



Then God said, "Let lights appear in the sky to separate the day from the night. Let them be signs to mark the seasons, days and years. And let them serve as lights in the expanse of the sky to shine upon the earth." And it was so.

Genesis 1:14-15

FOOD FOR THE HUMAN SPIRIT

When NASA released the first photos from the James Webb Telescope, the director of the Vatican Observatory, Br Guy Consolmagno sj stated:

The images are gorgeous, as anyone can see for themselves. It's a tantalising glimpse of what we'll be able to learn about the universe in the future.

The science behind this telescope is our attempt to use our God-given intelligence to understand the logic of the universe.

This is God's creation being revealed to us, and in it we can see both God's astonishing power and God's love of beauty.

BEYOND IMAGES, BEYOND WORDS ...

Thomas O'Loughlin is a priest of the Catholic Diocese of Arundel & Brighton and professor emeritus of historical theology at Nottingham University. His first response to the images from the James Webb Telescope was Wow! What follows is drawn from an essay he wrote in response to the images.

OUR WONDER JUST GROWS

For the whole of human history we have stared up into the night sky and wondered – but our wonder just grows as we look at these images. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) once opined that one reason humans stood up-right was so that we could turn our heads upwards to look at the wonders of the night sky! Looking upwards reminded us of the complexity of the creation.

The images show light that has been travelling for BILLIONS of years – thousands of millions of years – and so over an extent that is, literally, beyond comprehension. It looks back into an earlier 'moment' in the evolution of the universe than we cannot imagine – yet we see a simple fact: these photographs.

I can imagine a year, a decade, a lifetime. The historian tries to train his or her imagination to appreciate that distance back to the time of Jesus, or the builders of the pyramids, or the first cultural marks made by Neanderthals. Going back hundreds of thousands of years in tracing evolution to the time of Australopithecus and the early hominins is actually just an abstraction – we cannot really grasp such time spans. How do we even begin to grasp the time-spans in these new photographs?

EMBRACING MYSTERY

For some – that these pictures challenge neat, well boxed ideas about 'Made by God' are taken to mean that God, faith and religion is all just bunkum. For others – that there is a difference between these images and their simplistic reading of the Book of Genesis sets up a challenge of 'science versus faith.' 'To believe in creation is not to accept any story as a factual account, but to embrace all the wonder and complexity around us – and then appreciate that there is still the Mystery and that the Mystery is loving. I heard a physicist say recently that she was 'still a Catholic' and a believer in God 'even though I know I should believe in the Book of Genesis.' She is not alone.

For many – both those who claim belief and those who reject belief – it seems to be an either/or. This is a failure of our preaching and our teaching – and of understanding. One believes in God; one listens to books. One tries to love the Creator; one tries to appreciate our myths. The truth is one – and it is our conviction that whenever we grasp even the smallest little bit of truth that it is a little bit of the work of the Creator and eventually will fit with all the other little bits. But we will only come to 'the truth' at the end of time.

TRUTH IS NOT OUR POSSESSION

The truth is one – and it is our conviction that whenever we grasp even the smallest little bit of truth that it is a little bit of the work of the Creator and eventually will fit with all the other little bits. But we will only come to 'the truth' at the end of time. For now, both in our scientific work and in our human journey we move forward in darkness. Truth is our desire, our destination – not our possession.

As I look at these wonderful photographs I am driven back to those lines in Genesis:

Then God said, "Let lights appear in the sky to separate the day from the night. Let them be signs to mark the seasons, days, and years. And let them serve as lights in the expanse of the sky to shine upon the earth." And it was so. God made two great lights: the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night. And He made the stars as well. God set them in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth, to govern the day and night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the fourth day. (1:14-19).

THE HANDIWORK OF GOD

What a witness to continuity: the wonder of those theologians and astronomers is still the wonder of theologians and astronomers today. They had but their naked eyes, we have the lenses of the James Webb.

The concern of the Priestly-author (who created this part of the Genesis account) was to remind his fellow Jews in Babylon that the sun, moon, and stars were not divine, not gods – as those around them imagined – but the handiwork of God.

We believe in God – Creator beyond all that is seen and unseen – and we read Genesis as a memento of our desire to seek truth and to worship. We look at these photographs as still more evidence of our human quest for truth – even in our darkness and our wickedness. And we try – through theological reflection – to reduce our confusions.

WONDER, THANKS & PRAISE

The response of wonder, thanks, and praise. As a human being my response to these images is one of wonder. It is ever more amazing. It is also one of thanks. I could not even hold a screwdriver for the brilliant scientists and technicians who built the James Webb, but I am thankful to them.

I am also a bit sad. What if all the technical skill used to make and fire munitions in warfare had been turned to work similar to launching the James Webb into space? So the James Webb produces wonder at the scientists' results, thanks to the scientists for their research dedication, and praise to encourage them.

As a theist, I am driven to even deeper wonder at the cosmos – and challenged never to slip into the blasphemy that 'I have it figured out.' The universe revealed in these photographs challenges how we think and speak of the creation – and its Creator.

But I am also a little sad: human confusion – that 'creator' is imagined mechanically or that 'revelation' is reduced to a book – is a stumbling block on our human journey.

But most of all, I am driven to thankfulness for the beauty of God's handiwork:

When I SEE your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you set in place, what are mere mortals that you should think about them, human beings that you should care for them? For you have made us, mortals, but a little lower than the angels, and have crowned us with glory and honour (Ps 8:3-5).

So the James Webb produces wonder at the divine handiwork, thanks to the Creator for 'his' sustaining love, and praise – knowing that the desire to praise 'him' is itself his gift.