

Advent 3 - Millennium Falcon 12 dec 21

'To boldly go where no man has gone before... and may the Force be with you'.

Now the more astute of you, the Star Wars closet fanatics, or the Trekkies amongst you will have been horrified by my opening sentence, as I have mixed up famous quotes from each of them - deliberately, I must add - to test if you were awake.

But since I want to talk about the Millennium Falcon, you will see I have sided with Star Wars.

Actually, I'm going to talk about a journey, which is - in a sense - a space oddity of its own. Oops - slipped in a David Bowie reference

there - but instead of Major Tom who lost contact with Ground Control, I'm going to tell you about Major Grant, my son-in-law, who almost lost all contact with life on earth as we know it a couple of years ago.

He was - as some of you know - knocked off his motorbike whilst going to work one morning, and having been scooped up by sharp paramedics in a rescue helicopter and transported to the nearest major neurosurgical facility, he was immediately operated upon, and after a few days of his life very uncertainly hanging in the balance, his body decided to survive - even though his mind and brain were still in outer galactic space.

The battle to learn all he had ever known before was such an effort; to learn to speak, to hold things and understand what they were; to understand what they were for - what do you do with a toothbrush? - what do you do with a fork? - to learn to stand again; gain control of your sphincters; walk; understand what noises meant or what speech meant.

All of this was a monumental struggle that led at times to despair and wishing he had died in the crash he will still never remember. Had it not been for the dedication of our daughter - his wife - Ruth, who he also didn't remember, which was hugely distressing for her - and a very dedicated team of Traumatic Brain Injury experts who specialize in rehabilitation of the

seriously injured, and continue to give him care to this day - he would not have made it, or anything like the progress he has.

Little by little, step by step, there has been a gradual movement forward, but predictions have always been positive. One of the things that has kept him going is his engagement with building Lego sets. It has been good for his mind, his manual dexterity, his concentration, and his sense of achievement.

Starting with small sets of a few pieces each, he has gradually moved up the scale of complexity over the last two years, until this year he reached the zenith of his Lego successes when he completed the Millennium

Falcon, with over 4,000 pieces and an instruction manual half the size of the bible. Segue to...

You might have been wondering when I was going to get around to something approaching what you come to church for - or, at least, I hope you do.

The bible is a collection of 66 books with an eclectic mix of history, mythology, poetry, prophecy, visions and dreams.

This third Sunday of Advent has three themes to it, as all our Sundays in Advent do. This Sunday is called 'Gaudete' Sunday - from the Latin 'gaudere', to rejoice. It is equivalent to

the fourth Sunday in Lent, which is called 'Laetare' Sunday. Both words mean 'rejoice', and reflect a lessening of the stringencies of both the Lenten fast and the Advent fast. It is also why we light a rose coloured candle as opposed to another purple one on these Sundays, and the theme is 'Joy'.

In keeping with our rather more gloomy Advent themes of death, judgement, heaven, and hell - you'll be glad to know that we've survived death and judgement already - oh, you didn't notice? - I can always go back if you like - and now we're on to heaven. Sounds like a good destination; and the third theme to go with the other two is that of the prophets.

They weren't all a group of grizzled old curmudgeons who proclaimed, 'Doom! Doom! - the sky is falling! - sorry, Chicken Little is always sneaking in when I'm not looking!

Some of the prophets were strapping young men with a happy message to proclaim. Particularly those who foretold of the coming of a Messiah to Israel.

Depending on which biblical scholar you choose to read or believe, there are 574 or 456 Old Testament prophecies about the coming of the Messiah and his times. Some scholars believe there are more than 300 prophecies about Jesus in the Old Testament which were fulfilled. These prophecies are specific enough that the mathematical probability of Jesus

fulfilling even a handful of them, let alone all of them, is staggeringly improbable—if not impossible.

Peter Stoner, Chairman of the Departments of Mathematics and Astronomy at Pasadena College, was passionate about biblical prophecies. With 600 students from the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Stoner looked at eight specific prophecies about Jesus. They came up with extremely conservative probabilities for each one being fulfilled, and then considered the likelihood of Jesus fulfilling all eight of those prophecies.

The conclusion to his research was staggering. The prospect that anyone would satisfy those

eight prophecies was just 1 in 10^{17} . In Science Speaks, he described it like this: "Let us try to visualize this chance. If you mark one of ten tickets, and place all of the tickets in a hat, and thoroughly stir them, and then ask a blindfolded man to draw one, his chance of getting the right ticket is one in ten. Suppose that we take 10^{17} silver dollars and lay them on the face of Texas. They will cover all of the state two feet deep. Now mark one of these silver dollars and stir the whole mass thoroughly, all over the state. "Blindfold a man and tell him that he can travel as far as he wishes, but he must pick up that one silver dollar and say that this is the right one. What chance would he have of getting the right one?

Just the same chance that the prophets would have had of writing these eight prophecies and having them all come true in any one man, from their day to the present time, providing they wrote using their own wisdom."

As anyone will tell you, I am no mathematician, but those odds seem pretty convincing to me.

Some of you may have recognized Jimmy Cliff from our gradual hymn singing 'Sittin' in limbo;' I put this in because Christmas time is traditionally a time when those who are spiritually 'sitting in limbo' get up out of their chairs and force themselves to church to see if the pastor has anything new to tell them

this year - and maybe they go home happy, or maybe they go home muttering to themselves, 'Same old, same old.'

Some of our limbo-sitters will have been searching for some kind of belief to hang their hats on all their lives, but have never quite heard what they regarded as the words of truth. Let me try and help you.

Back to Major Grant (and he was a Major in the British Army) and his Lego. Each piece he created had a design and a right way to be put together. If Grant didn't follow the instructions, it wouldn't work. The piece would not come out right.

In the same way, as he tried to recover his lost functions and regain his intellectual capacity, he had to follow the instructions of his carers and rehabilitation experts. If he didn't, he would fail - and that failure led to enormous frustration and anger. I can relate to that as I'm sure most of us can.

What is hard is having to follow rules and guidelines - we all think we know better, don't we? Following someone else's way is not always easy or comfortable, but when you enjoy the success at the end, you realize it was actually all worth it and you wouldn't have managed on your own.

So eventually, Grant managed to construct both of the top models of Lego; a working Grand Piano, and, of course, the Millennium Falcon . We were all so proud of him - and he was justifiably proud of himself. There was real joy in his achievement.

And just as there was joy in his Lego achievements, so there was joy in his physical and mental progress; he was becoming who he was meant to be - almost literally a 'second birth' - certainly a second chance at life, which had been all but snuffed out in a moment.

So, too, there was joy when Jesus arrived as a baby, and was recognized by his mother, the

Magi (or astrologers), the shepherds, and later by Simeon and Anna in the temple.

Jesus also had to follow his Father's will in order to become what he was born to be. If he had not, we would not be here and we would still be wandering around, 'sittin' in limbo' waiting for the truth to set us free.

But we have that truth because Jesus became what he was destined to become as the Son of God. All the individual pieces that had been picked up painstakingly by the prophets of old, (as Grant picked up each piece of Lego and it gradually began to make sense), and at Christmas time we see the completed whole -

the Christ-child - as Grant finally saw the entire Millennium Falcon!

No wonder there was joy! The prophets were right - Jesus, the Messiah, was here! To bring us news of heaven on earth and show us the way for us to be what our Creator always wanted us to be. You see, we can all be our own Millennium Falcons, and the Force can be with us.

But if you want to see what the Falcon can do when it stretches its wings, and what Jesus can do when he exercises his power - you have to do two things; first, let Jesus take the controls, and second - and you'll see why if you

don't hit the ejector button - follow the story to Easter.

Now that's a flight you'd be foolish to miss.