



Christmas Eve
24 December 2014

Xmas

A sermon by Revd Dr Sam Wells

I want to tell you two stories tonight. They're both stories you know. But you may not have heard them told quite like this before.

The first goes like this. Once upon a time all of space was contained in a tiny point. One moment, about 13.8 billion years ago, it exploded, and it's been continuing to expand ever since. After a while, the universe cooled down enough to resolve into atoms. Huge clouds of these elements eventually came together through gravity and formed stars and galaxies. Around 8 billion years later, or two-thirds of the way into the universe's history to this point, the earth was formed by a similar system of gravitational convergence of atoms. A billion years after that forms of life appeared, and about 2 billion years ago oxygen started to be generated by primitive plants. Human beings emerged around 200,000 years ago, which, when you've got used to measuring years in billions, is more or less yesterday.

An unusual, perhaps unique, set of biological and climactic conditions came about to make the beauty and fertility of the world as we know it. The species exist together in remarkable balance, and the seasons come and go, replenishing life in the grand sweep of a David Attenborough multi-programme canvas. Patterns of migration and cycles of life lend rhythm and order to what would otherwise seem unfathomable sequences of development and change. After nearly 14 billion years of expansion, and more than 4 billion years of earth, it may seem exaggerated to talk of any threat to this glorious planet and dazzling world. But there are three threats. On a micro level one species, human beings, are setting about dismantling the climactic and biological conditions for the flourishing of all life. On a larger level, some cosmic occurrence like a meteor could always crash into the earth and do untold, perhaps wholesale, damage. And on a macro level just as what comes up must come down, so what expands must, eventually contract. The largest threat to the earth comes from what many imagine to be a big crunch that will one day, who knows how many billion years away, gravitationally suck the whole shebang back into the tiny mass it was before – then maybe, who knows, to be followed by another Big Bang.

That's the first story. The second story is the same, but very different. You're sitting in a church on Christmas Eve. You've just had a huge row with a member of your family. You wanted the plans for Christmas Day to be a big surprise but the delivery didn't come on time so you had to go to the shops to get something not as good. You're worried that no one will like what you've got for them anyway and part of you's resentful because you know you've put more effort into getting gifts than anyone you're giving them to. You want to sit in church and be happy and festive but your mind is buzzing with a thousand things that don't feel happy and don't feel festive. Your work is going badly and your colleagues are cross and mean, your home needs lots of money spending on it that you haven't got, you've just received a bitter and hurtful email from a person you used to live next door to. The whole idea was that Christmas was supposed to be this oasis of joy in the middle of family, work and neighbourly meltdown. But it isn't working out that way.

Meanwhile your colleague at work has asked to take the day off. She's not done so before so you ask her why. She says she's picking her family up from the airport. It turns out she managed to escape from a desperate situation in the country she came from, and she's spent the last two years living on next to nothing while sending home all her money to her relatives to enable them to escape the way she did. Finally they've got enough money and they're arriving tomorrow and she's currently got no

idea where they're all going to sleep tomorrow night. When you look at the combination of strain, suffering, tiredness, pride and relief on her face you see a whole world of displaced people and cruel regimes and selfless generosity and human ingenuity and you reflect on your own life and wonder if you could ever have achieved what she's achieved.

That's the second story. The first story is epic in scale. It's about billions of years, about indescribable distances and details and dimensions and discoveries. It leaves you thinking, in the context of this massive story, what am I? I'm scarcely a tiny speck in time and space. My existence seems the most colossal chance and my significance seems the tiniest obscurity. The second story is the opposite of the first one. It's ferocious in its intensity. You're totally immersed in the passions and dramas of your life, your fallings-out with one person and tetchy emails to another, your anxiety about one relationship and yearning to enrich a different one, your urgency to get a project finished and your fear about a development that's beyond your control. And the only thing that makes you pause is another person, like you, but not like you, whose story is dominated by political realities you're largely protected from, whose gentle demeanour hides her experience of violence and terror and exploitation and pain, whose every waking moment is designed to free others from the prison she's escaped from, who's absorbed in her world as you are in yours, but whose challenges are on a scale that leaves you humbled.

I said earlier that both stories are the same story. How can this be? The answer is, they're both the Christmas story. The Christmas story is about two words that come together like never before. The first word is 'word' – in Greek 'logos' from which we get words like biology, anthropology and theology. It means logic. It means the kind of logic of the big bang and all that cosmological language about galaxies and planets. The second word is 'flesh.' Flesh literally means what lives between skin and bone, but in truth it means what I just described in that second story – the human reality of passion and struggle and intensity and hope and despair and grief and love. Flesh means being so angry you can't see straight, being so in love you can't think straight, being in so much pain you can't feel anything else. Logos or word and flesh seem like polar opposites. They both describe our story, what it means to be human both as a result of all those cosmic goings-on and in the midst of strong passions and intense experiences. But what never happens is any overlap, any connection, any intersection between these two stories.

Except once. At one moment in eternity there was a point where word and flesh met. There was an instant in time when the cosmic story and the fleshly story became the same story. That was the moment we call Christmas. The God of heaven and eternity, the God of logic and divine plans, the God beyond and above and forever – took up residence in the world of passion and immediacy and suffering and anger and hatred and love. The word became flesh. This is the story the gospels tell. The heavens moved – the stars were rearranged, the cosmic order stood to attention, the angels lined up to order. The sleepy shepherds and the smelly stable and the earthy manger made a welcome for the bloody, messy, tiny new-born baby. The word became flesh. The cosmic and the earthly intersected. The logic of the stars and the life of the flesh kissed one another. And the result we call Jesus.

When people don't believe in God, it tends to be either because this life, the flesh, is so absorbing in its demands or disappointments or destruction that they can't see anything past it; or because the cosmic realities seem so far away, they can't see any meaning or purpose in any of it. In their own way, these objections make plenty of sense. But neither of these objections reject the Christian God. Because the Christian God brings heaven to earth in being made human, and brings earth to heaven in elevating fleshly life to eternal significance. The whole Christian faith hangs on this moment, when heaven and earth, word and flesh, intersect, and the two parallel stories become one. The point of intersection we call Jesus. Without Jesus neither story makes any sense. With Jesus we see that they were the same story, waiting to be united at Christmas.

It's quite common as an abbreviation for Christmas to write Xmas. The X is an anglicised version of the Greek letter chi, which is pronounced like an English ch, as in the word charisma. It's the first letter of the word Christ, and so Xmas becomes shorthand for Christmas. But the word Xmas contains a deeper truth. Christmas is the moment of intersection between the cosmos and the intensity of human existence; the coming-together of heaven and earth; the moment the word becomes flesh, and the flesh becomes word. Christmas is the intersection, the moment when the two great stories meet. Christmas is the crossover, the true X moment. Maybe it should always be called Xmas.