

The Address given by the Bishop of London, The Right Reverend & Right Honourable Richard Chartres KCVO on the occasion of Celebration Service, held on 12th April 2011, commemorating the 400th Anniversary of the granting of a Royal Charter to the Worshipful Company of Plumbers by King James 1.

1611 was a busy year. The King James Version of the Bible was published and the Plumbers got their charter.

You are celebrating in various ways. I am looking forward to the unveiling of the 7 foot tall Plumber's Apprentice on Canon Street Station.

You have also chosen to mark this year by holding this service and you have selected two lessons the Ten Commandments from the OT and Jesus' Sermon on the Mount from St Matthew. Both were read in the 1611 version.

In those days of course the Bible was accepted as the starting point for exploring areas of thought and study that have long since declared UDI – geography; anthropology; politics and possibly even plumbing if we consider that verse from Psalm XLII – One deep calleth another because of the noise of the water pipes.

For centuries your two lessons provided a curriculum for life in a Christian culture. Now of course there is an overproduction of information to a point where it cannot be consumed and we are left with the question of where is the wisdom that we have lost in so much knowledge.

You have nevertheless decided to set your 400 year story in a context which is open to the ultimate, to the Beyond-all, to God.

This is profound wisdom. Human beings are not just blind globs of idling protoplasm but we are creatures with a name who live in a world of symbols and of dreams and not merely matter.

Darwin, Dawkins and the Book Genesis agree that we are creatures of dust, star dust in fact, a part of the universe and the strange story of life on this planet.

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 homo sapiens 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 participants in a web of life; humans are the universe reflecting on and celebrating life as it seeks to expand, in conscious self awareness.

Unlike the animals we are conscious throughout life that we shall die but at the same time we strive for a life that is significant; that counts; that makes a contribution; we seem to be programmed to achieve a status and a self esteem that transcends death.

The history of human societies is a succession of strategies designed to offer the hope of immortality. Such hopes assist human beings to be confident and creative in themselves.

The ebbing power of these strategies for modern human beings means that our hunger for self perpetuation and heroism is largely unappeased. This shines a light on one of the news stories today. A new movement Action for Happiness has been founded. The organisers define happiness as “feeling good about our lives” and various everyday tactics for spreading happiness are commended.

I wish the movement well and do not disagree with the analysis that we are less happy hedonists than we were fifty years ago.

I doubt however whether the Action for Happiness strategy goes deep enough. Unhappiness today is a widespread problem because of the disappearance of convincing dramas that give us a sense that our lives are meaningful against the backcloth not only of this tiny planet but of the cosmos as a whole.

All societies are religious in the sense that human beings look for such convincing dramas. Science and secularism themselves can become dramas of this kind. The over the top reaction of the atheist lobby to the award for “Progress in Religion” from the Templeton Foundation to Martin Rees the former President of the Royal Society was a sign of the way in which science itself has become a drama conferring a heroic identity which you challenge at your peril.

Martin Rees acceptance speech however was significant for our current purposes. He participates in “the religion of his tribe” which is how he describes the Church of England but like many of you, I expect, does not subscribe to many theological dogmas. In describing the prospects for the human race however in the 21st century he is reflecting on what I believe is Act V of our five act drama.

This 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.

Martin Rees says that “unlike our forebears we know a great deal about our world. ... We know that we are stewards of a precious pale blue dot in a vast cosmos whose fate depends on humanity’s collective actions this century. All must be guided by the knowledge that 21st century science can offer, but inspired by an idealism, vision and commitment that science alone can’t provide.”

Beyond a certain point the defeat of unhappiness is not a matter of knowing more but of living and doing. We must plunge into experience and then reflect upon the meaning of it.

The possibility of transforming action is greater if we do this together. Membership of this company is part of the way you have chosen to make your contribution. The recent conference you organised in advance of world plumbing day is an example of the right way of celebrating and developing your 400 year long story by addressing yourselves to the horizon of the global challenges like water conservation which face us.

But you would be the first to say that such a project is only part of the picture. We are haunted by the question of what it is to lead a good and meaningful life. Being happy flows from identifying an adequate answer to this question.

Be humble, know that we are not little gods but instead take life as a gift aware that we live in a wonderful and mysterious universe. Be compassionate and aware of the suffering in this world. Be hungry for justice; be peaceful ourselves and work for peace and respect other life forms and the earth itself. Free ourselves of egotistical illusions and reach out to others.

This is a paraphrase of parts of the Sermon on the Mount and what ever else has changed it still comes as convincing truth and challenge at a time when so many people are drinking, drugging and shopping themselves into the kind of unhappy hedonism which is proving for so many people to be such a disappointing life project.

God is a word which conjures up so many pictures for us, some helpful and others not so but I believe that human life flourishes if it is lived into the divine dimension and that Jesus Christ has given us a vision of the human face of God and a vision of the way to enter into the divine life which is every bit as true today as it was when James I gave you your charter and the Bible translation named after him was published.

Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God. Amen.

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