

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, o lord; my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

During these challenging times I've been trying to think positively about the good things that have happened for our planet in 2020 and in this year, and there were some: greater awareness of the link between human and planetary health - some of the clearest skies in living memory; the first stage of acceleration towards greener development and energy transition; and the belated realisation that our current approaches to agriculture and livestock production create conditions that allow pathogens to jump to humans.

And we could add a bunch of exciting things which happened in space programmes and that will continue in 2021 as we earthbound creatures continue our search for answers to the mysteries of the universe.

This year three missions to Mars; eight missions to study asteroids; and the new James Webb space telescope, will reveal the secrets - or some of them - of the early universe. But none of them will reveal the mystery of God.

We now know so much more about the nature of the created universe than our ancestors did, due to better equipment and better science. The excellent Bill Bryson, in his brief history of everything, gives an image of the Royal Albert Hall in London full to the brim with frozen peas. And each pea, he says, could represent one of the galaxies now visible from earth.

And this is mind-blowing knowledge, only available since the mid-20th century; information about the universe inconceivable to our ancestors, and giving us fascinating insights into the remote history of our planet.

But such scientific progress has not been matched by progress in theology, and we have yet to develop a realistic vision of Christian life not enclosed in the world views of antiquity, but taking into account the realities of present-day experience.

And now might be that time, when we've been forced to move away from a building-focused Christianity, towards one that has rather more elastic boundaries; a church for all seasons; for all times; for all cultures; and perhaps, indeed, for all planets. And in order to do this we need to develop a way of seeing Christ in all things, that can help us lift our sights here, now, where we are.

A cosmic Christ, where the creator's love and presence are grounded in the created world, and the mental distinction between natural, and supernatural, falls apart.

The revelation of the risen Christ, as ubiquitous and eternal, is clearly affirmed in scripture - we've just had an example in our epistle today from Colossians - as it was indeed in the early church when the euphoria of the Christian message was still creative and expanding. But then things disintegrated, and unfortunately for much of the remaining two thousand years of Christianity we've framed faith in terms of problem and threat, and the need for verbal orthodoxy, plus exploitation of the world justified by Genesis.

And without a sense of its inherent sacredness, we've exploited and damaged the world and its inhabitants, whether plant or animal or the very air we breathe indeed. We need to move towards an incarnational worldview, to the profound recognition of the presence of the divine in literally everything and everyone.

To reconcile our inner worlds, with the outer one: unity with diversity; physical with spiritual; divine with human. Christianity has become clannish, but it need not remain so. A merely personal God becomes tribal and sentimental, and a merely universal God never leaves the realms of abstract theory and philosophy.

No amount of space programmes will tell us why God created the heavens and the earth. Was there a divine intention, or goal? Most traditions will offer explanations that envisage the concept that everything that exists in material form is the offspring of some primal source which once existed only in spirit, and God is the infinite primal source which somehow poured itself into finite, visible forms, creating everything from rocks to water, plants, organisms, animals, and humans; everything that we can see with our eyes, or feel with our senses.

The spirit of God hovered over the water, and then immediately the material universe became visible in its depth, and its meaning.

But much, much later, the spirit of God - the universal presence - becomes born of a woman and dies upon a cross. God's presence was poured into a single human being, so that humanity, and divinity, could be seen as operating as one, in him.

Jesus made it very clear in his teachings that when you saw Him you were also looking at God the Father. And this is the point made in John's prologue, that it is the person of Christ where we can see what God is like.

My favourite eucharistic prayer puts this rather well: "in him we see our God made visible, so that we are caught up in love of the God we cannot see".

And, in theory, we know that understanding God is beyond us, and we're taught that it's not necessary to understand; it is just enough to believe. Yet many of us try to spend our lives trying to do the impossible: to understand the nature of God; to seek God; or even just try to find a way to seek God, for that would be enough.

We accept the premise that our God is immortal and invisible, but also, I suspect, secretly envy those first apostles who had God with them, the very person of God incarnate in Jesus sitting around a table, eating with them, teaching them, healing them.

One of the collects set for today has the words "teach us to discern your hand in all your works", and this includes, alas, the current plague, with all its ramifications, and what we must learn from it. And what are we learning? Revelations about human greed, and stupidity, and disregard for God's laws but also the boundless, selfless, inexhaustible, kindness of many and that there is no limit to God-inspired human ingenuity in medical research.

But above all we are learning about mechanisms to cope, to create community, to see beyond the present, to look beyond the incarnation of Christ that we think we can understand, to an infinitely larger vision, an eternal, cosmic Christ.

And, perhaps, when we are depressed with the current state of the world and our lives, it might be well to remember the words of Thomas Merton: "No despair of ours can alter the reality of things, nor stain the joy of the cosmic dance which is always there". Amen.