

## Sunday 6 April 2008 : The Third Sunday of Easter

### Then their eyes were opened

**Readings: Zephaniah 3:14-end; Luke 24: 13-35**

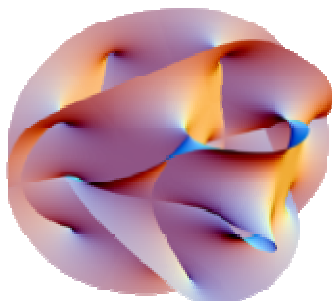
*They stood still looking sad. .... When he was at table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognised him.”*

The late physicist Richard Feynman once gave a famous interview to BBC's Horizon programme in which he explained that while he could experience the beauty of a flower as fully as an artist, he felt that his knowledge of science actually enhanced his enjoyment of it and enabled him to wonder further at the beauty not visible to the eye – the atomic and subatomic processes and structures that formed the flower.

During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the search for the deepest understanding of how the world around us is structured sent physicists off in two directions, the very large and the very small. At the very large end, Einstein's theory of general relativity dominated, and successfully explained many of the features of astronomical observations, including the development of the Big Bang model of the expanding universe. At the other end of the scale, quantum mechanics enabled our understanding of the subatomic world and again successfully explained and predicted many of the results of experimental investigation. The problem was and is that when the worlds of the very large and very tiny collide, such as for example the centre of a black hole, relativity and quantum mechanics seem to contradict one another. Einstein himself recognised that to understand those extreme situations when large and small are one, including the very origin of the universe, required something to unify relativity and quantum theory. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and to present day, the search for a unification theory, 'A theory of everything' has been the Holy Grail of theoretical physics. Amongst the candidates put forward for this theory of everything, have been string theory, superstring theory, brane (short for membrane) theory and the latest 'M' theory where 'M' according to its creator, Edward Witten could stand for membrane, matrix, magic or mystery depending on taste! If the search for a theory of everything seems arrogant in the extreme, then Witten has the humility to say that 'M' could also stand for 'murky' because it's so difficult to understand; and string theorists at least have the decency to tell jokes against themselves like the philandering string theorist who when confronted by his wife said, "But darling, I can explain everything!".

One of the common features of these theories is that they require us to accept that instead of the four dimensions (3-dimensional space plus the added dimension of time) that is our common observational experience, the world around us actually exists in 10 or even 11 dimensions. In the world of strings, most of those dimensions are curled up so tightly that we can never see them, but the mathematics of the theory tells they are there, and at the extremes of experimental investigation, the effects of those hidden dimensions might be observed.

This picture is called a Calabi-



Yau shape and is an attempt by

mathematicians to create an image of a slice through a 10-dimensional object.

*Then their eyes were opened and they recognised him.*

The best creative art, like the best creative science and mathematics has the capacity to take us into a world beyond that which is normally observable. Below is the famous picture by Caravaggio of the incident described in our Gospel reading today - the Supper at Emmaus. You can appreciate the picture properly over the road at the National Gallery. It is without a doubt my favourite painting of all time – it's fantastic! It's an extraordinarily dynamic, almost breathless, picture, and one which I find it almost impossible to look at without being drawn into what's happening.



It may be painted on two-dimensional canvas, but looking at the figures you feel that we've caught them full movement. In the centre Jesus is seated with his hand stretched out blessing a small loaf of bread. And it seems that it is this action which has triggered every other movement that is happening in the picture. At the front of the table is a basket of fruit. It's balanced on the edge and it looks as we've just caught the moment when it's about to topple over – you almost feel you want to rush forward to catch it.

The two other seated figures also seem to be propelled by an unseen energy. One of them grips the arms of the chair as if he about to be forced out of it. The other man has his arms flung wide open in a gesture of awe and amazement. Both of them are so vividly 3 (or 4 dimensional) that they look as though they are about burst through the canvas. And it's these very people who, our Gospel reading told us, were just a few hours previously were stuck in the 1-dimensional world of "standing still, looking sad".

For me, the picture captures the very heart of resurrection – a vision, an energy that both draws me and takes me beyond my normal frame of reference. For me, the picture captures the very heart of the Eucharist. The real moment of revelation that should force us to our feet or to throw our arms wide in amazement as we realise that in simple bread and wine, the risen Jesus is made visible before our eyes. For me, the picture captures the very heart of the Christian hope and the possibility of transformation. For me this picture conveys another theory writ large – "R" theory where 'R' might stand for Resurrection, Revelation or Reality according to taste.

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We might not agree with Richard Feynmann that knowledge enables us to appreciate beauty to an even greater extent, but it's the gift of prophets, whether in the world of religion, art, or even science to point us to look beyond the surface, and to see beyond the obvious; to those

places and moments and encounters when the invisible dimensions unravel and we see and experience with a clarity and a wonder that is unimaginable. The prophet Zephaniah, who we heard earlier, like so many of the Hebrew prophets, speaks harsh words of judgement to the people of Israel who repeatedly failed in faith and trust as people of the covenant. But he also encouraged people to have their eyes open and to see differently, to recognise a new dimension of hope, redemption and transformation made possible in the love and mercy of God; a dimension of life beyond death that is was and is and continues to be made real in the resurrection of Christ.

*At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord.*

Where, or who or what are the prophets and the prophetic actions that open our eyes to see differently enable us to experience realities and dimensions beyond the obvious? What for us are the encounters where the hidden dimensions unravel and enable us to know ourselves as God's resurrection people; those moments when we know how things are and also *really* know how things are?

I know I'm one of the those people who experience those eye-opening moments more readily in the world of ideas, than in the world of relationships, so if the thought of God as a theoretical physicist has left you reeling, then here, perhaps surprisingly, is a moment of encounter I experienced recently when the hidden dimensions of resurrection reality unravelled and just for a moment I could see.

Last week, Ally Hargreaves, our business operations manager and I were walking around our new underground spaces, part of our renewal project still being worked on. Ironically we were looking at signs, at some of the temporary signage we've been developing around the site. We walked into the new Dick Sheppard Chapel where one the builders was laying floor grilles, and got into conversation with him. "This is going to be a chapel, isn't it?" he said. "I'd love to see it when it's all finished. Do you know," he went on, "15 years ago I was homeless, and that place there", pointing at the Connection, "helped get me my first flat. I still know some of the people there. I was 21 then," he said, "I'm 36 now and I'm working to build this place. I can't believe it."

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