

Psalm 1
John 12:27-36
(strangely) there

ForeWord

Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz of the Galactic Hyperspace Planning Council is probably not a name any of you have ever had reason to invoke.

That said, some of you will have fond memories of having read or listened to the radio play versions of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, in which the Vogons feature, and which opens with the destruction of Earth to make way for an intergalactic highway.

The end of our world is announced with the arrival of a fleet of bulldozing spaceships. A line which has fixed itself in my mind ever since I first read the book describes the sight of these “huge as office blocks, silent as birds” ships: *The ships hung in the sky in much the same way that bricks don’t*.

Quoting more fully:

The great ships hung motionless in the sky, over every nation on Earth. Motionless they hung, huge, heavy, steady in the sky, a blasphemy against nature. Many people went straight into shock as their minds tried to encompass what they were looking at. The ships hung in the sky in much the same way that bricks don’t.

The striking thing about this last sentence is that it’s both immediately clear, and then immediately not so clear, what is meant.

Clearly, bricks don’t hang in the air, if we take “brick” and “air” to mean what they usually mean. And a spaceship, in this description, corresponds to a brick. But it is clearly also not-brick, because if the air is just air, the spaceship should fall.

It matters here that the ship doesn’t hang in the air in the way a helicopter might. The noise a helicopter makes indicates how hard it is trying not to be like a brick. And, presumably, there would be a technological explanation for why the spaceships don’t do what bricks do. But this is not the point. The point is the “blasphemy against nature”. The ships don’t “fit”. They have no meaning in the sense we’ve considered before: we can’t “locate” them. And yet they are there, in such a way that we have to speak about their “thereness” as something *sheer*. They are wrongly, but starkly and strongly, “there”. And this sheer thereness corresponds to the shock of the news: the world is about to end.

My interest in all this is not the possibility of space travel or how advanced alien tech might be. I want instead to compare Douglas Adams’ description of those cosmic bulldozers to the crucifixion of Jesus.

Admittedly, this is a connection you’ve probably not thought much about until now, so let me fast-track you into it. An apparent difference between Jesus and the spaceships is that Jesus hangs in the air (on the cross) precisely the way a condemned criminal *does*. There is no surprise here. Seen it all before. People get crucified, and this is what it looks like.

If we think about the cross these days, it's typically in terms of the suffering it entailed and so the "price" Jesus paid. But there's not a lot of this in John's Gospel. Disrupting once more our normal sensitivities, John doesn't quite do suffering. He's not dispassionate; he is just doing something else. (We might note in passing here that Jesus asks, "...what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. ")

Our Gospel text today has Jesus speaking of his being "lifted up", in an apparent reference to his crucifixion. But, for John, this is not *merely* a crucifixion. While Jesus is made to hang there in the way that condemned criminals typically did, this lifting up also has Jesus hanging there *strangely*, in the way that bricks don't.

But, before we go any further, let's pause for a moment to listen for the Word of God in the hearing of the Scriptures...

Word: The Testimony of Scripture

(→ Hearing: John 12. 27-36)

Word : Proclamation

Jesus speaks several times in John's gospel of being "lifted up". The expression is one of John's many wordplays.

The lifting up is clearly a raising in the ghastly mode of a crucifixion. But the term also has overtones of a different kind of elevation. In particular, this elevation can also be a coronation.

And this changes dramatically what we are invited to see. The cross is now not a place of suffering or some saving transaction. The cross is here more like a throne upon which is "seated" (hangs) the king.

But, as an elevation, a coronation, the point is not quite that a king is crucified, whether intentionally or accidentally. To the extent that the crucifixion is a coronation, Jesus *becomes* king in the process of crucifixion. And so, on this reading, Jesus' death upon the cross becomes the high point of the story, the point at which he comes to himself, rather than merely the point at which his executioners reject him.

But now a strange question presents itself. If the cross is indeed the high point of the story, what then of the resurrection? We have to say that the resurrection is no longer necessary for the story to be true or complete, although it's essential if we are to *know* that the cross is the high point. We've seen this once or twice in our Gospel of John reflections over the last few months. The story peaks at the cross, but no one will know this unless something happens to give us a different way of seeing the cross, which is the work of the resurrection.

But if the cross is the climax of the story – the point at which Jesus becomes king – then the crucifixion is no longer a familiar tragedy but is suddenly deeply anomalous. Jesus, like those cosmic bulldozers, hangs "motionless, heavy, steady in the sky, a blasphemy against nature" – against everything by which we have measured what is right and what is wrong, what is divine and what is worldly, what is life and what is death.

Here, as with the arrival of Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz with all his bureaucratic planet-destroying efficiency, is the end of the world, the revaluation of all values, a kind of blasphemy against what had been true until that moment. The cross is the least human, least kingly, least Godly of places. But it's here that Jesus is declared to be the one in whom God reigns: the "king".

This is not merely neat or even profound "theology". Faith doesn't interpret the stories of Jesus to make sense of them. Rather, out of those stories, faith interprets the world to

make sense of it. The cross is to our sense of ourselves and our world what a suspended brick would be: a blasphemy against our typical ordering of things and, so, a new thought, a new vision.

How Jesus is, is how we are to be. The Christian – or, better, the properly and truly human being – will be strange like this, will be blasphemous like this, will surprise and shock.

The cross is what it would be like for all the guns and the bombs just to stop, without explanation. It is like the soldiers just packing their gear into their jeeps and going home, not because the war is over but to *make* the war over. The cross is the stunned, brick-in-the-air-like silence which such an impossible thing would require – before the ecstatic, jubilant, shout-out-loud joy.

The cross is like living as if death were not there, lurking, fearsome.

The cross is mercy which shatters the shackles of hard justice.

The cross is all such impossible things, hanging in the air in much the same way that a brick doesn't, inexplicable, and utterly glorious. In the midst of death's dismal order, this has the power to draw all people, to see and to marvel that such things could be (Nicodemus, again!).

This is our faith. And to hold this faith is to hear that this is what *we ourselves* are to become: such impossible things, such unexpected blasphemy against the natural but oppressive order of the world – the light of the glory of God in a humanity fully alive, contradicting the reign of death.

This is our gift, our calling, and our prayer.

And all God's people say...
