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## ARE WE LOST IN THE COSMOS?

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Are we lost in the cosmos? It may seem a strange question to ask. Yet it opens up some really interesting questions, many of which are religious. Do we really belong here? Are we meant to be here? The word “home” is one of the richest words in any language. It designates somewhere special – a place where we feel, above anything else, that we *belong*. It’s a way of mapping space in our minds, which highlights one special place which is our spot. We come to feel a deep kinship, a sense of connectedness, with our home. Our heart belongs there, and we feel disconnected and alienated when we end up somewhere else. We find ourselves experiencing, an existential ambivalence – a queasy unsettledness, which hints that this is not where we really belong.

It’s part of being human to feel moored to a specific place, rich in associations and memories. Home, as they say, is where the heart is. Yet it proves hard to conceptualize what is distinct about a “home”, and what distinguishes it from a mere “habitat”. Perhaps that’s because “home” is really a category of the human heart, rather than the human mind. It’s about the way we *feel* about a place – experiencing its existential magnetism, taking pleasure in its associated sense of peace and security, and feeling ill at ease when we are away. We are rooted animals, who often see “home” as a repository for our personal historical pasts, a gathering place for memories that define who we are partly in terms of where we come from.

For some people, the notion of home is problematic. What about the perpetual nomads of our global culture – the international players who move from one continent to another, never really setting down roots anywhere? This is a particular concern for the children of individuals who leave their homeland and work abroad – such as military personnel, missionaries, and aid workers. A common complaint on the part of these children is that there is nowhere that they can call home. They seem to belong in many cultural contexts, yet deep down feel that they belong nowhere.

Or what about immigrants, who leave behind their homelands and their family roots as they seek a better life, or freedom from oppression? They bring only their memories to their new situations. Yet many immigrants show a remarkable capacity to recreate the vestiges of their lost homeland in a different place, while adapting to a new language and society. Memories of their homeland subtly shape their understandings of their adopted country, helping them to cope with their sense of alienation and disconnection.

Where physics speaks of space and time, most of us find these notions abstract and disconnected from human concerns. We prefer to speak of place and history. The distinction is, of course, subjective. Yet subjectivity really matters to human beings, and it cannot be ignored. This point is emphasised by the noted Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, who argued that, to make sense of the theological concerns of ancient Israel, a fundamental distinction had to be made between “space” and “place”.

Place is space which has historical meanings, where some things have happened which are now remembered and which provide continuity and identity across generations. Place is space in which important words have been spoken which have established identity, defined vocation, and envisioned destiny.



Brueggemann's analysis of the history of Israel shifted discussion away from the abstract notions of space and time, and anchored it firmly to the experiential realities of human existence, which are much more naturally expressed using the categories of place and history. We merely exist in space and time; we live and act in places and in history. Not every space is seen as a place. The French anthropologist Marc Augé highlighted the role of “non-places” in western culture – such as airports, shopping malls, hotels, highways, and subways. We have no sense of “belonging” here; we merely pass through them, on our way to somewhere else. Home is where we feel that we are rooted, and where we belong.

Places play a critically important place in human life, not least in that they function as anchor points for memory, identity, and aspiration. Two observers might look at the same objective space, but see it – and *experience* it – in very different ways. Place is what a space is *for us*, shaped by memories that are often known only to ourselves. That's why some see home as the place to which they long to return, others as a place they never want to see again.

Let me turn to a short passage from Pascal. Many of you will know his *Pensées* – a collection of short reflections, often concerning human nature and our place in a greater order of things. Yet Pascal often explores existential questions, reflecting our anxiety about our identity and significance. He puts into words feelings of unease that many of us share, and helps us to express them – and hence to engage them. In this passage, Pascal reflects on the brevity of life in the face of cosmic time, and the seemingly random character of his own personal location in the flow of history.

“When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in the eternity before and after, the little space which I fill, and even can see, engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces of which I am ignorant, and which know me not, I am frightened, and am astonished at being here rather than there; for there is no reason why here rather than there, why now rather than then. Who has put me here? By whose order and direction have this place and time been allotted to me.”

Pascal's haunting passage identifies some of the deepest fears of human being – that we are insignificant elements in a vast and meaningless universe, which has not the slightest interest in us. We seem to have been inserted into the cosmos at a place and time which were not of our choosing, and we will eventually depart from it at a place and time which are unknown to us. Our “world line” began with our birth at  $(x_1, y_1, z_1, t_1)$ , and will end with our death at an indeterminate point in the future  $(x_2, y_2, z_2, t_2)$ . So why did we enter this cosmic process *then* and *there*? Or is it utterly meaningless to ask the question *why*, when all that can be hoped for is an answer to the rather different question *how*? And what about that most troubling and perturbing question of all: *so what*?

Now some would say that it is pointless asking these questions. We're here, and that's all that there is to it. We can't change things, and there are more important things to do in life than worry about these deeper questions. We just need to get used to the idea, and stop worrying about it. But others would say that it is important to think about our place in this universe. After all, it might help us lead better and more authentic lives.

So let's ask that question again. Are we meant to be here? Or is it all a cosmic accident, which we have to accept, even if we think we can make something out of it? It is not surprising that many have concluded that we have found our way into this strange and puzzling world by accident. We are not meant to be here. We find ourselves in a world which is neither of our making nor of our choosing. In fact, we are not meant to be *anywhere*. We just exist. Nature is the prison in which we find ourselves trapped, the landscape through which we are passing on a journey that goes nowhere. The universe doesn't know we exist. It doesn't care. Like us, it just exists. And now we know that one day it will die – just as we too must die. It's a thought that is expressed lyrically in a poem by the twelfth-century Persian mathematician Omar Khayyám, which I think many of you will know:

And that inverted Bowl they call the Sky,  
Whereunder crawling coop'd we live and die,  
Lift not your hands to *It* for help – for *It*  
As impotently moves as you or I.



A feeling that we don't really belong in this world is thought to be characteristic of the movement known as "Gnosticism", which flourished in late classical antiquity. Underlying many forms of Gnosticism was the belief that we do not belong in this world. We are trapped in this world, and struggle to find our way out of it, and back to the realm where we really belong. Human beings were "gold in the mud", spiritual beings imprisoned in material bodies and a corrupt world. Our destiny was to escape from these prisons, and make our way to our true homeland.

Now Gnosticism was a complex movement, but some general themes seem to run throughout. Gnosticism takes its name from the Greek word *gnosis*, which is usually translated as "knowledge." But the movement recognized a special kind of knowledge – a sort of secret insider knowledge which has a redeeming and liberating function that helps the individual break free of bondage to the world. Some writers almost seem to suggest that this is like some sort of cosmic password that opens doors to better worlds.

Most forms of Gnosticism recognized a Supreme God or a True God, who is remote from human affairs, and is unknowable and unknown. The world was created by a lesser god, the *demiurge*, who made a mess of the act of creation, so that humanity finds itself in a corrupt world, and needs to escape from it. Yet while Gnosticism was hostile to the physical world, it held that there was "gold in the mud", and that we could escape from this imprisonment after death.

Gnosticism highlighted the human sense of alienation or disconnectedness from the world, reflecting a deeper intuition that this is not where we really belong. We find ourselves trapped in this world, as "gold in the mud," knowing that we really belong somewhere else. That same basic idea is expressed in the existentialist notion of *Geworfenheit* (literally, "thrownness"), introduced by Martin Heidegger to refer to the frustration of being "thrown into the world," and being enmeshed within constraints which are not of our own choosing. This theme is often echoed in popular culture – for example, in the lyrics to one of the songs of the American rock band *The Doors*: "Into this world we're thrown." We did not choose to be born in this world, and wonder whether we can find something better. Is there another world that is where we are really meant to be?

So why do so many of us feel such a sense of disconnection with this universe? After all, when you think about it, every one of us is made of stardust, the basic stuff of the universe. Elements such as carbon, nitrogen, and oxygen were all forged in the cores of stars. At the level of our fundamental building blocks, we are very much part of the universe. And yet so many feel alienated from it, sensing our solitude and isolation within the cosmic mechanism. We sense that there is – that there has to be – more to life than the universe itself can offer. We seem to be born with an innate capacity to wonder, intuiting that there is some greater vision of reality which might make sense of our presence and place in the universe. It's like the scientist confronted with a mass of observations, who knows that there has to be some way of joining up the dots which discloses a pattern that makes sense of things – a grand theory, which lies hauntingly beyond our reach.

Perhaps that experience of wondering might begin with the simple yet astonishing fact that there is indeed a universe, and that we are here to observe it – what Ludwig Wittgenstein termed an "existential wonder" elicited by our imaginative awakening to the world around us. Let me introduce you to a writer who is not well known, but deserves a wider readership. Michael Mayne was Dean of Westminster Abbey from 1986 to 1996. In his retirement, he wrote a remarkable book entitled *This Sunrise of Wonder*. It takes the form of a series of 24 letters he wrote while living for a month high in the Swiss Alps to his grandchildren, telling them about everything that has inspired him in literature, music, religion, and art. Yet the book is really a plea to all of us to pass through our only earthly life with a trained and watching eye so that we capture a sense of exquisite sensitivity towards the existence of such a greater world. Here's one of its most striking passages:

My subject is wonder, and my starting point is so obvious it often escapes us. It is me, sitting at a table looking out on the world. It is the fact that I exist, that there is anything at all. It is the *givenness* that astonishes: the fact that the mountains, the larch tree, the gentian, the jay, *exist*, and that someone called *me* is here to observe them.



Most of us have experienced some such sense of the strangeness of things – the sheer oddness of the fact that each of us is here, and able to see a reality beyond ourselves. G. K. Chesterton wrote movingly and perceptively of a suppressed, submerged or forgotten “blaze or burst of astonishment at our own existence”, lying at the back of our minds, but able to break through to inform and enrich our “artistic and spiritual life.”

Yet that sense of wondering rarely terminates at this point. Having appreciated the singularity and surprise of our individual existence, we cannot help but wonder about the world in which we find ourselves, and our place within it. Is this universe our home – even if only for an astonishingly short time, in terms of the vast expanse of cosmic history? Or are we like sojourners, passing through it on our way to somewhere else? Do we really belong here?

So we come back to this question: Why do so many feel that we don’t really belong in this world? It’s a feeling that was well known to G. K. Chesterton, who had his own explanation of its origins and significance. We experience a sense of homesickness for our real native land, as we slowly realize that this is not where our true destiny lies. “We have come to the wrong star ... That is what makes life at once so splendid and so strange. The true happiness is that we don’t fit. We come from somewhere else.”

This theme is developed in a number of distinctively Christian ways in the New Testament letters, which emphasise that this world is a place of transit, rather than permanent habitation, often using the imagery of citizenship to make this point. We have no permanent citizenship in this world, in that our citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20). “Here have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come” (Hebrews 13:14).

Christian theologians developed other organizing images to help illuminate this idea. One of the most powerful derives from first century Roman imperial culture. Roman citizens would regularly serve the imperial administration abroad – for example, in the colonies of North Africa or Asia Minor – eagerly anticipating their return home on completion of their service. Rome was their *patria*, their “homeland” – the place where they really belonged. Early Christian writers used this framework to illuminate the dynamics of living on earth, while hoping for heaven. Cyprian of Carthage, a Roman citizen who converted to Christianity and served as bishop in the great colonial city of Carthage in North Africa in the third century, expressed this way of seeing things in a pithy maxim: “paradise is our native land (*patria*).”

The human longing for consolation in the face of death may be traced back to classical times. Perhaps the most distressing aspect of death is that of *separation* – being forcibly, and it might seem irreversibly cut off from close friends and relatives, never to see them again. Classic mourning rites and funeral ornaments point to the sense of desolation which traditionally accompanied the death of a significant other. The Hellenistic world had become accustomed to the Hades myth, which portrayed Charon as ferrying the dead across the river Styx to the underworld for the fee of one obol – a coin which was placed in the mouth of a dead person for this purpose. Once on the other side, the dead person took part in a family reunion, such as those portrayed in two of Cicero’s more important dialogues, *On Old Age* and perhaps more importantly *Scipio’s Dream*.

This classic scenario of a family reunion in the world to come impacted on Christian writings of the era. Cyprian of Carthage, a martyr-bishop of the third century, tried to encourage his fellow Christians in the face of suffering and death at times of persecution by holding before them a vision of heaven, in which they would see the martyrs and apostles, face to face. More than that; they would be reunited with those who they loved and cherished. Heaven is here seen as the “native land” of Christians, from which they have been exiled during their time on earth. The hope of return to their native land, there to be reunited with those who they knew and loved, was held out as a powerful consolation in times of trial and suffering.

We should consider that we have renounced the world, and are in the meantime living here as guests and strangers. ... Anyone who has been in foreign lands longs to return to his own native land . . . We regard paradise as our native land.



Yet the framework that many regard as best adapted to capture the experiential aspects and express the Christian way of thinking about our place in this universe is that of exile. A landmark episode in the history of Israel was developed by Christian spiritual writers into an imaginative template, allowing Christians both to visualize and to evaluate their position within the world of space and time. Although it offers a Balcony view of life, it comes into its own as a way of thinking about faith on the Road. The historical episode is what is generally known as the “Babylonian Deportation” or “Babylonian Exile”, a complex event which extended throughout much of the sixth century BC.

The historical course of events focused on the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and its Temple and the ending of the Davidic monarchy in 586 BC. Following the death of Josiah, king of Judah, in 609 BC, tensions emerged within the ruling elite of Jerusalem over which major power it should support – Egypt or the Babylonians. Initially, Judah was allied with Babylon. Yet while Nebuchadnezzar had defeated an Egyptian army at Carchemish in 605, he was in turn defeated by the Egyptians in 601. This prompted Judah to rebel against Babylon, leading to occupation of its territories and the besieging of Jerusalem in 597 BC. Some prominent citizens of Jerusalem were deported, and the city reverted to Babylonian rule.

Following a further failed rebellion by the kingdom of Judah against the Babylonian empire, Nebuchadnezzar besieged the city of Jerusalem, and deported most of its inhabitants over the period 597 – 581 to Babylon. Archaeological evidence indicates that most of the population of rural Judah remained in place; those who were deported were mostly from Jerusalem itself. They would remain in exile until the fall of the Babylon to Persian king Cyrus the Great in 539 BC. Although some Jews remained in Babylon, most appear to have made their way back to Jerusalem in the following years, rebuilding the fallen city walls and its Temple. Although many aspects of this event (including the precise number of people deported to Babylon) remain unclear, there is no doubt of the theological significance that was attached to the period of exile in the Old Testament.

We know a lot more about this period from a collection of 100 rare clay tablets from 6th century Mesopotamia that detail the lives of exiled Judeans living in the heartland of the Babylonian Empire. The tablets, each inscribed in minute Akkadian script, detail trade in fruits and other commodities, taxes paid, debts owed and credits accumulated. These were put on display in Jerusalem in 2015 in the collection “By the Rivers of Babylon”, which showcased this collection of tablets, and assessed their significance. Interestingly, most of them come from a town Al-Yahudu — “Jerusalem” — which was basically an immigrant town, populated by exiles from Judea. “They were free to go about their lives, they weren’t slaves,” according to the the curator of this exhibition, Filip Vukosavovic. “Nebuchadnezzar wasn’t a brutal ruler in that respect. He knew he needed the Judeans to help revive the struggling Babylonian economy.”

Babylon finally fell to Cyrus the Persian in 539 BC. Cyrus issued a general decree permitting foreigners who had been deported to Babylon to return home. Some of the Jews returned; others, however, did not, and remained in Babylon. The Old Testament prophets tended to see the exile both as a punishment for Israel’s disobedience, and as an opportunity to rebuild and purify the Jewish religion.

The narrative of this historical event is important in its own right. Yet it gave rise to an imaginative template, a way of looking at the world, which was widely adopted and developed within the Christian spiritual tradition, especially during the Middle Ages. Christians, it is argued, should locate themselves within an imaginative framework, in which they are the inhabitants of Jerusalem who have been exiled to Babylon. They do not belong there, and long to return home. During their enforced absence, they console themselves with singing the songs of their lost homeland, keeping its memory alive, while they wait for the day when they can go home. In the meantime, they live in hope in Babylon, knowing their true identity and destiny. The great medieval theologian Peter Abelard captured this in one of his most famous hymns:

Now, in the meantime, with hearts raised on high,  
we for that country must yearn and must sigh,  
seeking Jerusalem, dear native land,  
through our long exile on Babylon’s strand.



This does not encourage any disengagement or disconnection from the world; it simply affirms that we really belong elsewhere. Yet this world is our place of transit, in which we begin to garner hints that something lies beyond it. Like the prisoners in Plato's cave, we sense there must be more than this world of shadows.

Let me take our thoughts in a different direction here, and look at the writings of Edward Said, a Palestinian who grew up in Egypt and the United States, and who taught for most of his career at Columbia University, New York. Said was a Palestinian exile, cut off from his homeland. Yet he saw being in exile as productive. In a collection of essays focussing on this theme of exile, Said describes the life of exile in ways that will remind some of his readers of the Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius. Exile, he suggests, requires detaching oneself from all belonging and love of place, and adopting what Wallace Stevens called "a mind of winter." Exile means a critical distance from all cultural identities, and thus opens people up to new ways of thinking and existing. For Said, some of the most creative writers and thinkers are exiles – such as Joseph Conrad, who was ethnically Polish, but a citizen of the Russian empire, who eventually became a British national.

But this is a digression, and I return to my theme of exile as a religious theme. For Abelard, as for C. S. Lewis, this world is God's world, and is to be valued, appreciated, and enjoyed. Yet it is studded with clues that it is not our real home; that there is a still better world beyond its frontiers; and that we may hope one day to enter and inhabit this better place. Lewis believed that the secular world offers people only a hopeless end, and he wanted them instead to see and grasp the endless hope of the Christian faith, and live in its light. Does this mean that Lewis is a "world-denying" writer, who treats this world as devoid of value? No. Lewis was clear that to "aim at Heaven" is not to neglect this world or earthly concerns. Rather, it is to raise our horizon and elevate our expectations—and then to behave on earth in the light of this greater reality.

Although the image of "exile" is grounded in the theological framework of the Christian faith, it has found wider cultural resonance, not least because it offers a framework for naming and understanding the feeling of not being at home in the world. A good example of someone who develops this image is the Palestinian-American Edward Said, sometime professor of literature at Columbia University. For Said, the notion of exile speaks of an "unhealable rift" imposed between an individual and a "native place", between a person and their "true home," evoking a sense of loss and alienation. Simone Weil saw the notion of being "rooted" as a core "need of the soul". Yet the concept of "rootedness" does not entail belonging *here*; rather, it is about belonging *somewhere*, which makes existing *here* bearable.

Most Christians think of life as a journey through this world on our way to heaven, which is where we really belong. Now there is a lot that needs to be unpacked here. We have already noted how Cyprian of Carthage, who was martyred in 258, spoke of paradise as the Christian's native land. So let us now think more about this idea of a journey. The image of a journey is perhaps one of the most important ways of stimulating the imagination, and sustaining the hope of heaven. Both Old and New Testaments depict journeys, such as Abraham's journey to Canaan, or Paul's great missionary journeys. Perhaps the two most important journeys described in the Old Testament are the wandering of the people of Israel through the wilderness for forty years prior to entering into the Promised Land, and the return of the people of Jerusalem to their native city after decades of exile in the great city of Babylon, which we considered a few minutes ago in this lecture. Each of these journeys has become an image of considerable importance for Christian spirituality.

It will thus come of no surprise to learn that one of the most powerful images of the Christian life is that of a journey. Indeed, the New Testament records that the early Christians initially referred to themselves as followers of "the way" (see, for example, Acts 9:2; 24:14). Just as God led the people of Israel out of captivity in Egypt into the Promised Land, so the Christian life can be seen as a slow process of deliverance from bondage to sin before being led triumphantly into the heavenly city.

At several points in the writings of St Paul, a modification is introduced to the image of a journey. For Paul, the Christian life is like a race – a long and arduous journey, undertaken under pressure, in which the winners receive a crown (see Galatians 2:2; 2 Timothy 4:7). The image is also used in the letter to the Hebrews, which urges its readers to persevere in the race of life by keeping their eyes focussed firmly on Jesus (Hebrews 12:1-2). This image stresses the importance of discipline in the Christian life.



Yet Paul also develops an image which helps us think about our place in this world from a Christian perspective. The letters of the New Testament were written at a time when Roman power was at its greatest. Rome established and maintained its authority by means of the colony (Latin: *colonia*). In one of his letters, Paul develops the idea of the church as a “colony” – not of Rome, but of heaven. What might he have meant by this? Modern western ideas of “colonies” are largely shaped by the outcome of European imperialism in the nineteenth century, when overseas territories were in effect annexed as belonging to a European state, such as Great Britain or France. The Roman idea of a colony was very different. For a start, the term referred, not to a territory, but to a city or township. When a city was conquered, its administration was handed over to Roman settlers. Typically, a city would be populated by Roman citizens, or by inhabitants of the region around Rome (“Latins”). These colonies would be seen as extensions of the mother city abroad, with citizens enjoying the right of return to Rome.

Rome, of course, was not alone in establishing colonies in the ancient world. Many Greek cities established colonies, and one such was Krenides in Macedonia. This city was captured by Philip, the father of Alexander the Great, and renamed “Philippi” in his honour. It was taken over by the Romans in 148 BC, and in New Testament times, was populated by Roman citizens and governed according to Roman law. Although Philippi was situated in the Greek-speaking Roman province of Macedonia, its official language was Latin and its public buildings were modelled on those of Rome. Philippi was, in effect, a relocated, scaled-down version of that great city.

This historical detail is needed to make sense of one of the most remarkable features of Paul’s letter to the church at Philippi: its use of the Roman *colonia* as a way of understanding the place of the church. Paul assumes that his readers in Philippi, already familiar with this political model, will understand his allusion to the situation in the colony and its implications for thinking about the Christian life. “Our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Philippians 3.20). What does he mean?

Paul’s central theme is that, just as Philippi saw itself as an outpost of Rome in the distant province of Macedonia, so Christians must see themselves as a colony of heaven on earth. The idea of Christians being “citizens of heaven” would have come naturally to Paul, since he himself held Roman citizenship and was aware of the privileges this brought. Paul’s analogy would have connected with his readers in Philippi in a number of ways, including the idea that Philippi was not where they really belonged. They were Romans.

Roman citizens residing in Philippi had the right to return home to the metropolis after their service in the colony. Paul’s point is that one of the “benefits of Christ” was the privilege of being a citizen of heaven. The greatest privilege of a citizen of a great city was the right to live there permanently. Roman citizens had the right to reside in the world’s greatest city, even though they might serve the empire in some of its most far-flung regions. Christians in Philippi could thus see themselves as citizens of heaven, with the right to return to their homeland.

The theme of the hope of heaven, and especially the consummation of all things in the heavenly Jerusalem, is of major importance in Christian spirituality. In the medieval period, the Latin term *viator* (literally, a “wayfarer”) was used to refer to the believer, who was envisaged as a pilgrim travelling to the heavenly city. The vision of the heavenly city was seen as an encouragement and inspiration to those engaged on this pilgrimage. Many writings of the period direct the believer to focus attention on the glorious hope of final entry into the New Jerusalem, and the rejoicing and delight which this will bring. Such thoughts were widely regarded as an encouragement, enabling believers to deal with the disappointments and hardships which were so often their lot.

The metaphor of “journeying to heaven” thus has a long history of use within the Christian tradition. Often, this is specifically linked with the idea of life as a “pilgrimage to the New Jerusalem.” The central theme of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* is that of a journey from the darkness of a wood to an encounter with God in the beatific vision, in the course of which the poet achieves insight into his own identity, and the nature and means of achieving salvation. In John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* Christian journeys from the “City of Destruction” to “the Heavenly City.” Once more, the dominant theme is the difficulties, temptations, and encouragements which are to be had on the journey to the new Jerusalem, intended to encourage and admonish its readers.



C. S. Lewis is a good example of a more recent religious writer who gave much thought to the way in which the hope of heaven impacted on this life. For Lewis, this world is God's world, and is to be valued, appreciated, and enjoyed. Yet it is studded with clues that it is not our real home; that there is a still better world beyond its frontiers; and that we may dare to hope to enter and inhabit this better place, which Lewis refers to as our "true country." Lewis affirms the delight, joy, and purposefulness of this present life. Yet he reminds us that, when this finally comes to an end, something even better awaits us. The secular world offers people only a hopeless end; Lewis wanted them to see and grasp the endless hope of the Christian faith, and live in its light.

Lewis was clear that to "aim at Heaven" is not to neglect this world or earthly concerns. Rather, it is to raise our horizon and elevate our expectations—and then to behave on earth in the light of this greater reality. We must try and infuse earth with the fragrance of heaven. The true believer is not someone who disengages with this world in order to focus on heaven, but the one who tries to make this world more like heaven. Lewis is surely right when he declared that "the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next." Like many other Christian writers before him, Lewis declares that the hope of heaven enables us to see this world in its true perspective. This life is the preparation for that greater reality. It is, as Lewis put it, the cover and title page of the "Great Story," in which every chapter is better than the one which went before.

Some lines from *The Last Battle*, the concluding novel of the "Chronicles of Narnia", express this point particularly well. On seeing the "new Narnia," the Jewel the Unicorn declared: "I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now." For Lewis, the Christian hope is about returning home to where we really belong.

Lewis was no killjoy. He does not deny that we experience desire in this life, nor does he suggest that these desires are evil or a distraction from the real business of life. His point is that our desires cannot be, and were never meant to be, satisfied by earthly pleasures alone. They are "good images" or signposts of something "further up and further in." They are foretastes of the true source of satisfaction that we will find in the presence of God. For Lewis, heaven is the "other country" for which we were created in the first place. We should, he declares, "make it the main object of life to press on to that other country and to help others do the same." This rich vision of heaven, deeply rooted in the New Testament, was something that brought Lewis hope, especially in the final years of his life. The Christian hope, Lewis insisted, was not, as he put it, some "form of escapism or wishful thinking," but was rather "a continual looking forward to the eternal world." We are not lost in the cosmos; we are rather passing through it, and enjoying as we travel.

But it is time to end this lecture. My next lecture, on 8 May, will be my final lecture as Gresham Professor of Divinity. In it, I will wrap up this series by looking at the question of why we need more than just information about our world. We need something deeper – something meaningful – is we are to live life to the full. So that's our agenda for May. Thank you for coming today!