

## KNOWING MY PLACE

a theological portrait

Peter Cullinane

I was called into existence with the rest of the universe 13.8 billion years ago – give or take a million or two. Of course, there would be much cosmic turmoil before certain elements and chemicals came together, in the right combination and at the right time, for me to emerge. From the outset, my existence has been part of a process in a universe still unfolding. From its beginning, I was included.

Over billions of years and billions of miles, hundreds of billions of galaxies formed, each with its billions of suns. Hot gases collapsed into hard rock, and colliding debris merged to form planets. Even planets kicked each other into different trajectories. The scars are there to see, and now we can. It was rough out there, and it still is. Other ways the universe might have come together without me, didn't.

In the midst of it all, there is a tiny speck – out of sight from distant regions – which is the planet I have been part of for the last 4.5 billion years. Its present shape evolved from a vast wasteland of rock, volcanoes, fierce heat and acidic seas. Around 3.5 billion years ago, with just the right combination of variables, and at just the right distance from our sun, the earliest forms of life emerged. This was a massive transformation in the life of the planet. The planet was on track to teem with life in all its variety and splendour. Geological history had become biological history.

Belatedly, less than half a million years ago, life evolved into self-conscious minds, capable of asking: “what’s going on?” This was another huge transformation of the planet. In us, the universe became conscious of itself. Human life had arrived. Those naked boulders that banged together to form the planet would eventually morph into the whispers of love, songs of joy, laughter, children’s smiles...; but also tears, fears, bombs and atrocities! Biological history had become human history.

But also, thanksgiving – the very heart of religious expression. Religious awakening came with being human, and the realisation that existence which isn't owed is therefore given. Science confirms that the universe had a beginning. What began wasn't there to start itself. And if God had needed creation, it would have been there always. So, I am in wonder at being part of something that need never have existed at all. In us the planet had awakened to learning its own purpose and meaning.

From what is revealed in nature and in history I would learn that God's agenda is human beings fully alive. Experience would teach me that departures from that agenda bring human diminishment – showing up in cultural, religious, social, environmental and economic distortions. Religious distortions obscure the agenda itself.

What takes place in human minds and hearts is just as much part of the planet as are its atoms and oceans – whence “wisdom fairer than the sun and surpassing every constellation of the stars”, and false ideologies that distort and kill. What chance human relationships and civil society if “truth” is whatever the individual chooses to believe, and “right” is whatever the individual chooses to do; if choosing is more important than what it leads to?

Human history became a drama - called “salvation history” - in which God uses our mess-ups to bring us to our senses; and our sinfulness to reveal the unimaginable lengths of mercy. My own conscious life would be part of that drama.

But first, a bewildering number of choices and circumstances were part of my own parents' lives, even before they met, to say nothing of their own ancestors reaching back through ages unknown. All these eventually led to me. Many times, their histories could have taken different turns, and not come in my direction at all. Chance, too, has a role within the big picture.

Even at the time of my conception, there were more than a million sperm competing to fertilize a waiting ovum. One did so. Every other combination would have been a different person from me. The one moment in the whole history of the universe when any of them could have come into existence passed. They will never exist. At the one moment when I could have come into existence, I did. It was an event in the life of the cosmos, but it was also personal. And God was involved:

It was You who created my inmost self, and put me together in my mother's womb;  
I praise you, so wonderfully you made me; wonderful are your works. (*Psalms*.139).

So too, for every person, each to their destiny, each their place; no matter where or how, none are outside God's embrace.

The cosmos continues to unfold, geologically in rock, biologically in life, consciously in me. My becoming continues - still through inter-action with the world around me; still a process, still personal, but now, more clearly a calling: there are moments which beckon me to bow before the mystery of life; e.g.

- when experiences of goodness, love, truth and beauty draw me towards something more, with hints of what I am made for. Pausing to notice this, and gratefully remembering, are ways of seeing that make me more fully alive. Not stopping to notice, just taking it all for granted, is a form of self-harm: "The world will never starve from want of wonders; it will starve from want of wonder." (*G.K.Chesterton*);
- when I notice that everything is connected, that my truest self is my whole self in right relationships with all else; that becoming involves taking personal responsibility, and being accountable; that my life is both gift and task; that I am both called and sent to play my part.
- When loving God, and all else that God has made, lead into each other. And when, like God's love for me, mine for others is not conditional on what they are or what they do. In this way, differences can belong, and dialogue be fruitful. This is life-giving for all concerned.
- whenever loss, disability, tragedy or injustice turns lives up-side-down, I am upset and moved to prayer. But I am also reminded that we belong to a universe that is unfinished. Human nature seems to know the present is the foretaste of better yet to come. Just look at headstones, anywhere! I cannot expect in the present a completion that belongs to the future. Meanwhile, adversity, and the sufferings of others, play their part in what kind of person I become. Responding to the needs of others reveals to me my own humanity, dignity, and mission.

However, what is the point of any of it? The sciences now tell me that one day the sun will go out, as fires do when their fuel runs out. And all the planets which depend on the sun for life of any kind will become lifeless, just as the conditions for life on some may have died already. Where does this leave me? Last seen on a dying planet in a lifeless universe? There is much is at stake here: my present life is either pointless already if it will be pointless in the end; or wonderful already if it's on the way to a wonderful future.

Well, there was a further transformation, qualitatively different from every other. It reached right into the life of the planet, and took that life beyond anything evolution could do:

“In times past, God spoke in fragmentary and varied ways to our ancestors... In this final age, He has spoken to us in the person of his Son, whom He made heir of all things and through whom He first created the universe.” (*Letter to Hebrews*).

The Incarnation is about God’s participation in the life of the planet and in human history as one of us. This surpasses all other reasons for wonder, joy and thanksgiving! There is no language for it; early accounts simply picture angels and shepherds singing, and kings offering homage... It’s what makes Christian faith different from all others; it’s above all, a mystery to be absorbed in.

“... the message which was a hidden mystery from generations and centuries has now been revealed... The mystery is Christ among you, your hope of glory...” (*Letter to Colossians*).

A creation in which God has a stake is a creation that has a future! (Against the big picture of cosmic history, modern Western secularism will look like just a blip, a moment of denial, out of step with creation’s long journey towards completion.)

Jesus’ life, bringing healing, hope, peace, forgiveness and compassion into people’s lives ratified human nature’s deep hunch that life and love are what I am made for. His resurrection confirmed that death does not have the last word. “Deep amazement at the worth and dignity of the human person is another name for the Christian gospel.” (Pope John Paul II, *Redeemer of the Human Race*).

Those who were witnesses to these things summed them up in their message that all creation is being “made new” – it will not be discarded. It is only its present form (what scripture calls this “present age”) that will pass. It will be transformed in the way that Jesus was transformed through his death and resurrection. We don’t have language for that, because language is based on our experience of the world in its *present* form. Enough to know that the risen Christ

“will give a new form to this lowly body of ours and remake it according to the pattern of his glorified body, by his power to subject everything to himself...” (*Letter to Philippians*.) It is a

“plan God had in mind from the beginning... to bring everything together under Christ... everything in the heavens and everything on earth...” (*Letter to Ephesians*).

If that is my calling, then what matters forever always matters more than what is passing.

The whole of life is different already when we know that “all the good fruits of human nature, and of human enterprise, we shall find again, cleansed and transfigured.” (Second Vatican Council, *Church in the World*, n.39,). People we love, times that were special, good things we have done, all belong, and will share our future. What is truly precious to us now is never really lost.

This is so much more than a doctrine. It came out of Jesus’ personal encounter with the mysteries of sin, injustice, and death. On the night before he died, he prayed that there might be some other way to fulfil his mission. But in his complete acceptance of God’s will – “not mine but your will be done” – creation opened up to the power of God, and resurrection entered in. His prayer “was heard” – not by avoiding death, but more marvellously, by entering into it and turning it around on itself:

“.. aloud and in silent tears, he prayed to the One who had the power to save him out of death, and he submitted so humbly that his prayer was heard...” (*Letter to Hebrews*).

I was not there, of course, when Jesus' life among the people revealed what God's love is like. Nevertheless, in our own day, I find his style hasn't changed, he is still the same person, and his effect on people is the same. And he is calling me:

In the community of those who live, now not they but Christ living in them,  
I have seen frail human nature raised up  
reaching heights of hope and depths of peace  
which nothing in the world could give, or take away.  
In their midst I come to know  
that He who enabled the lame to walk, and the blind to see  
and sinners to start again  
is risen,  
for that is what their lives proclaim;  
and so, I believe in Him in whom they have placed their trust. (*I believe within the Church*).

Within that community I find my calling, my place, my becoming, my being sent.

And now, I raise my glass in toast to ordinariness! It has been an extraordinary and humbling privilege to be part of the life and history of our diocese. But there is also great mystery in the sheer unlikeliness of how it came to be that one who grew up in the paddocks, around the creeks and up the trees at Oringi-Waiaruhe became a bishop of the Church, and first bishop of this Diocese.

My parents mediated to me the gift of life, and with it, God's purpose for my life. In some way my origins and my destiny belonged to each other. And so, I shall be buried with my parents at Dannevirke, not as if to disown my calling, but to re-own its earliest beginnings. I want to highlight the fact that for every one of us, *God's purpose unfolds within the lowly and ordinary circumstances of our lives.*

If the flower beside me tells of you, it is because many years ago  
one who loved her flowers told me Your name.  
I thank you for a grandmother's hand that led a five-year old boy  
on frosty mornings a mile's walk on a country road,  
to where we caught a train that took forever – coal-smoke and wooden seats –  
so that I could start with a Catholic education.  
It couldn't last, and didn't, but could it be that  
long-forgotten conversations along that country road  
sowed flowers that still bloom? (*I Believe Within the Church*)

The Gospel reading for my funeral is a one-liner in which Jesus says: "when you have done all that was commanded you, you are to say 'we have only done what it was our duty to do'."

That is knowing my place.

Peter Cullinane

Praised be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
who in his great mercy gave us a new birth  
to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead;  
to an imperishable inheritance incapable of fading or defilement,  
kept in heaven for you who are safeguarded through faith,  
to a salvation that stands ready  
to be revealed in the last days. (*1<sup>st</sup> Letter of Peter*)