I'M A GREAT FAN OF SCIENCE

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No, I don't think scientists are out to disprove the Bible.
Category: Observations

The galactic president Slartibartfast once said to Arthur Dent "I'm a great fan of science, you know". If you've never read, listened to or watched the Hitchhikers' Guide to the Galaxy, you may not have a clue what I'm talking about. The thing is, like Slartibartfast, I'm a great fan of science, I think it's brilliant.

There are a number of reasons why I love science. Prosaically, I think it's amazing that I am typing this on a laptop that has infinitely more power than was available to the Apollo astronauts. Video calls were a thing of distant science fiction a few decades ago, now they are so common that we are suffering from zoom fatigue. On a more serious note, for most of human history, I'd be dead before I got to the age I am now. Medical science has advanced to the point where we more or less expect to live the sort of long lives that only a very few lucky people would have managed a century ago. Another reason that I love science is that I like finding things out and understanding them. I've been fascinated by viral diseases since long before the current kerfuffle, I love astronomy and I've even been known to curl up with books on quantum mechanics.

Of course, I'm happy to admit that science, like all human endeavours has its negative aspects. Alongside developing medicines to help us live longer, science has produced much more effective ways of killing people in large numbers. Our planet is struggling under the way in which science and unrestrained commerce have polluted the land, sea and air - with potential devastating consequences.

Over the next few days, I'd like to explore some of the interactions between science and the Christian faith. This isn't my normal field of interest, but it is one that I care about.

Firstly, let me say that I believe that the impulse to scientific research has profound biblical roots. The command to care for creation (Gen 2:15) and to name the living creatures (Gen 2:19,20) imply that we need to understand and categorise the world. You can't care for something unless you know what it is and what it needs. It is no surprise that modern day science and the scientific method emerged within a Christian context.

However, there are Christians who see science in negative terms, as the enemy. One complaint is that scientists keep changing their minds and that they say different things at different times. Of course they do! That's exactly how science is supposed to work. The whole idea is to test ideas, refine theories and develop new knowledge. We should expect scientists to be saying different things about Covid-19 today as compared to two years ago. Back then, we knew virtually nothing about it, today we know so much more.

Another complaint is that scientists are trying to disprove God and the Bible. I can't speak for other contexts, but here in the UK, that's a ridiculous assertion. Let me explain. Forty years ago, I worked as a research biologist (see my publications here, if you are interested) and worked alongside evolutionary biologists. Not one of the people I worked with had any interest in proving that God didn't exist, that the Bible wasn't reliable or that the Book of Genesis was a made up fable. They weren't interested in doing these things because they never gave them a moment's thought. Like most of the British population, religion rarely entered their thoughts. That was forty years ago and society has only become increasingly secular since. Of course, there are people like Richard Dawkins who used their pulpit to attack religion, but they are in the minority. For most people, it just isn't an issue; they just get on studying their fossils, genomes, habitats or what-have-you.

British society in general, has turned its back on religion in general. This means that scientists tend to have little experience, knowledge or interest in the subject. Evolutionary biologists have as little interest in engaging with the book of Genesis as geologists have in arguing with flat-earthers. That bird has flown and those arguments belong to a different age.

Now, before you get angry at me, I am not equating a belief in Genesis with a belief in flat-earth. I'm simply pointing out that for the vast majority of people working in science, these are arguments and discussions which are no longer relevant. One of the first things that they teach you in missionary school, is that you have to understand the culture you are working in if you are to share the Gospel in a relevant way. My concern is that in our Christian attitude to science, we really haven't understood our own culture and so we are fighting battles and discussing things that no one really cares about.

Tomorrow, I'll say a bit more about why I don't think that arguing about creation-evolution is a very fruitful thing to do in terms of evangelism and then the next post in this series will look at what the approach that I think we do need to take.