess that since we know more than people did in Bible times it may be that's meant to inspire in us an even greater sense of wonder when we look above us.

And just as Ian was saying last week asking us to perhaps consider the wonder of particles of a super small quantum level last week.

[3 : 33] That's pretty amazing. But equally so. I think for me one of the things which prompts a deep sense of wonder is when I contemplate our place in the universe which is just so incomprehensively big.

How big? Well here's something I heard the other day. So consider this. Alright. The speed of light covers in one second seven and a half times the circumference of the earth.

In one second. That's the speed of light. So to travel even to the closest star in our galaxy other than the sun we need to keep up that speed of every second, every hour, of every day going around the earth seven and a half times every second for four years and four months just to get to our nearest star.

Seven and a half times around the earth every second for four years and four months just to reach our closest star. Or say then to get to Andromeda which is the next door galaxy to our Milky Way we would need to whiz at the speed of going around the earth seven and a half times a second and keep that speed up for two and a half million years to get to the next galaxy.

And that's just the next galaxy to ours. Not any of the plethora of other galaxies that are out there. But then this is the one that blows my mind. So say we wanted to travel from one side of the known universe to the other.

[5 : 12] Now even if that were possible we would need to travel at the speed of light so to whiz around the earth seven and a half times a second every second of every minute of every day to get from one side of the universe to the other for 93 billion years.

And that's just the known observable universe let alone what we haven't discovered. 93 billion years of travelling at the speed of light. Kind of puts the decades of West Ham's trophy drought into perspective I think.

As I say that the universe is so big as we were singing it's no wonder perhaps that we get lost in wonder at the mystery and the mastery of it all because the heavens really do declare the glory of God.

And yet I'd say what's even more full of wonder perhaps even than that is the fact that in the midst of this universe which is billions of light years across and contains hundreds of billions of galaxies the God who is behind it all chooses to come and dwell in person with us dwelling with us in a way which somehow fully embodies all that God is.

You know we could put it like this that we see the cosmic Christ if you like in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and he's the one of whom Paul could therefore write this.

[6 : 49] He says he is before all things and in him all things hold together. And I'd suggest actually even beyond the galaxies that's where our joy can best reside in knowing that the God of the universe is with us in Jesus and now with us through the presence of his Holy Spirit.

We use a little prayer as part of our Monday service which says this. It says it's a mystery so deep it's impossible to grasp and it's a mystery so beautiful it is impossible to ignore.

Now since Jesus is therefore I would say at the heart of the universe I think it's worth asking therefore what is at the heart of Jesus?

And the good news is that this isn't really a mystery since Jesus himself gives us the answer to that question of what is in his heart. We're going to watch a passage from Mark's Gospel chapter 12 in which Jesus responds to being asked what is at the heart of life with God?

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer he asked him of all the commandments which is the most important?

[8 : 17] The most important one answered Jesus is this The second is this Love your neighbor as yourself There is no commandment greater than these Well said teacher the man replied You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him To love him with all your heart with all your understanding and with all your strength and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely he said to him You are not far from the kingdom of God And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions

So what's the most important commandment? Well there's two says Jesus But really I guess they're two sides of the same commandment coin Love God with all you are and love your neighbor as yourself Love God Love people And so since that the center of the universe is Jesus and the center of Jesus is love I think we can declare with confidence that across the billions of light years across the billions of galaxies love is the cosmic universal truth Love which is personified in Jesus Love which is the greatest commandment Love which is God's gift to us and love which God calls us to give to one another And we could ask what's the meaning of life?

I'd say the meaning of life is love Which kind of sounds simple doesn't it? One word answer But I guess as thousands of poets and songwriters and artists and theologians and Clinton's cards display they show us defining what love is putting it into practice and so on Well in some ways that's anything but simple because you all know as well as me love can be complicated and yet if the

whole universe can be distilled down to this one word love and for Jesus to distill the whole of the law and the prophets and the way to live he thinks it can be distilled down to this one word love as well then it seems to me that would find joy in love yes but perhaps our task in that is to keep love as simple as possible love I would say goes together with simplicity so what might that look like? I want to share three ways in which I've been struck by the joyful simplicity of love this week and firstly to do with this sleeping beauty at the front here Beatrice and her baptism that we've just been doing it's this idea as you were saying that in amongst all the complexities of life in amongst the pressures of parenthood the pain and the joy which that can bring the weight of responsibility that comes with raising a child and so on today we simply deeply want to thank the God of the universe for this little girl for Beatrice and to ask God's blessing to rest on her now we can debate the theology of baptism and quite what's going on in it should we wish but really none of that debating would matter to Beatrice all she can experience I think all she longs to know is that she is loved loved by us and loved by God and that's what will ensure that she lives up to her name that she is a bringer of joy to know that she is loved and to pass that love on you know it's interesting that at birth apparently a baby's focal length what they can focus on the distance in which they can focus their eyes is no more than a foot between sort of 20 and 30 centimetres and the wisdom in that suggests that in those earliest days of a newborn baby their whole world you know their focus is actually the faces of the ones who care for them at that foot length distance in particular those who feed them so we have a breast or bottle fed feeding a baby means that that foot long focus is on the one from the baby who provides for their needs their focus is on the one who loves them so a foot long focus in a universe which is 93 billion light years across and yet I'd suggest in the simplicity of that 30 centimetre space

I'd suggest Beatrice has known the fullness of God's love for her through the way she has been cared for by her parents by her family by her community and so I wonder for you and for me what might it look like for us to know the love of God and to know the love God has for us in as full a way as a baby knows the fullness of God's love for them as they rest in the arms of those who care for them you know sometimes I think and I know for me perhaps for us all we just need a rest in God's love to know God's love holding us as a loving parent holds their child you know no wonder I think Jesus says this he says truly I tell you anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it because it seems in that simplicity we can know the love and the peace and the joy of God with us you know and amongst all of life's activities

[14:50] I guess the question for us might be how might we rest and receive God's love for us this week that's one thought on love and simplicity from the earliest years of life secondly though and almost by way of bookending that I was struck again by the simplicity of love this week when I went into Chase View care home to take a little midweek service in a lounge area for some of the residents there this week now Dave and Chris were kindly with me and although we used to go in regularly to Chase View before COVID this was the first time that we've been back since and it was good to be back now some of the residents some of them were engaged and chatty in that lounge some of them were asleep and remained asleep pretty much for the whole time but particularly those who perhaps were struggling to engage were those who were living with dementia and they weren't altogether sure at all it seemed what was really going on and so after singing a few hymns shared a little thought for the day we said some prayers as Dave played

Chris and I went round to each resident one by one and simply offered them some bread dipped in wine as communion but if they didn't want that just said a little prayer of blessing with them now again some of you will know this better than me but for a 90 year old with advanced dementia what do you pray for them well I think all I felt able to pray and perhaps the best thing to pray was a very simple prayer that they may know in their own way the love and peace and joy of God in their lives almost an identical prayer that we would pray for Beatrice that they would simply but deeply know God's love for them I don't know how God does that for someone with dementia but I trust and I know that he does and yet whether it was through the hymns we sung that perhaps triggered some memories whether it was the sensation of the taste of bread and wine in their mouths that maybe brought back some distant memory whether it was

I think interestingly perhaps the experience of me doing my best to look in their eyes from a foot away and asking for God's blessing on them the love and the joy and the peace of God the God of the universe I'd say was present with us in those simple moments and for me well it was a reminder that love isn't rocket science if you like love is often just giving people time looking in their eyes

smiling at them listening to them offering them something to eat or drink saying a prayer for them sharing something enjoyable with them whether it's singing or a walk or a game or a joke and it's interesting I think more than anything I know for our kids I suspect for Beatrice and Nate too our children whether in family life or community life just want us to spend time with them more than anything and for our elderly

I think they often just want the same time time for company and time for conversation and if those two needs are the same at the book ends of life then I suspect those needs are present throughout the rest of our lives too yes we'll need our space and our solitude away from people just as Jesus did and some of us would need more of that than others which is maybe where the resting in God also comes in for us but as Jesus demonstrates it seems it's the times of solitude the times of resting with God that will enable us like Jesus to then joyfully spend the rest of our time with people and again I think it's kind of ironic that in a universe which is reckoned to be just shy of 14 billion years old it's actually the simple minutes the seconds sometimes that we spend in the company of each other and with

God that are often the most precious and the most joy giving of all and so again I wonder for you this week for me what time might we set aside as a way to express our love for others in amongst all the inevitable busyness the work how might we give the gift of our time in an intentional way perhaps this week could be a visit a phone call a message of encouragement could be a card we write conversation with someone over coffee today that lingers just a little bit longer not one that's perhaps looking around to see who else you fancy chatting to but quality time we could say and I'm reminded the Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians love is patient so how might we ask God to help us to be patient with the way we love with our time this week and then thirdly and finally for now as we think about a simplicity of love

[20 : 24] I had again the privilege this week of taking a funeral for a guy called George who ironically was a resident at Chase View had been there for a number of years but he died at the ripe age of 97 now took his funeral on Tuesday I didn't know George and it wasn't an easy funeral to put together because George had no next of kin there was no family and he had just the one friend who was going to come to the service but in speaking to this friend what I did manage to find out was that George had served on the beaches of Normandy in World War II and so for someone with his service his background well part of me felt this is going to be quite tragic that hardly anyone would be at his funeral and it crossed my mind I think earlier you know last week to think about spreading the word if you like in honour of George and that's sometimes been done elsewhere you might have seen it where news goes viral and the streets get lined with sort of anonymous mourners and strangers in honour of a war veteran who they didn't know but they felt they wanted his funeral to be well attended but someone in me just didn't feel that was appropriate in this space it wasn't my grief to manage

I suppose in that way and in hindsight though I'm glad it didn't go viral I'm glad it didn't do that because instead on Tuesday well Mark sang beautifully a couple of solo hymns for us and attending just a few folks here attending there was George's friend with his partner and son who came but also and this was quite moving for me having been to Chase View the previous day there were four members of staff from Chase View who'd arranged time off work to come to remember their resident and again they all came on to the small simple graveside service of burial that we did a bit later as well and it struck me I think that even in the midst of grief and in the midst of what could have been a kind of depressingly tragically small funeral actually for those who were there for those who did come as they said to me afterwards the intimacy of the service made it all the more special for them the joy this knowledge of God's presence with us came not with crowds of people but through the faithful attendance of the few and it strikes me that the beautiful simplicity of love is that it often just requires us to turn up to commit to be in present

I think just as Jesus was able to take the gift of five loaves and two fish in order to feed 5,000 people from them so often God takes and honours the smallest of offerings that we're able to make and he pours out his joy and multiplies his joy through those so again in the midst of billions of galaxies it's maybe in a simple act of kindness of anonymously leaving some flowers on a friend's doorstep of washing up someone else's coffee cup in the work kitchen of a baby bag for Ukraine of choosing to sit next to the stranger rather than the acquaintance it's perhaps in the simplicity of those acts of love that the God of the universe is able to bring joy to our world and so again a wonder for you a wonder for me this week what simple acts of love of being present perhaps of

servicing of being intentionally generous maybe what might

God be prompting us to offer to him and to others this week the good news is that in the vast complexity of our universe there is wonder and there is joy to be found in the simplicity of offering loving kindness to those we live alongside and that simplicity means that we can all play our part in bringing or being joy bringers like Beatrice into the world to sum up really our universe it is indeed a thing of wonder which declares the glory of God at the heart of our universe as we saw is Jesus God with us and at the heart of Jesus is love we can know the joy of God's presence with us through this love love which is perhaps often best expressed through simplicity and this simplicity well I suggest we can know it through resting in the caring arms of God through giving our time to those around us and by seeking the good of others through small yet significant acts of kindness and care that

I would suggest is how we can know the joy of wonder of simplicity and of love and I'll close with this I find it interesting that as part of Paul's cracking poem on love in the letter to the Corinthians he says this he says if I can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge he might say if I can fathom the mysteries of the universe itself but have not love I am nothing but if we turn that around the implication is that if we have love well that may just be the key to fathoming all mysteries and all knowledge since love is indeed at the heart of this life and at the heart of Jesus and at the heart of the universe so may that truth bring us joy this week

[26 : 40] Amen Amen