

The Eighth

ERIC SYMES ABBOTT

Memorial Lecture

delivered by

Angela Tilby

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'He Made the Stars Also ...'

I suspect that during the years of Eric Abbott's priestly ministry the word 'spirituality' would have been interpreted as 'private prayer' or 'the interior life' or 'personal religion' –something a bit precious and embarrassing, an option for the seriously devout. I don't need to tell you that in recent years 'spirituality' has been broadened and redefined. The churches can no longer be said to 'own' it. Spirituality has become part of a great seething marketplace of therapies and disciplines: rituals, private and public, meditation, exercises of the body and imagination, concern for health and diet, esoteric knowledge, ways of healing, ways of dealing with birth and bereavement and dying. The spirituality market is where we shop for relief from many anxieties.

Anxiety is so universal, and yet so intimate, that I can only touch on it in very broad terms. But at its root it is a fear of the ultimate disintegration of the self: either by being swallowed up in chaos or everlastingly abandoned. The religions have always met this primitive anxiety and enabled people to face it, with their specific myths of the origins of things, their stories and teaching, revelations and ethical codes.

Our problem now is that religions are widely regarded as dysfunctional; their capacity to contain anxiety blown apart by the icy winds of science. Blaise Pascal the mathematician, constructor of the world's first computer, strict Jansenist and neurotic, wrote before his death in 1652:

“When I see the blindness and wretchedness of man, when I regard the whole silent universe, and man without light, left to himself, and, as it were, lost in this corner of the universe, without knowing who has put him there, what he has come to do, what will become of him at death, and incapable of all knowledge, I become terrified, like a man who should be carried in his sleep to a dreadful desert island, and should awake without knowing where he is, and without means of escape.”

This form of cosmic anxiety comes from the Enlightenment of the 17th century. It is the price of the intellectual liberation that came with that movement, and is still with us today, perhaps in heightened form. When I was researching for the BBC television series *Soul*, I met a brilliant American woman who had studied quantum mechanics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She told me that as she explored the world of inner space the greater her fear grew of the night sky, until she could hardly bear to face the darkness and the random, meaningless pattern of the stars. The stars for her were a major spiritual problem. (Much as the zoo was for Bishop Charles Gore – once a canon of Westminster – who said that he always felt tempted to atheism by the sight of the enigmatic creatures nature had produced.)

In contrast, on the same project I also met a number of distinguished astro-physicists and cosmologists, and I was struck by how many of them had come into science because of the emotions roused in them in childhood by the sight of the stars. One spoke of being given a star atlas for his birthday, a gift which changed his life. Another spoke of escaping to the back yard on winter nights to gaze at the heavens, feeling more at home on his own with the universe than round the kitchen table with his parents and family. To the child the stars are not necessarily alien or frightening. But in order to do science some natural awe has to be repressed, and the repression takes its toll. Perhaps the fierceness with which some scientists persecute religion is the measure of how hard they have fought to repress the religious instinct in themselves.

The stars are both an inspiration and a problem to our attempts to pray and make sense of God. They locate us in nature beyond the life of this earth. They remind us that nearly all the created universe is non-human.

What does this tell us about what it means to be creatures of God? I will look first at how some biblical writings understand the purpose of the stars, and add to that some comments from Karl Barth on their significance for our knowledge of ourselves as creatures in time. I will then briefly explore some of the insights that modern astronomy brings to bear on the links between us and the stars.

As far as we know, the Hebrews of the Bible were not great observers of the stars.

The word for 'star' in the scriptures is used of all heavenly bodies, planets, stars, comets, meteorites. The Hebrews didn't use the stars for practical purposes. They were not great sailors, unlike the neighbours, the Phoenicians, who were among the first great navigators. Even the stories of the crossing of the wilderness do not suggest that they took their bearings from the stars. Instead the scriptures suggest that they were guided by miraculous signs, outside the order of nature – the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. A supernatural deliverance requires supernatural guidance.

The Genesis account of the creation puts the stars after the moon and the sun on Day 4. 'He made the stars also,' has been described as the most astonishing throwaway line ever written. It is startling for us to see billions of years of cosmic evolution lost in a single sub-clause. But for the biblical writers, the casual reference serves a theological purpose.

There is the suggestion in the book of Deuteronomy¹ that God has allotted the stars to the other nations, as objects of worship, but his people are not to be seduced. In the Genesis account the stars are anything but divine. They are created as subordinate lights to the moon and sun. They share in the purposes of the sun and moon; that is, to give light to the earth, to separate light from darkness, to give signs of the times and seasons. The stars are there in the dispensation of creation to help human beings to orientate themselves in space and time, so that they can hear God's word and do God's will. In a famous dialogue between God and Abraham the stars are taken as a promise that the unborn generations of his descendants would be as many as they were. 'Look toward heaven and number the stars, if you are able to number them ... So shall your descendants be.'² The stars were a sign of the human future, like milk or human seed splashed on the night sky. The link between the stars and human generativity is found in other traditions as well. The milky way and the galaxy are ancient names, even though today they might be thought to give cosmic significance only to chocolate. But for the Hebrews the stars were, like grains of sand, infinite, beyond the power of human computation. Only God could count them.

In spite of the ban on worshipping the heavenly bodies the Hebrew eye could easily be seduced by them; carried away to worship the host of heaven. There is evidence that the planet Saturn was worshipped as a star god in the time of Amos, and there are references to a cult of the stars practiced on the house tops of Jerusalem in the later days of the kings. Jeremiah³ speaks of the coming disgrace in which the bones of all the past kings and priests and prophets of Jerusalem will be taken from their tombs and spread out before the sun and the moon and the stars. This is the ultimate betrayal of God, the worship of the creature instead of the creator, the choice of death instead of life.

In the light of the constant polemic against idolatry that runs through the Old Testament there have been attempts in recent interpretation to read into the Hebrew scriptures a secular and utilitarian attitude to nature. The argument goes that the Hebrews began the process by which the universe became despiritualized. They were the first secular men.

It is even claimed that the Hebrew belief in a single, rational transcendent God was the first step on the road to the scientific reductionism of our own time. It has been suggested that Isaac Newton's God was such a monarch, the creator of the laws of nature, far beyond nature, whose only intervention in the massive machine he had created was to keep the stars from collapsing together under the force of gravity. The American theologian Harvey Cox, writing in the 1960s, described the Genesis account of creation as 'a form of atheistic propaganda'.⁴ He suggests that by dismissing the creation of the stars in a sub-clause, the writer wanted to suggest that they were lamps hung up in the sky purely for man's convenience. Cox was trying to make sense of secularism for a generation that was confident of science. Men had stood on the moon and the conquest of far space seemed inevitable. On earth the lights of the secular city had blotted out the stars from human sight, and Cox's message was, really, Grow up, and accept the freedoms that come with secularity as God's gift, without nostalgia for sacred nature. Now we read him, more knowingly, fearing that it is precisely such attitudes that have cut us off from our creatureliness, from a humble knowledge of ourselves as God's creatures.

Karl Barth wrote about the doctrine of creation in his *Church Dogmatics* in 1945, nearly thirty years before Cox. He concedes that the stars are not in any way divine for the biblical writers. In fact they 'Show to the creature that the universe is not heavenly, but earthly'. But Barth knows that secularism is another form of idolatry, a dangerous one, which masks as liberation from all gods. To adopt a utilitarian attitude to nature is a kind of contempt, and contempt for the creature dishonours the Creator. So he insists that for the Genesis writers the stars were never simply dead lumps of glowing matter, accidentally strewn about. They are creatures, as much as we are, willed and intended by God. Barth goes on, 'Though the universe is earthly, it is created in the sign of light'.

The stars, then, are light bearers, candlesticks, communications like the angels. They mark the boundaries of creation, mediating light and knowledge. The birth of Jesus is foretold by a star in Matthew's gospel. The more humanistic Luke has a multitude of the heavenly host announcing the birth to shepherds.

As Barth contemplated the Genesis account of the creation there was echoing around in his mind the sense of God as one who is surrounded by a mighty host. Barth listened to Mozart early in the morning before working on his *Church Dogmatics*, and perhaps he had been listening to the *Magic Flute* when he came to this passage about the stars. He says that the stars are related to the host of beings who surround the Lord. How can we read of the hosts of the Lord, says Barth, and not think of the constellations? 'Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts, heaven and earth are full of thy glory.'

At the creation the morning stars sang together and the sons of God shouted for joy. Praise him all his angels. Praise him stars of light. Barth insists that the stars belong to the earthward side of creation, but, if I understand him correctly, he suggests that the purpose of created light is to witness to the uncreated: 'The heavens declare the glory of God'.⁵

The stars are there to reveal to God's people nothing less than the createdness of the whole world. As Gerhard Von Rad says, writing on the Wisdom tradition of Israel, there is a call from the created order to human beings. In the light of this call the world presents itself to us as creation. The world is not self-created, it is the handiwork of God.

But it is not enough to know that God is. The stars tell us who we are and where we are located. And here Barth comes to his most important comment. The stars show us that the universe of God's creation possesses time, the 'divinely created time of light'.

Without the stars, human beings would be blind in the midst of light, cut off from objective measures of time and space. Because the stars belong to the world of living creatures, they mediate the objective message of the will of God to God's human beings. They tell us that we are born into a universe that possesses time, and we are intended to have knowledge of time and use it to the full. Time in this sense means historical time, salvation time, time to hear God's word and do God's will.

The sin of creatures is always to deny their creatureliness. The Daystar falls from heaven because he said in his heart, 'I will ascend to heaven, above the stars of God'.⁶ Stars, because they belong to the earthward side of creation, are even capable of sin, at least according to Bildad the pious who says sadly that 'even the stars are not clean in God's sight'. This is a last desperate, unsuccessful attempt to persuade Job that he might himself be just a teeny bit sinful himself.

What we get from the biblical account then is a message that we are embedded in this universe that God has made and declared good, placed in it, in space and time. Yet unlike the creatures of the first five and a half days we are empowered to understand our natural origins and our destiny. Two temptations constantly beset us. The first is to be led away into idolatry and worship the beautiful and elusive processes of nature for themselves; the second is to deny our creatureliness, by ascribing to ourselves the omnipotence or omniscience that belongs to God. Pascal's fear of the great spaces was a fear that man has put himself outside time as a god, and has found that there is no God. Hence his solution, a spiritual life of strict penance and prayer.

I will now try and describe what we know from astronomy and physics about the stars. I said that the words 'He made the stars also' was the most astonishing throwaway line in the Bible. To us the words are astonishing because of their innocence. The biblical writers could not have imagined the universe of modern cosmology, of the big bang and the unfurling of space time, the emergence of the four forces of nature out of the one superforce, the evolution of primitive atoms, and their binding together into matter, the gradual clustering of matter into galaxies and the creation of stars. All this development happens within time and is held on the knife-edge between the expulsive force of the big-bang and the counteracting force of gravity.

This is the context within which we now pray and experience ourselves as souls before God. This is the natural world in which we are embedded. This is the space time universe which offers us the time of salvation, to hear God's world [sic] and do God's will. In historical terms the cosmology that we now live with is very new. We have barely begun to understand it, let alone assimilate it, emotionally or spiritually.

The first feature of our new context is that we actually live on a world that is lit and enabled to bear life because it orbits a star. A medium sized star, of the Main Sequence (that means its characteristics of size, density and luminosity are about average). Our sun is half way through its life. The future for our world is to be engulfed by a swollen sun, as it burns itself to death. Even a brief meditation on these facts are likely to evoke ambivalent feelings towards this universe of ours. The awe and anxiety that earlier generations felt about God, the all-seeing and all knowing, is replaced by awe and anxiety about what it means to live in a universe that has so much in it that neither sees, nor knows us. We face in the new cosmology a threat to the integrity of the self. Faced with such a universe isn't the personal self merely annihilated or fragmented out of existence? Better for religion to concentrate on an internal God, an ethical demand that can be shown to be useful, than to try to connect the doctrine of creation to the real cosmos we happen to live in. But to make such a choice is merely to repress anxiety, not to confront it. There have been attempts to confront it, to find a language for prayer which does justice to what it means to trust God in such an environment.

I think, for example, of the Second Eucharistic Prayer in the Book of Common Prayer of the American Episcopal Church. This begins with the words:

‘God of all power, Ruler of the Universe, you are worthy of glory and praise ... At your command all things came to be: the vast expanse of interstellar space, galaxies, suns, the planets in their courses, and this fragile earth, our island home ...’

Listen to the words ‘vast’, ‘expanse’, ‘interstellar space’, ‘fragile’, ‘island’. The drama is in the contrast between the vastness and the fragility. The vast expanse of space is not hospitable, is not familiar, above all is not human; but that does not mean it is wholly other, empty, or dead. We are fragile on our island home. This prayer is struggling with the sense of shipwreckedness, or at least, strandedness, that we feel in the cosmos that science reveals to us. Can this be received as gift as well as threat?

There is violence out there in space, and our existence is the product of it. I want to emphasise again how new this picture is, and how disorientating. Until we get used to it, it will raise anxiety. Remember that only a hundred years ago most people believed that we would never ever know for certain how old the stars were or what made them shine. Now we have answers to both these questions. We know that the stars do not last forever. They are created and they are destroyed. We also know that they shine because they are furnaces of raging gas, mostly hydrogen and helium, held together by gravity.

This is knowledge that does not bring us peace. The more we find out about the stars the less they appear to have to do with us. For many of our contemporaries they judge the smallness of our enterprises, our lostness in space, and the unlikelihood of meaning.

Yet the message is not all despair. Once we’ve got over the shock at how big the universe is, and start to look more closely at the place of the stars in modern cosmology, we might be impressed by discoveries which suggest interesting parallels with what Barth wants to say about the stars in the theology of creation. I want to remind you before I describe those discoveries that of all the theologians of our century Barth is the least enthusiastic for any kind of natural theology. He thought nature was an opaque enigma. Like Bishop Gore, he didn’t think much of zoos, regarding the animals as a collection of enigmatic problems to which we have no answer. Being a Swiss Calvinist whose ambition, if he had not been a theologian, was to have controlled the traffic in Basle city centre, he at times seems lacking in curiosity, thought not in humour. For Barth the only value that the contemplation of nature has for faith is to frustrate us to the point where we are prepared to recognise the hidden God who breaks through in revelation. It follows that any kind of spirituality based on nature must be a form of idolatry.

With that in mind, let us consider that modern study of the stars reveals the not obvious fact that our universe does not last forever, but has changed through time. A century ago none of this was known. It was assumed that the universe was either created in one go, much as it is today, or that it was eternal. Either way it was fairly static, the mere background to human life. In this static picture the evolution of life on earth was a weird anomaly without precedent. If there was change it was in terms of decline. The second law of thermodynamics proclaims the relentless advance of entropy: the laws of heat ensure that disorder will always increase.

In 1929 Edwin Hubble claimed that the galaxies are receding from one another. He showed that the universe was expanding. This was the key step on the road to our contemporary big-bang model of an evolving universe. The accidental discovery in 1965 of an echo of the big bang in the microwave background radiation helped the theory to find acceptance. If the big-bang model is right, and the discovery a year ago of minute fluctuations in the background radiation have provided

further support for it, then time is not a mere accident in the development of the universe, it is a condition of it.

As to the stars themselves, we now know that they are very intimately bound up with us in our creaturehood. The elements which make up our bodies were not present in the primitive universe but were created through the stars.

How? A star is a constant point of tension between the radiation at its core, which is pushing outwards, and the force of gravity at its edge which is pulling the star inwards to collapse on itself. When a really massive star runs out of hydrogen its outer layer expands while its core collapses. A giant explosion ensues in which the outer envelope of the star is blown into space. This liberates all the elements in the periodic table up to iron which have been made by the burning of the star and the process of the explosion generates the heavier elements like zinc and iodine. Together the elements cooked in the stars and the ones produced in the explosion provide all that is required for life.

So an ingredient of our self-knowledge is that the physical structures which give rise to consciousness, and science and intimacy and prayer, come from exploding, dying stars. In a sense we are the descendants of stars. If there is within us the possibility of holiness, of apprehending the divine, it belongs to the same creaturely nature that we share with the stars. There is a real, if lowly sense in which the story of the cosmos *is* the story of the self.

What is more, the fact that the cells of our bodies come from the ashes of stars is an illustration of what could be called a sacrificial principle that is present all through the natural world. Creation feeds of creation. Death produces life. The rubble of a star builds an animal. Matthew Fox, the former Dominican theologian, has said that he believes Christian doctrines are essentially no more and no less than cosmic laws. The universe makes itself through time; its violent catastrophes are, in time, the seed of its potent transformations. In spite of entropy the universe is set up to be creative.

The idea of the universe as a story in which time is fundamental is still controversial within physics, with conservative scientists like Stephen Hawking, still very reluctant to consider the possibility that time is fundamental to nature. But even he would give a much greater role to time than would have been possible without our evolving model of the universe.

Now listen again to Barth. Commenting on Genesis 1:16 he says that the power and knowledge which the stars give are part of their destiny within the purposes of God. They tell us where we are in time and space, where we have come from and where we are going. God wants to share knowledge and power with us, and the stars are the sign that we are intended to be partners with God, consciously participating in his purpose. If Barth is right, then the scientific story, far from being the enemy of the Gospel, is part of that shared knowledge between Creator and creature which the Gospel promises. We do not steal from God, God gives us what we need. And what we are being given at the moment is a vision of God greatly expanded by the subtlety and creativity and exquisite balance of forces which we perceive in the universe of his creation. And by the humility and awe that the story of the stars evokes in us. A theologian of the Russian Orthodox Church writes of the delicate precariousness of creation:

‘All creatures are balanced upon the creative Word of God as if upon a bridge of diamond; above them is the abyss of infinite infinitude, below them, that of their own nothingness.’

In this universe held so precariously, so delicately between the expulsive force of the big bang and the relentless tug of gravity, everything belongs together. There is a seamless continuity from

the furthest galaxies to the inner invisible world of the atom. Nothing is separate or isolated. There are experiments that show that related particles influence each other even when they are far apart. Everything relates to everything else. This demolishes the idea that we are all lonely separate souls in search of a private relationship with a distant God. The universe is relationship. God's interest is not only in the human story, but in all the layers of complexity which lead to the emergence of consciousness. God has an investment in time itself, in what time can produce. This is something that the people of the Old Testament realised more and more as they found the divine action in history, in politics, in the shame and glory of the people of God. It is something that the Christians realised as they quarrelled and struggled towards the doctrine of the incarnation. In the Christian programme God has to invest himself in time to the point of ultimate commitment and risk.

Under the old static model of the cosmos, consciousness and life were anomalous. Spirituality was construed in terms of a quest for purity and innocence, a movement of the will against the tide of things in nature. Now we begin to see that mind belongs in things, is part of how things are. The choices that we make as conscious beings do not run against the grain of a universe where all else is determined. They are a creative development of a universe which is in some profound ways indeterminate, and creative. A universe of chance and a universe of death. Where a man can break through into heaven and God can be crucified. A universe that is set up that way. Not perhaps the best of all possible worlds, but certainly the most interesting. Where perhaps we are judged not for our deviances as much as for our lack of imaginative insight.

The temptation for us in trying to assimilate the new cosmology is to take the classic short cut into Gnosticism. Gnosticism cannot accept the created goodness of matter. Nor can it accept suffering. In Gnosticism creation is hostile or indifferent, and the way to salvation is the way that either avoids or sentimentalises, pain. Gnosticism looks for special exemptions. So it offers us esoteric links between the cosmos and self which are vaguely therapeutic and flattering, while keeping in place a basic unredeemed cosmic despair. Many of the disciplines and therapies on offer in the spiritual marketplace are modern applications of Gnostic teachings. There is an atavistic thirst for a direct emotional experience of 'who we were and what we have become, where we were, where we were placed. Where we are rushing to, from what we are redeemed, what birth is, and what rebirth'. This knowledge of the self in the universe is the content of gnosis, described here by Theodotus, a gnostic teacher of the second century. The purpose, now as then, is to conform us to life in this world, to quiet our rage, and soothe our despair, by the false gospel that we can escape our subjection in time.

The challenge for us is not to escape time, but to accept it in ever more radical ways. Time is the stream in which we swim and our gift is to receive the eternal in what flows and changes, to carve and shape the living waters which contain, bear and overflow us. The stars signify the createdness of the universe through the big-bang event. They show us that time is important. As Rowan Williams put it, 'The universe has a biography, a beginning and an end'. The universe is not as unlike us as we might have thought, for like us, it comes into being, develops, changes and may eventually die. The winding story of the human spirit through time and chance is not a lost story in a universe which does not change. Everything that is, including ourselves, is a product of process.

I think this affects our prayers quite directly. The drama of my life does not belong to me alone, I can no longer say 'I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul', as if my highest vocation was to become a disembodied automaton controlled by God or by the force of my own will. I am actually constituted by my relationships and my environment, and they are by me. When I approach God I do so as a creature, formed through time, scarred by time, if you like, as part of a tradition of the people of the Bible who also wind their way through time, as pilgrims. The challenge is to reconnect ourselves, as human beings, to nature without worshipping its processes or divinising ourselves. This will involve a new kind of worship. An appreciation of our freedom. A

sober recognition of pain and death. A thankfulness to a God who is strong enough and humble enough to take delight in what he has made space for in time.

Yet if we are to do this, we must face new anxieties with courage and imagination. One of the big questions posed by the new scientific story is about whether death can still have any personal meaning. Hope for a life after this one has become very vague. We may grasp at straws, like near-death experiences, fascinated, but perhaps unconvinced. What is more obvious to us is the awesomeness of death, and its naturalness. To die is to belong to nature in the most intimate way we ever do. We observe deaths on the cosmic scale. Stars die, and our star will, and our world with it. The whole universe will either peter out in a frozen blackness, or incinerate itself as it returns to its original condition. If the whole universe is temporal then so are we, and we can no longer flatter ourselves that some eternal bit of us survives the death that we know belongs to the whole of created existence.

When I think about my own death, what impresses me is the sacrificial principle by which in death we are conformed to Christ, and to the Logos at work in all nature. We all owe our death to the next generation. There is something holy about the return of the elements of our bodies to nature. 'Dust to dust, ashes to ashes.' The disintegration of the self at death is something that we could perhaps learn to endure stoically, with courage and humour as many do.

But belief in the resurrection has always been a crucial part of Christian faith. There is a triumph song in the New Testament, an alleluia, that bursts in against the odds. St Paul seems to say that, under the old dispensation, death was the last laugh on us, now we laugh at death. Because of the resurrection of Jesus Paul sees that the sacrificial principle has become a sacramental principle; the death of Jesus does not only bear fruit in others, it represents the breakthrough of humanity into eternity. 'What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body which is to be, but a bare kernel.'⁷

For most of us death is the point at which faith must be stripped of sight and become simple and naked in the face of the invisible. To die with faith in a universe like ours must mean that we die into God, into God's memory of our history, into God's providence and care for each soul that the universe has produced.

'There are celestial bodies and terrestrial bodies; but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory. So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable.'

The Apocalyptic literature is full of images of cosmic destruction. The stars will be darkened, or they will fall; the sky itself will be rolled up like a garment. These dramatic images were intended to bring comfort to believers under pressure. The destruction is the prelude to a mighty transformation, the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. The Apocalypse of St John presents Jesus Christ as the Lord of history, the First and the Last and the living one who appears between the seven lampstands, holding the seven stars in his hand. The implication is that nature is as fragile as the battered churches of this world, and will pass away in time just as they will. In the city of God at the end of the universe we will not need the sun and moon to give us light 'for the glory of God is its light and its lamp is the Lamb'.⁸

In the absence of evidence for life after death there is an unquenchable longing for transformation on the other side of destruction. Augustine writes eloquently about the human homesickness for eternity, for rest and permanence beyond this restless and impermanent world. It is very hard to be a creature in a world which is both pre-programmed and indeterminate, a world

whose vocation it is to make itself. Even physicists find it hard to relate emotionally to the sheer chanciness of existence.

That is one of the reasons why Stephen Hawking seems to suggest that at the end of the day we must always understand the universe as a product of timeless numbers. He is notoriously unclear about this in his famous book *A Brief History of Time*, but he does seem to recognise something not unlike a Platonic realm of eternal relationships, out of which our spacetime universe has bubbled up. In what sense this realm ‘exists’ he is not clear. He speaks of ‘imaginary time’ as the ground and condition of real time. He has been much criticised for this. But look at him for a moment, not just as a mind, locked in a body which has been cruelly battered by disease, but as a human person; a whole network of relationships who must tell what he believes. Am I wholly wrong to see in this insistence a vestige of the religious instinct for eternity? Not in this world, or in its creatures, but in the ultimate source and goal, the Alpha and the Omega, who was and is and is to come – and to whom be glory, now and forever and world without end.

Postword

When this lecture was delivered at Westminster Abbey Canon Reginald Askew drew my attention to Tyndale’s translation of Genesis 1:16, which emphasises the dismissiveness with which the Genesis account describes the creation of stars. It was also pointed out to me that this accurately reflects the Hebrew text which dismisses the matter of the stars in two words without even repeating the verb or using a separate article: ‘God made the two great lights, the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night. And stars.’

In the context of modern cosmology I take the message of this to be, however illustrious they are, don’t worship the ancestors.

Angela Tilby

Footnotes

¹ Deuteronomy 4:19

² Genesis 15:5

³ Jeremiah 8:2

⁴ In *The Secular City*, Pelican Books, 1968

⁵ Psalm 19:1

⁶ Isaiah 14:13

⁷ I Corinthians 15:36-37

⁸ Revelation 21:23