

Sermon Delivered by Howard Hague  
at Essex Church, 11<sup>th</sup> January 2004

## Life, the Universe...

Sometimes you struggle hard to find anything on television that is really worth watching, but then occasionally you come across a few gems. Over the last fortnight or so I have seen parts of two series that I found fascinating. The first was the Royal Institution Christmas Lectures series, when Dr Monica Grady from the Natural History Museum was exploring 'A Voyage in Space and Time'. The second series has been showing on Channel Five this week, and has been looking at 'The Big Questions of Life', with the help of several eminent scientists including Professors Stephen Hawking, Richard Dawkins and Susan Greenfield. One of the problems with science, at least for a largely lay audience, is that the concepts described are often difficult to understand, but both these series largely succeeded in looking at the topics in an accessible manner. Indeed it is perhaps because the Christmas lectures are aimed at children and young people that adults can actually understand them. And one reviewer noted that Stephen Hawking managed to make even the Big Bang theory seem almost straightforward. No mean achievement.

For some time I have been an interested observer of the work of Richard Dawkins, whose role as 'Professor of the Public Understanding of Science' at Oxford University is surely a vital one for today's world, even if his views on religion tend to be rather uncompromising. In his programme this week he was looking at the question 'Why are we here?', and the questions don't come much bigger than that. The biological answer, the Darwinian answer, is that we are here to reproduce, to pass on our genes to the next generation. Darwin showed that successful species survive by adapting to their environment, using the harsh principle of evolution by natural selection, or 'the survival of the fittest'. However Richard Dawkins suggested that humans appear to break Darwin's rules. We have gone beyond the mere business of propagating our genes, we have learned to set goals for ourselves, to seek, to strive, to plan ahead. Indeed he went on to say that it is humans who provide a purpose in a universe that would otherwise have none. Nevertheless, one is tempted to add that we humans don't seem to be making a very good job of our striving and our planning when you look at the state of the world today. Let us hope that we do better if and when we return to the Moon and then head on to Mars, as President Bush has just proposed.

For a long time I have been intrigued that so many scientific discussions still take as their starting point the work done by Charles Darwin over 150 years ago, and it is an indication of the extent to which he totally changed our view of the world. It was his five year voyage as a naturalist on board 'The Beagle' from 1831-1836 which provided him with the scientific evidence on which his theory of evolution was based. In the Galapagos Islands he noticed how the finch populations on the various islands had developed different shaped beaks according to the habitat and foodstuffs to be found there. But even though he worked out his theories shortly afterwards it was to be another twenty years before he actually published them in his work 'On the Origin of Species' in 1859. My own interest in Darwin was aroused by an enquiry received in 1982 (the centenary year of his death) in the library where I was then working about the causes of the illness which plagued much of his adult life. Numerous papers have been written in the medical journals about his illness, some trying to show that he picked up a tropical ailment called Chagas' Disease when he was travelling in South America. My own view is that his illnesses were more psychosomatic. Darwin was a very sensitive man, a kind and loving father, and he knew that his theories - as well as being very controversial - would have a profound effect on the way people viewed the world, including on religious belief. His wife, who came from a strong Unitarian family, the Wedgwoods, retained the religious faith that he himself had lost long before (though it would be nice to think that the Unitarian day school and the chapel he attended in Shrewsbury did encourage him to think for himself). In the end, it was only because another scientist, Alfred Russell Wallace, had come to very similar conclusions about evolution to himself and wanted to go public that he was persuaded to publish in 1859, with the profound results that we know.

Anyway, I digress slightly, though you will deduce that the life and work of Charles Darwin has been one of the 'significant encounters' in my life. Let us return to the subjects which Channel Five has been tackling this week: how did it all begin, why are we here, why am I me? etc. These are clearly great philosophical questions, but we do perhaps need to retain a sense of perspective. Ever since Douglas Adams wrote his marvellous 'Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy' and it appeared on television over twenty years ago, one is surely entitled to remain a little sceptical about the answers to such fundamental matters. Adams considered the meaning of 'Life, the universe and everything', and concluded that the answer was 42. If that is the answer, then clearly we need to ask ourselves what is the real question?

In our second reading, Meg Lynn <sup>(1)</sup> said she believed that we are all here by chance - the world and all life exists by chance. I think I'm with her on that. I personally cannot believe that some being or external force has arranged for us all to be where we are today, doing what we are doing. But in another sense, we are not here purely by chance. We learn that if the laws of physics

were only very slightly different, then things would not be as they are. The solar system, the planets and life on earth would not have evolved as they have, and indeed probably wouldn't have evolved at all. A sobering thought.

So you could conclude that the universe is intrinsically meaningless, that life has no purpose. In many ways I think that is true. But as human beings we do find or at least put meaning into our lives in various ways - through our work, our families and friendships, our hobbies and interests, our appreciation of great art, and indeed through our striving to understand this amazing and awe-inspiring world in which we find ourselves. That may not seem to be very satisfactory, but for me it is probably the best that can be done for the moment. And I rather like the irony of it all, for surely it is an ironical world.

*(An address given by Howard Hague at the Kensington Unitarian Church on 11th January 2004, as part of a service entitled 'Influences and Meaning')*

## **Reference:**

(1) Meg Lynn, from 'Kensington Quest: Statements of Belief by Kensington Unitarians', published by Essex Church in 1987.