

If physicists are to be believed- and who's smart enough to contradict them? Not me- look at the job I ended up with. If physicists are to be believed, we live in an ever expanding universe. At least for the time-being.

In the beginning, so the science story goes the totality that comprises life, the universe and everything was compressed into a tiny space- infinitesimally small, smaller even than the Trump brain- then BIG BANG and like the aftermath of a teenagers first binge drinking; out it all came and ever since the entire universe has been expanding, ever onward in space and time, out from that first explosion. I might have misunderstood the science take (and to be fair physicists usually misunderstand the religion take) but who's going to contradict me? At Midnight Mass on Christmas? In my own pulpit? Nobody.

In practical terms, sort of, ish-the ever-expanding universe means that everything is always getting further away. Stands to reason if you think about it. But you don't need to tax the grey cells still left functioning this far into Christmas Night. You sort of know it's the deal without coming over all Erwin Schrödinger: and this way it's kinder to cats (niche joke). You don't need the $E=MC$ whatever. You can pretty much see the stretch marks left by the universe ballooning all around you.

As time marches on further and further away goes the optimum distance for reading; further and further away are your feet when you need to bend down to do your laces, and of course, further and further away it is to get back up again when you've tied them. Though the time it takes for them to untie themselves always gets shorter- shoelaces are exempt from the laws of physics. Back to the main point before it gets too far away. The distance between your partner saying he'll do something and him actually doing it. Always getting bigger and bigger. Not just me then. I'm still waiting. As time goes by the space between you and everything else stretches away into the distance; happiness, security, a decent government- forever receding from sight, smaller and smaller to the eye closer and closer to vanishing point no matter how hard you try to keep up- like some nightmare dream where

the off button just keeps getting further and further away from your finger when some tasteless super-sadist has put Mistletoe and Wine on repeat.

Everything. Always. Further and further away.

Interestingly, you can see this movement, if you look, in the epic narrative sweep of salvation history. A slightly different take to the Big Bang, in the Bible when everything begins God has no-one to talk to but himself: he speaks the universe into being and then grabbing some dust and breathing into it makes humanity in his own image. That's a pretty intimate way to start if you ask me. And God then interacts directly with his creation. Adam and Eve can meet God in person as he walks in the Garden of Eden sampling the summer breeze... and then when God realises that Adam and Eve have realised that they are somewhat worse the wear for not having clothing and have knocked up something shockingly tasteless from fig leaves, so begins the process of his getting further away. We're chucked out of his back garden for starters.

For a while there are some personal appearances: God comes to visit Abraham for tea. Moses meets him face to face quite a few times, though only in certain places: a burning bush, up the mountain, in a holy tent. Elijah gets to see God just the once, from the back, walking past, but more and more frequently God stays in the office and sends an angel to do his comms work. Prophets hear voices and messages (and more often than not mishear them); by the time it gets to Solomon- Israel's greatest King, God's no longer getting his hands real world down and dirty but has taken to appearing in dreams and then by the time we get to telling Joseph that; Mary is pregnant, yes, but it's ok God's the Father, by then it's angels appearing in dreams. If an angel decided to slip into my dreams it would probably spend so much time trying to orientate itself to the weirdness- zombie bishops, forgotten liturgy, talking shiba inus- that it would forget what it had come to tell me and before it had opened its mouth I'd be waking up groaning to another day of double-yellow lines, unpayable parish share and zombie bishops... But, Joseph seems to have had calmer dreams-

wood shavings and bandsaws, really good planks or whatever carpenters dream of- but that's for another sermon and let's just note even here, with Jesus's stepdad, that process is still going on: God is getting further and further away. Rather than the face to face meeting Abraham or Moses would expect, Joseph is getting the equivalent of the PR man delivering a press release on Zoom.

It's not a direct line from close to distant- it's a bit like a country bus going back and forth winding through the villages as it slowly gets to the destination wandering amiably like one of my sermons- but look at the overarching sweep. In the beginning it's intimate, physical even: as the centuries roll by we find we're quickly several removes from the source

But. Now.

I mean, right now.

As in, now, tonight, the whole process suddenly stops.

Some physicists think that eventually the universe will end its expanding and will, with perfect celestial symmetry, hit the reverse and at a similar pace to its expansion, start contracting. Pity our poor drunken teenager when *that* process starts.

But whatever happens in the universe. that's not happening here. No slow grinding of the gears as the ship laboriously manoeuvres into position for the homeward voyage tonight. For now, in the blinking of an eye, the God who has been becoming more and more distant, more transcendent, more *mediate* is in the instant of incarnation, right here, in person, physically present in a way he has never been before; God with us, Immanuel, immanent, God *immediate*.

Ooh, that sounds good, what does it mean?

It means that child in the manger is God. In person. Upfront and personal. It means you could go and pick him up and rock him and coo at him and do all the other things normally staid people do in the presence of a newly hatched tiny human. You could do that. To God. And he wouldn't smite you for pulling a stupid face and going even though you would really deserve it.

In the years to come you could watch him make your wedding go with a bang as he changes corporation pop into claret. You could hear him speaking the words of Heaven directly to you; more you could ask him questions- and get answers. You could *reach out and touch* the hem of his cloak and find yourself healed. You could sit down to dinner with him; share the same cup, the same bread. You don't really get much closer than that with most people.

And this person, people, is God.

That's what the child in the manger means.

And that's what tonight means.

No longer far off, God is in the room.

Very exciting. And a little bit scary. And totally amazing.

Happy Christmas.