

A Season of Song

A series of seasonal meditations from John Rackley

Sunday 17 January 2021

The silent stars shine down on us

by Herman J Stuempfle Jr (1923-2007)

(*Singing the Faith*, 231)

This is a modern hymn for Epiphany from the prolific North American writer Herman Stuempfle Jr. He was a senior Lutheran minister who worked in ministerial formation as well as the local pastorate. He has composed a hymn that takes on the contemporary interpretation of what it means to be a minor planet in a limitless universe.

In the first verse he addresses the way in which many people think of the universe and our present existence. For instance, Stephen Hawking speaking in 1995:

“The human race is just a chemical scum on a moderate-size planet, orbiting around a very average star in the outer suburb of one among a hundred billion galaxies. We are so insignificant that I can’t believe the whole universe exists for our benefit. That would be like saying that you would disappear if I closed my eyes”.

We have lost the enchantment of ‘*Twinkle, twinkle little star, how I wonder what you are?*’ The night sky no longer holds the wonder that overwhelmed the writer in Psalm 8, but is a cold indifferent emptiness which reinforces our own inner purposelessness. With a nod in the direction of ‘O little of Bethlehem’, Stuempfle’s hymn begins:

*The silent stars shine down on us
with bright but sightless eye,
unmindful of our little earth,
of us who live and die.
Are we but grains of stranded sand
beside a cosmic sea
that lie unvalued and unseen
in such immensity?*

What a question! It takes us to the heart of contemporary Western needs, which ask: *is this all there is?* Is there nothing else but to eat, drink and be merry, because who knows who will catch the virus next? But within us we also fight against such bleak hedonism. For the psalmist saw more in us than just a temporary cluster of stardust. However ‘developed’ we become, there is a longing which arises from the depths of our being and speaks to us from the very first makings of the universe.

Here is Paul Davies – an agnostic cosmologist – from an interview he gave Bel Moody, recorded for a BBC series, *Devout Sceptics*:

“The older I get, the more I find I am returning to those deep questions like asking ‘why?’. I don’t think it’s enough to shrug this question aside. We do want to know why the world is as it is. Why did it come to exist 13.7 billion years in a Big Bang? Why are the laws of electromagnetism and gravitation as they are? Why those laws? What are we doing here? And in particular, how come we are able to understand the world? Why is it we’re equipped with intellects that can unpick all this wonderful cosmic order and make sense of it? It’s truly astonishing.”

The Lutheran minister responds with a story. The Star of Bethlehem speaks for all stars with the voice of God:

*Creator of all stars, you came
to grace our transient race.
In Christ you spoke a Word that broke
the silences of space.
Still through that Word you call our hearts
to know that we are known,
to trust we do not walk through time
unvalued and alone.*

*We see the star the wise men saw
and hope again is stirred.
We track the footprints left in time
by your incarnate Word.
We see them climb a lonely hill
where Love is left to die –
The Love that formed the furthest star
and hears the faintest cry.*

The earth and all its fullness is a creation of Love – immortal, invisible. Stuenpfle echoes the words of another epiphany hymn by Graham Kendrick:

*Come see his hands and his feet
The scars that speak of sacrifice,
Hands that fling stars into space
To cruel nails surrender.*

Kendrick’s verse speaks to the heart more than the mind. The ‘hands of God’ metaphor is common in scripture, and Jesus among his last words on the cross committed himself into the hands of his Father (Luke 23.46). Epiphany creates a pathway to Lent as we watch with

growing consternation the walk of God into the grasp of death; a death that would reveal the full glory of God, full of grace and truth. As much as we abide in that grace, the more we can discover a security for our faith.

*O Christ, the bright and morning star
whose radiance does not fade,
whose glory filled the universe
before the planets played;
come, heal our hearts of blinding doubt
till faith shall end in sight.
Shine down upon our darkened earth
And conquer sin's long night.*

Prayer:

God of many wonders;
fascinate our hearts and minds
with the revelation of Christ, and
help us to cope with times when we
fail to understand and feel of little importance,
by the embrace of your immortal love.
Amen.