

We've all heard that the answer to life, the universe and everything is 42, as calculated by Deep Thought, the greatest supercomputer of all time. Not to be outdone by our curate I too will quote from the Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy. Deep Thought went on to predict the coming of a greater computer which would work out, if the answer was 42, what on earth the question was. "I speak of none other than the one who is to come after me, whose operational parameters I am not worthy to calculate." Not actually very relevant to what I want to say this morning, but my wife said I normally only quote Tolkien in my sermons, so... this is just to give you a bit of variety.

John the Baptist's words ("I speak of none other than the one who is to come after me...") are so familiar they can even turn up in the most unlikely of places. And isn't that the problem? We're so used to these stories we feel they have an inevitability. We might think that John the Baptist lived just in order to be able to say these words, point to Jesus, and then get neatly removed from the story by getting himself executed. Seen from our perspective these events seem inevitable, pre-ordained, but the world's not like that, is it? If our having free will is to mean anything then the future is not already fixed. Our everyday experience is that we could do one thing or another. The future is not predetermined. But when we read these familiar stories we have a sense that they take place in another world. If we were to go back to the time of John the Baptist and stand next to him, I suspect it would look different. The story is not mapped out in advance. A man's life is not predetermined, even in Biblical times, which is after all, not a fairy tale, but part of the history of this world.

If we begin to consider this it has far-reaching implications. Think of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, struggling with what lies ahead of him. Is he going to go through with it or not? Is he going to resist arrest? Run away? Surely the story is reduced to meaningless if we say that he did not actually have a genuine choice. But then he might have run away, back to Galilee, not gone to the cross. Wouldn't that mean that he then wouldn't have been the Messiah? Would that mean that the man Jesus of Nazareth would not later have been identified as the Son of God, even as God himself? If it depends on the choices Jesus made in his lifetime, for example, in the Garden.

"But you're forgetting about the virgin birth" you might say to me. But the virgin birth is much disputed as a historical event, including among theologians and Christians, although sometimes people feel they ought not to let the side down by airing their views except in academic circles. It was interesting to see some feedback on the blue board at the back of church from one of the Explorer Groups, which said that no-one in the group believed the virgin birth was important. Such heresies sitting quietly at the back of our church! Well, in a way, that's what the Explorer House Groups are for- to give people a forum to be able freely to discuss and say what they really think.

Now, I'm not going to spoil the straightforward Christmas Story at a service where lots of children are present but adults should at least countenance, *for example*, the possibility that the virgin birth of Jesus be not a literally true fact. It could be metaphorically true, that is, a powerful way, in a narrative, story form, of expressing the Christian belief that we see God in the person of Jesus Christ. Of course to moot such possibilities is nothing new. You've heard bishops in the C of E in recent

decades say such things, provoking simplistic headlines “Bishop denies the Resurrection”. You may have gone along with much of the media which seems to think it is in a position to tell academic theologians what they ought to believe.

I suggest to you that is akin to teaching physics. First you learn about the mechanics of a solid, reliable world in which objects follow clear, common-sense rules. Only later do you learn that it’s not quite as simple as that. There’s quantum mechanics and relativity to take into account. That’s not to say that the initial teaching (Newtonian mechanics for example) was rubbish. It isn’t. It’s powerful and very useful, but it’s not the last word: it *is* a simplification of reality. So too, maybe, some of the straightforward stories of our faith.

So I hope that Sunday School teachers do teach the simple Bible stories. Take every word literally as some people do, and there’s quite enough to get your teeth into and to change your life. As young people get older we have Youth Church, to encourage young people to ask questions, and to realise that looking a bit deeper is a good and healthy thing to do. And then God forbid that from adults should be withheld mature teaching, to think about *if* they want to.

*Maybe* the virgin birth story is not literal fact, *maybe* it’s a way of saying that we perceive Jesus to be divine. We’d love certainty but all these “maybes” are there because accepting uncertainty is another aspect of thinking like adults.

I do realise that you may not like this sort of teaching. It rocks the boat and there’s a fear that it could be the thin end of the wedge. If it’s what you want, I would encourage you to go with

the straightforward literal story- I’m not rubbishing that. I’m just saying that some of it *may* be metaphorically rather than literally true. On the other hand, be encouraged if you *do* find yourself questioning things. Your faith might be quite shaky or you may long ago have pushed your uncertainties to one side because they were just too unsettling. You may have a sense that you’re going through the motions of churchgoing and prefer not to think too hard about the central claims of the Christian faith. So if that’s you, be encouraged that there *are* other ways to understand the Christian message *and* that such thinking does *not* necessarily lead you to lose your faith.

In fact I suspect that more people lose their faith because they have never moved beyond Sunday School faith. Then they wake up one day and think: This is all nonsense!

It’s sometimes said that the church is like a swimming pool. All the noise comes from the shallow end. This is particularly worrying when you think about the impression given to non-churchgoers. I was speaking to an old gentleman a couple of days ago. “I’d love to go to church,” he said, “but I find too much of what is said in church just incredible.” And, you know, many clergy and others who have studied theology are aware of the uncertainty surrounding many issues. (The virgin birth is the example I’ve mentioned today.) Vicars for example who do still have a Christian faith, but they don’t speak about these grey areas from the pulpit for fear of upsetting their congregations.

But I want to encourage anyone to whom this rings a bell- let’s not stay in the shallow end of the pool. For God’s sake, and the sake of his kingdom, let’s be deep, and thoughtful, and wise, and encounter the true and living God.

So I'm arguing that the future is not fixed. No-one's life is inevitable, including characters in the Bible. We've explored some of the implications of that, for example, Jesus in Gethsemane and at what point do we start to call him the unique son of God- does that depend on his choices in life?

Today we're supposed to be thinking about John the Baptist so let's think about *his* future not being fixed. We heard the familiar reading, "One who is coming is greater than I. I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals." We know that John the Baptist was executed around the time of the beginning of Jesus' ministry. That is the way it happened but might it have been otherwise? What if John had been released from prison? Might he have become one of the apostles? Might he even have remained the leader and Jesus remained one of his followers? The mind boggles! Perhaps not, as JtB is recorded as saying the one who comes after me is greater. Jesus and John knew each other and perhaps John had long known that he would hand on the mantle of leadership to Jesus his cousin. But fascinating to think. If you don't believe the events were somehow fixed then at least John might not have been executed.

You may be thinking, what about the prophecies that foretold the events of John and Jesus? But again I suggest we can see this in a very simplistic way. The Old Testament prophets may have been expressing a trust or hope that God would rescue them, send another king like David, and *we* see those hopes fulfilled in Jesus. Or the prophets are writing about something happening in their own times such as the so-called Suffering Servant passages "Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, so he did not open his mouth. The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." In

retrospect we Christians rightly see these words to have been fulfilled to the uttermost in Jesus but I think we would be simplistic to understand prophecy as a magical foretelling. It seems as if every other film these days has an ancient prophecy and some character turns out to be "the chosen one" and, do what they may, the prophecy will come true. Great entertainment maybe, but surely not the way the world really works, and the real world includes the world of OT prophecies.

So JtB may have long known that Jesus would become the leader but he surely didn't know that he (John) would be arrested and executed. It was not all fixed or pre-ordained. Let's rescue these stories in our minds from the realm of fairy tale. Jesus and John the Baptist are part of real history, just as much as the Battle of Hastings and the 2nd World War. We should care about what's really true.

Because the main role of JtB in the NT is to point to Jesus we don't mind too much that he gets executed. The grisly story of his head on a platter is one of the dramatic moments of the gospels, with its memories of colourful drawings in Children's Bibles of long ago. From our perspective John fulfilled his role so it doesn't matter. But if you were JtB you would feel differently about it! Even if you *were* happy to step aside to make room for Jesus, planning to do so, it's still your life we're talking about: whether you die young in Herod's dungeon or live on for many more years.

We think of John as very different from ourselves. But is he? What I'm really saying today is that the course of no-one's life is inevitable. Has God given you a job to do? What part can you play in bringing God's kingdom nearer? Somehow John was

open to hear God's guidance and direction for his life. Well, are we?

In particular, John looked to the future. He pointed forward, but he died before he saw its fulfilment. He didn't even live long enough to be a witness to the resurrection. For John and his family and friends his untimely death would have been a tragedy. From the perspective of eternity we see that he played a vital role and his short life and death almost look pre-determined. But the course of his life wasn't pre-ordained any more than ours are. He worked for the future, for a better world. In pointing to Jesus he led many to follow Christ. He made a difference in the world, but not because it was written. Our lives are also not inevitable. Like John, we can work for a better world and look to the future, whether we live to see it or not.