

Abberley Hall Sermon Sunday 15th January 2012

Last Sunday the country's most famous astrophysicist celebrated his 70th birthday. Unfortunately ill-health prevented him from joining the hundreds of scientists and well-wishers who gathered to celebrate this event, but he sent a speech to be delivered on his behalf at the climax of the four day symposium organised for him by his colleagues at Cambridge University. **"Look up at the stars and not down at your feet,"** he said, to an audience that included the world's leading cosmologists – star-gazers, in ordinary English. I wonder if any of you know who I'm talking about? Perhaps some of you have heard of his most famous book, 'A Brief History of Time'...

Only two days before that great event for the modern scientific community, the Christian church celebrated the Feast of the Epiphany – an important date in the church calendar that marks the events described in our beautiful reading tonight: the journey of the wise men, who followed the bright new star they saw in the sky all the way to the stable in Bethlehem where baby Jesus lay.

Now Stephen Hawking is a master of the universe if ever there was one. He is a mere mortal, but gifted with genius – not only a genius for physics, but also a genius for explaining complex ideas to the general public as well as university types. This gift has brought his ideas to a vast audience across the world: that book I mentioned a moment ago, 'A Brief History of Time', has sold more than 10 million copies, and Hawking has made guest appearances on The Simpsons and Star Trek. Over the years he has become an intellectual superstar, and the celebrations to mark his birthday are a tribute not only to his exceptional abilities but also to his fame among ordinary people. Part of this might be due to the extraordinary fact that Hawking's breakthroughs on subjects like black holes and quantum physics have been achieved despite the fact that he was diagnosed at the age of 21 with motor neurone disease, and has been severely disabled for most of his adult life. He has been confined to a wheelchair for most of this time, and for the last twenty-five years he has been unable to speak except through a voice synthesiser operated by tiny movements of his body.

In his birthday speech, Hawking talked about how he was no more than an average student at school. When he was 12, he said, one of his friends bet another friend a bag of sweets that Hawking would never come to anything. He had a message, in his birthday speech, that applies just as much to young people like you as to other scientists. "Be curious," he said. "Try to make sense of what you see and of what makes the universe exist. And however difficult life may seem, there is always something you can do, and succeed at. It matters that you don't just give up."

That's a powerful message from a man who has achieved so much, against such odds, as Stephen Hawking. And it's a message the wise men of our reading this evening would wholeheartedly agree with. Those cosmologists of yesteryear are, surely, the Biblical equivalent of Hawking. They certainly looked up at the stars rather than down at their feet, and persisted despite great difficulties and obstacles. And like Hawking, they made wonderful and extraordinary discoveries at the end of their long and arduous journey, following the star to Bethlehem.

Let's look briefly at some of the parallels between them.

Those of you who were listening carefully to our reading may have noticed that the new arrivals at Jesus' cradle are not described as kings – although that's how they are often thought of today. In fact, they are more likely to have been what the Greek of the New Testament calls magoi, or magi – men of great wisdom, with a particular interest in astronomy and the movement of the stars. The word magic comes from the same Greek root: there is something otherworldly and strange about the power these wise men have, just as the knowledge and wisdom of learned scientists today is something we hold in awe, especially when it gives them insight into the mysteries of the universe.

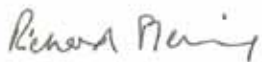
Secondly, let's think about the long journey the magi have made, following a star which they believe prophesies the birth of a king. Setting out by camel, loaded with provisions for their journey, they were probably laughed at by their fellow stargazers who didn't agree with their conclusions. The weather was terrible; the terrain

sometimes hostile; the locals suspicious; the political situation very tricky. Herod's inquiries put them on the spot, and they answered as best they could. In the final days they had to hurry to keep up, worried that they would miss the place where the star settled. And when they arrived, what did they find? A baby, lying in a manger in a stable, between humble parents. They did not turn away in disappointment: no – they knelt down and worshipped, convinced that the star was right and that before them was the king they were searching for. It is a remarkable story, and a tribute to the power of the human spirit to follow one's beliefs even when they seem ridiculous. They might have been following the advice today's wise man gave last weekend, "Try to make sense of what you see, and however difficult life may seem, there is always something you can do, and succeed at. It matters that you don't just give up."

Of course, in some ways it's easier for us than it was for the wise men. The narrative of the story of Christmas, and indeed the rest of Jesus' life is laid out for us in the New Testament. We can put our trust in this historical account in a way that the wise men of that first Epiphany could not – and the whole structure of the Church, and its yearly pattern of festivals, makes following Christ more straightforward.

But in some ways it's more difficult now. When most people talk about stars, and looking up to them, they mean pop stars and film stars, the stars of the Premier League and of reality TV. There are so many different stars to follow today that sometimes it's not clear exactly what we are kneeling to and worshipping, even if we call ourselves Christians. There is the star of personal fulfillment; the star of ambition; the star of individual success. All of them are shiny and seductive and alluring. They tempt us with their own kind of truth. 'Come and be successful' they whisper: 'see what we can give you.' Those of you who know the Bible will know that Jesus was only too familiar with the false lure of worldly success and riches, but it doesn't take a genius like Stephen Hawking to realise that the temptations of the world grow greater for every generation – at least in the West.

How refreshing it is, therefore, to celebrate, at this very time of year, the birthday of a man whose life has been devoted to the pursuit of wisdom and truth, rather than of fame and fortune – even if he's acquired some of those along the way. How good it is to remember that one of the superstars of our lifetime is someone who has overcome all sorts of difficulties to follow his goal with as much zeal as the wise men. I leave you with his words: "Be curious. Look up at the stars and not down at your feet."



Richard Fleming
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