

# SOF Sermon

Ronald Pearse preached this sermon in All Saints' Church, Loughborough, on 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2014, the sixtieth anniversary of his ordination.

At the age of nearly eleven I had my first grammar school science lesson. It laid down the principles of science. I must have been impressed, as I remember bits of them still. They showed an impersonal, objective method, not dependent on the mood or feelings of the practitioner.

A little over three years later I was sent to confirmation classes at our parish church. I went obediently and without enthusiasm but I stuck it out and in due course I was confirmed. I was bewildered by the communion service that I was subsequently sent to.

One day the vicar asked me to be a server. I didn't know what that meant and my dictionary didn't enlighten me. But I became one and was taught what to do.

Then gradually I found I was in a welcoming community – with the other servers, with other young people who stood and talked in the road outside after services, with the curate leading us on rambles in the Surrey countryside on bank holidays and with a churchwarden who said an occasional strategic word. I remember thinking of the church as 'my club'.

I became aware that this 'club' had a long history. It had dogmas and an authority structure. I came to think that these must be true and right. But I continued at school and chose science in the sixth form.

When I was called up for National Service – as a Bevin Boy – I found that only a tiny few of my fellows went to church.

Recently, while downsizing my belongings before Elizabeth and I move south to be near our daughter, I came across a slim book which I bought in the 1940's called *How Heathen Is Britain?* Re-reading it, I found that the author had interviewed many national service men of that period and his findings were that if Christianity

had been taught properly they would have accepted it, but it hadn't been taught well. The implication of this seemed to be that teachers and the clergy had failed in this. Another book I remember from those days was about vocations to the priesthood.

I took all this into my thinking about what I should do when I was released from my three years' national service. Eventually and with much hesitation I went to talk to the vicar of the parish. He encouraged the thought that I should offer myself for ordination. My parents were startled, but helpful, and I was accepted for training for ordination in the Church of England.

I thought that the university course in theology would help me to tackle the work of teaching Christianity properly – as that slim book had urged. Looking back now, I can see that I was disappointed in this. The academic theology that I was taught was dull – with one exception. Our Old Testament lecturer was brilliant! He had begun life as a Jewish boy in Berlin. As a youth he managed to escape from the Nazis, came to England and eventually became an Anglican priest. He enlightened us about the human origin of some of the stories in the Bible.

When eventually I transferred to the post-graduate department of the college, in Wiltshire, the whole situation brightened. There we had varied and interesting courses in matters that would be useful to a parish priest – and tiny glimpses of a more modern theology. The pastoral care of us by the staff was superb and not limited to our year of residence there. I didn't consciously think of the place as 'my club', as I had in the first congregation I was a member of – but, looking back, I see that it had the same supportive qualities.

I was ordained deacon five days after our Queen's coronation, when the nation was glowing

with the thought of a coming, new and golden 'Elizabethan Age'.

Mount Everest had been conquered the day before the coronation and the Church of England glowed with reflected glory from its hosting of the coronation service.

The golden age may not have developed as we hoped, but life for the nation, for the Church and for me went on developing in various ways. The basic attraction from my school days of both the scientific method of thinking and religious faith continued, with varying degrees of emphasis. I learned much from the parishes I served in, especially Asfordby, where I was incumbent for a very long time. I revelled in both the history and care of its mediaeval church building and some very open discussion groups with parishioners about modern life.

My twin concerns – to think scientifically and with religious faith – continued roughly in parallel, but sometimes with tension. I could feel the difference at times between local secular committees I was invited to join, and some church committees. At one stage the chair of a diocesan committee suggested I should resign from it as I was 'rocking the boat'. (I had opposed a rather medieval way of dealing with a pastoral situation.) But my two concerns came close – I hope harmoniously – when I delivered a series of sermons favourably in step with a television series on Darwin's voyage in HMS Beagle.

Eventually my second incumbency ended with retirement a year early because of arthritic problems. (I remember gratefully the kindly help of undertakers' men when my movements at funerals became difficult – and the bishop's permission to sit when conducting services!) Retirement found me rather bewildered at first. Eventually, Elizabeth and I found our way here to All Saints' and I have been grateful to experience again the 'my club' feeling of being welcomed and supported that was my first church experience of long ago.

For a number of years I have also felt the encouragement of belonging to a group of religiously minded people inside and outside the churches that started in and around Loughborough, following a BBC series thirty

years ago entitled *The Sea of Faith*. During this time my two 'outlooks' of thinking both scientifically and religiously have continued harmoniously and in parallel.

Until last year – when they became united as one! This unity came from reading a book by a New Zealand Presbyterian theologian, qualified with degrees in both mathematics – on which science relies heavily – and theology. This book draws on the insights of a French Jesuit priest and scientist a generation ago named Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and but goes further in offering a breath-taking outline of the scientific history of the enormously long process of evolution – the origin and evolution – of the universe, of our planet earth, of life on this planet and of our human species, including the evolution of human culture, of which religious faith is part. I consider this book, entitled *From the Big Bang to God*, to be, for me, the most important one I have read for a long time.

Other animal species have, like us, developed the power to think, but we seem to be the only species to think and to be consciously aware that we think. A bird may think instinctively about which twigs to choose when building its nest, but we can think to a consciously designed purpose. We are in fact an expression of the universe's slowly evolving self-consciousness. This is a risky situation to be in. We know that we can consciously choose less than good purposes. And our news programmes bring us accounts of consciously chosen malpractices that cause great harm. Life is risky – as Jesus found.

I therefore see my life as a privilege – the privilege of being a time-limited, and proportionately brief, part of this whole, enormously long, growth to cosmic self-consciousness.

This privilege brings with it the duty of living my life and using it creatively and lovingly. In other words I have the opportunity, the privilege and the duty of following the teaching of the Jewish Sage, Jesus of Nazareth – to love our neighbour as ourselves – and so working to bring about what he called – using the language of his day – the kingdom of heaven.

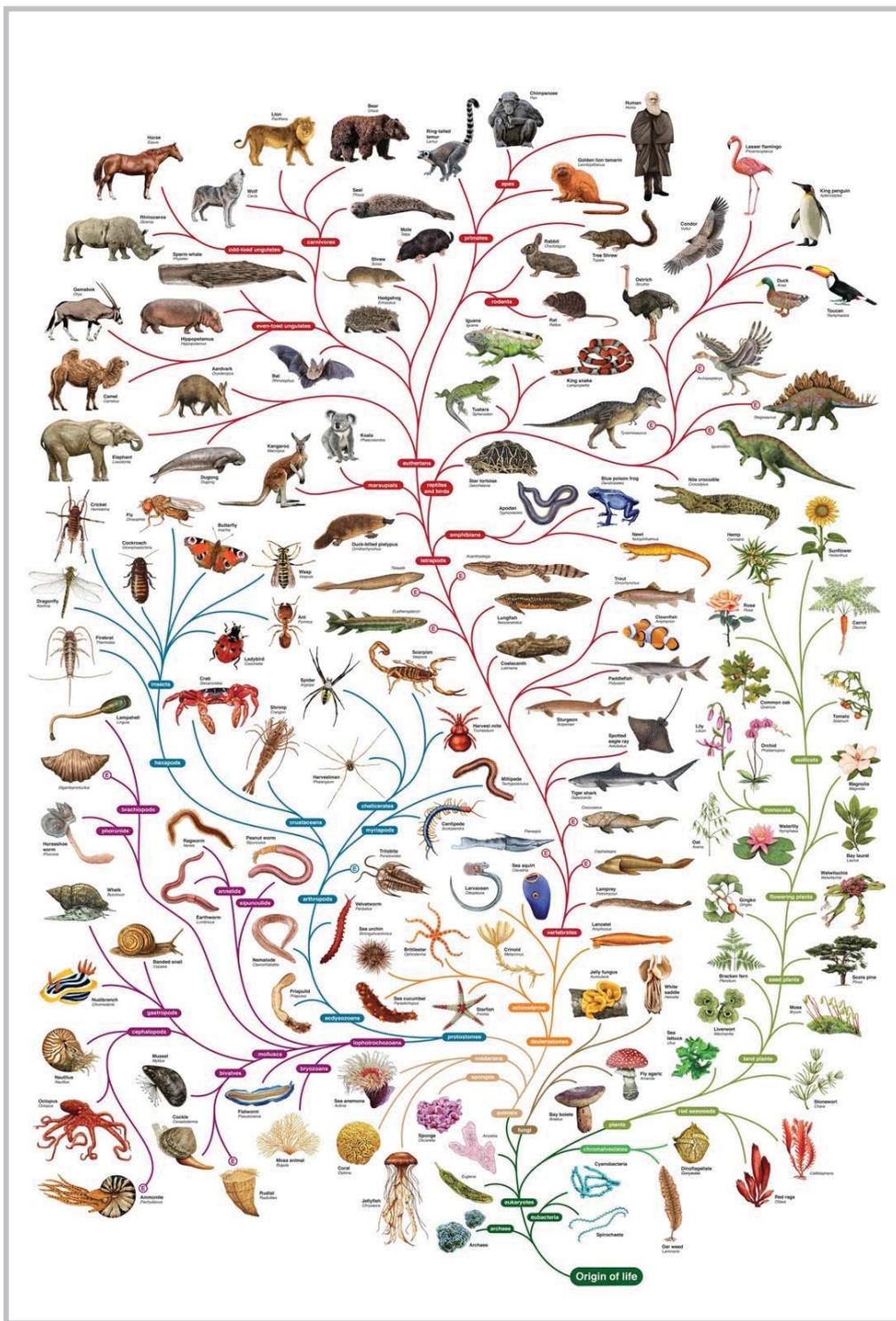
What an amazing privilege this is! It is marred by our petty failures to follow it up – and by the

greater evil doings that appear on our TV news screens. But we all have the opportunity to repent – to re-orientate ourselves.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus helped his hearers to stretch their concept of who was their neighbour. Nowadays, of course, we need our idea of who is our neighbour or our brother to be stretched beyond those of a class within our society – the Levite of our own time – or the Samaritan, someone just beyond our borders. Our neighbour may be someone of a different faith tradition or political party or in a far distant country or caught in the poverty trap here. And, perhaps, supremely, the fragile surface of our planet Earth, on which we all depend for our survival, and which is in current danger of being steadily destroyed, is to be cherished as our neighbour.

All this is now my religious faith – a privilege and a responsibility – arising from a conjunction of the scientists’ study of the universe and the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth.

Thank you.



Making Connections. This 'Tree of Life' image of evolution shows how all life on Earth is connected.

Ronald Pearse is a founder member of SOF Network. He was its Secretary for 20 years and is now its honorary archivist. This sermon, his first for ten years, was preached on the sixtieth anniversary of his ordination. It was greeted with applause in what is 'definitely not a happy-clappy church'.