

Daniel's reflection for week beginning 9th May

THE BREATH OF LOVE

There are places on earth that take our breath away. There are millions of wondrous species that we never even imagined. There are landscapes that are wrapped around our world like multi-coloured tapestries. Natural history programmes proliferate on our social media, and more people than ever are enchanted by them. Over 14 million of us in the UK, for instance, 80 million in China, with numbers rapidly expanding across the world, watched *Blue Planet II*, one of the most expensive and most technically advanced productions ever. Words cannot do justice to the wonder of such science and nature documentaries. They are wild and beautiful. At times they are bizarre and almost frightening. And sometimes they make us cry.

Universally enjoyed, these productionstell of an exquisite, undiscovered world where life, time and light are different. There are shapes, colours and limbs never seen before by the human eye. Revelations about the maternal qualities of creatures, their 'emotions', their mating habits, their survival instincts are scarcely credible. And why are we so attracted to these amazing stories? Do our souls stir to some inner intimations of the first tremor of life itself, of a common evolution of original being? Do we somehow see their stories as our story too, as we lose ourselves in the unique spectacles unfolding before us?

For the Christian in particular there is the silent invitation to recognise God's essence in all these natural epiphanies. St Thomas Aquinas refers to creation and evolution as the 'first bible' of divine beauty. The light of Incarnation, when shone on these marvels, affirms that the evolving flow of life is actually the action of the Holy Spirit, the sacrament of the divinity within nature, now tangible, visible and evolving. Incarnation parts the veils and reveals the deeper and divine significance of all that's happening in continuing creation, the love and meaning hidden in all evolution, in every breath and heart-beat of our existence.

When watching those increasingly popular science and nature programmes we grow in astonishment at the exquisite artistry, the creative passion, the mysterious love-energy, the undoubted humour we call God. Nature is truly the mirror of its Creator. 'Ask the beasts - they will teach you,' writes Job. 'Let the fish of the seas inform you. In the hands of the Creator is the life of every creature, the breath of love in all that lives' (12:7-12). Only imagine, only connect. 'Hidden beneath the waves,' David Attenborough said at the launch of the *Blue Planet II* project, 'there are creatures beyond our imagination'. Hidden also, and beyond our comprehension too, is a glimpse of the astonishing secret of all life and its Creator.

For the vast majority of viewers, watching dramatic natural visual spectacles is a moment of great enjoyment and wonder, an hour of discovery, delight, and of many emotions around the self-sufficiency of non-human creation, and the shockingly irresponsible attitude of humans towards their precious earthly home. And so it is for the Christian, but with a depth and vision that watches, in a kind of spiritual 3D, the whole unfolding scenario, providing the emerging story of what a Mother-God is like, giving birth to the first ever Big Bang, the Great Radiance, and then sustaining evolution for nearly 14 billion years, and until the end of time.

This experience then becomes a kind of 'holy hour', a contemplative moment of praise, presence and thanksgiving, a transformation of who we think God is, and a radical re-appraisal of our relationship with, and our images of that God. And amazingly, we have always known, by heart, something of this possibility. Grace perfects nature. Nature, when truly seen, will always lead us deeper. It is a beautiful scripture. (Rom 1:20).

Our scientists sense as much. When Einstein, Hawking, Attenborough, Cox et al, for instance, say they no longer believe in a controlling God 'out there' who allows evil things to happen, who arbitrarily punishes people and has personal favourites, do not we, too, agree with them? The Christian's true and divine Being – the Mother of Life, the Mystery of Love – is the free-flowing, free-flying Holy Spirit of the Cosmic God who will never be 'boxed' into any religion or belief system, who is the love-energy of all creation, all evolution, all humanity. Responding to a question about his belief in God Albert Einstein said, 'I believe only in (the) God who reveals himself in the orderly harmony of what exists.'

In his diaries he confessed to a 'feeling of utter humility' towards the unattainable interiority of the harmony of the cosmos. 'Try and penetrate,' he asks, 'with our limited means, the secrets of nature and you will find that, behind all the discernible laws and connections, there remains something subtle, intangible and inexplicable. Veneration for this force beyond anything we can comprehend is my religion.' He has hard things to say about those who have lost the 'most beautiful emotion' that springs from the experience of wonder and the mysterious.

Attenborough, too, refers to the 'mystery' of it all. Brian Cox who does not believe in God, said that, if he did believe, he would be proud of such a wondrous Creator. He echoed some of Einstein's remarks, and admitted to being scientifically and emotionally moved by the beauty and mystery of the cosmos, and said, 'For small creatures such as we are, the only thing that makes the vastness of the universe bearable is love.' Scientist and theologian Franciscan Sr Ilia Delio agrees, 'To see the universe through the eyes of love helps us make sense of evolution, not as a process of blind chance or randomness, but one of passion, yearning, novelty, union, gift, suffering, death and new life . . . The name 'God' points to this mystery of love in its unlimited depth, the centre of all that is.'

Open, then, to that 'mystery of love', can science and nature documentaries enrich our imagination and thus be called a spiritual experience? Could they be called even more - a revelation about the Creator-Mother of all life, windows of wonder to bless and deepen people's search for love and meaning at the heart of their lives. And of their broken and beloved Earth – the spinning blue planet of a Divine Beauty?