

***“Christ the Prime Attractor”***

**(John 10.1-10)**

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***Introduction***

Metaphor works by taking something common place, something well-known and everyday, and using it to explore and understand *unknown* territory... mystery. ‘*Our love burns brightly*’... uses the common experience of a flame to explore the *mystery* of love. ‘*He’s as dull as dishwasher*’ tries to explain how we *feel* about someone via the left-over sludge of the daily wash-up. The first metaphor works well because we all still experience fire... but I suspect the second is fading in usage as younger generations always use dishwashers... or just never wash up at all!

Because the world of God is *always* mysterious, religion is hugely dependent on metaphor. We say ‘*God is our rock*’ in an attempt to speak of the great stability we find in our faith. ‘*Christ is our light*’ explores the guidance and direction we find in the experience of Jesus. Faith uses and relies on metaphor all the time.

And so one of the ways the early church explored this strange mysterious world of the Resurrection, was by today’s metaphor of Christ as *the Good Shepherd of the sheep*. This was undoubtedly helpful in a past time, when shepherds looking after small flocks were a common everyday sight. But today, while the metaphor still has sentimental value for those of us who have been around church for a long time, it communicates very little... even to us ‘insiders’... and it’s become totally impotent as a means of speaking of the Resurrection in the world. It no longer works! Essential to any renewal of Christianity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, will be the discovery of *new* contemporary metaphors that can explore what we’re saying in our faith.

Teilhard de Chardin, 20<sup>th</sup> century priest, scientist and theologian (who died in 1955) was one of the first Christian scholars to fully embrace the science of evolution, not as a challenge to faith, but as a way of understanding creation... its progress and ultimate fulfilment. He spoke of the Risen Christ as the *Primary Attractor*, drawing all creation to the *omega* point of fulfilment. Today’s sermon is a

brief exploration of this metaphor – *Christ the Primary Attractor* – as a new way to investigate the ever-present mystery of the Resurrection.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Chaos and Attractors***

In schoolboy science, I was taught that the world was ordered by fixed, predictable laws of nature... like gravity. But what I *experienced* in the world was anything but – it was more like chaos. Big things in life... like the weather, health, human behaviour, love... seemed totally unpredictable and sometimes scarily random. And I found chaos both confusing and frightening! So it really helped when much later in life, I came across a psychological reading of the science/maths that's called 'chaos theory'.<sup>2</sup> As I understand it, chaos theory is the study of complexity... of apparent randomness and unpredictability... and the mysterious order that emerges from within it.

That is, the experience of chaos is an incomplete experience of a much larger, more ordered system, though in the moment we are unable to see it. My example is of looking at an ant's nest... which to my eyes looks like chaotic behaviour... ants charging in and out, frenetically crashing into each other without any order or system. And yet what I'm seeing is actually a highly organised society, with incredible communication, designed to ensure the health and safety of the whole nest. I would say the ants are mysteriously (that is hidden to my perception) organised around a common *instinct* that brings order to the whole. Chaos theory would say the activity is drawn by and to... a common point that they name a 'strange attractor'... and it's this *attraction* that holds the whole nest together. What looks like chaos is really order; what looks random is actually purposeful – many individual parts drawn into one direction and ultimate fulfilment, by and around a 'strange attractor'. Like watching a flock of birds wheeling and careering around the sky... seemingly without any one bird in charge... and yet a mysterious attraction holds them together as a flock... and directs them to the safety of their ultimate nesting place.

### ***Christ, the Prime Attractor***

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon is 'play' rather than science or precise theology.

<sup>2</sup> I didn't read chaos theory as science, but rather psychological/therapeutic interpretations of the science.

My *experience* of life *is* of randomness and chaos. In the world – the madness of Syria, the threat of terrorism, the posturing of North Korea... all of this sends shivers up my spine. Certainly in the church... total chaos (but I'll exercise discipline and say no more.) And *most* alarmingly... in my own life – there is no certainty or predictability around the big matters of health and love... anything can happen. I can't even predict the nature of my mood from one day to the next.

The experience of chaos frightens me – I feel unsafe within it. I've spent many years and huge quantities of energy trying to control my life, to keep it ordered... but all that has been illusory and a complete waste of time. I am tempted to despair – the world is hurtling into a hellish future and carrying me along with it. That's how it seems...

But the faith says this is NOT how reality is. What looks like chaos to my eyes is really the process and out-working of a much bigger order.... leading to a blissful fulfilment. The Spirit of God is drawing all creation to its intended beauty and completion... and using the metaphor of Teilhard de Chardin, the Risen Christ is the 'Primary Attractor'. If we call the Big Bang the Alpha point... the beginning... then the Risen Christ is the Omega point. In the Risen Christ we see our ultimate destination.

Speaking in simple language, all of *this* is going somewhere (it's not random or pointless)... and it's going somewhere good. All of this came from Love and all of this is returning to Love. The Risen Christ is the *Primary Attractor* that draws, allures and invites history forward to its certain conclusion. Teilhard spoke of the Cosmic Christ – the whole universe is evolving towards its full realisation... its perfection... being drawn into the Body of Christ. In the language of chaos theory, the Risen Christ is the strange attractor – the hidden organising principle that draws and holds all of this seeming disorder... into one... into Love... into God.

### ***The Vision***

So Richard Rohr says, "*The Risen Christ is the icon of humanity in its final and full destiny. He is the pledge and the guarantee of what God will do with us... with all our (pain... failure... our wounding... even with our death).*"<sup>3</sup> When we look at the Resurrected Christ, we see where *we* are going... who and what we will be... regardless of what life (or death) throws at us.

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Rohr, *Daily Reflections*, January 19, 2016

What does that fulfilment look like? What are we being encouraged to see in the Risen Christ? Here are just a few characteristics that attract my attention.

- The Risen Christ is totally free – unconstrained by time and space (he walks through walls), but also unleashed from pain, regret, anxiety and the haunting presence of death itself. We are being drawn into perfect freedom.
- The Risen Christ is the ultimate triumph of Love. It was fear and hatred that tried to extinguish him, but cross and tomb couldn't hold him. It's Love that rules our destiny.
- The Resurrected Christ is the icon of Life... eternal and abundant. This journey of ours is about Life, not death... and it's spirited life, like water gushing from a deep spring... splashing everywhere.

This is the vision of reality that attracts and draws us.

And what does this mean for us here and now?

- There's no need to fear chaos... indeed we can relax and enjoy the wild unpredictable ride.
- For life is not meaningless – there's a purpose evolving in all this, no matter how chaotic it seems to our eyes. We can live as people who know themselves drawn to an ultimate fulfilment. We can relax into this resurrection flow.
- And so we can live in trust. We come from God... and in the Cosmic Christ, all creation is being drawn home to the unity that is the beginning and the end... the alpha and omega.

### **Conclusion**

As a child, growing up in the parish of Good Shepherd, Plympton, I took comfort from the metaphor of the shepherd, envisaging myself as that little lamb held in Christ's arms that adorned our parish banner. But that was comfort rather than attraction. In today's Gospel it's the last line that has been *my 'strange attractor'*... from childhood to the present day. *"I came that you may have life, and have it abundantly."* It's that Christ-promise of outrageously abundant life that's drawn me on the way of Jesus. This is the spirit of the Risen Christ, drawing us into the beauty and light that is the cosmic reality of God.