

Well, we know it must be Christmas because there's a new Star Wars film! 'The Rise of the Skywalker' is number nine in the trilogy-of-trilogies known as the 'Skywalker Saga'. I've been told there's no point going to see it because I have not seen any of the others. It's almost as if that radio comedy series from a few years ago, 'I've never seen Star Wars' was deliberately aimed at me! Or *you*, if you too are thinking that since 1977 you might have been missing out on something significant!

Amidst all the hype, I thought I had better do some research. Thanks to Wikipedia, I now know that both the original trilogy, the 'prequel trilogy', and the latest 'sequel trilogy' are based on the idea of *humanoid* beings having left their equivalent of Earth in search of a new *home*. As they move through space they encounter other beings and other worlds. The ensuing conflict of interests leads to almost unlimited scope for a battle between the forces of Good and Evil.

It's a topical theme. Our home – this beautiful blue planet, set as it is in a vast galaxy which is just one of many in an infinite universe – is changing. Thus far, the delicately balanced climatic conditions here on Earth have enabled life to thrive. We human beings have evolved to be perfectly adapted to our environment, and as a result have been able to make huge advances in social order, commerce, science and technology, and culture: the very things that make us more human. And I might add, the thing that surely makes us most human is faith. There is a 'God-shaped hole' within each of us, alluded to in this prayer of St Augustine: 'You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you'.

Now, even though *I've never seen Star Wars*, even I have heard of 'The Force'! Further research on Wikipedia revealed that, 'The Force is an omnipresent energy field... that surrounds us, penetrates us, and binds the galaxy together.' Well, my fellow Jedi (!), with the eye of faith, I think we know how to interpret *that* idea!

With the eye of faith, we might conclude that the *order* of the created universe – whichever scale we choose to examine – suggests a creative force beyond our imagining. And yet the Christian faith declares – indeed, is built upon – the truth that this creative power chose to limit himself and become subject to the physical frailty which we all experience. 'The Word became flesh and lived among us... full of grace and truth'. God came to us as a human being. In doing so, he affirmed the dignity and the wonder of our physical human condition. In doing so, he revealed himself not to be some remote creative power, but the God of love who yearns to be in relationship with us. And this same God of love reveals himself now by his Holy Spirit – who 'surrounds us, penetrates us, and binds [us] together'.

Jesus may only have walked this Earth for a short time, but he remains physically present with us: he is still Emmanuel, 'God with us'. He commanded us to 'do this in remembrance of me': to receive his body and blood in bread and wine, that he might live in us and we in him. And this we will do later in the service. When we do, keep

in mind that Jesus deliberately asked us to *eat and drink* in remembrance of him: very physical acts!

This point is made passionately by our new Archbishop-elect, Stephen Cottrell – who adds that we also encounter Jesus in each other. He writes, ‘We encounter Jesus in bread and wine, in the *breaking open* of scripture, and in the gathering of his people. ... [In the Eucharist] the sharing of the Peace of Christ is the pivot between word and sacrament. Having heard Jesus in the scriptures, and in readiness to receive Jesus in the sacrament, we turn to our neighbour and greet the presence of Jesus in each other’. So keep that in mind, too, later in the service.

Jesus’s second great command was to make disciples of all the nations, ‘baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit’. When baptism is reduced to a mere sprinkling at the font it’s easy to lose the connection with the very physical act of washing. Full immersion is a powerful symbol of dying to those dark forces of evil and rising again to new life and to the force of good!

In baptism we die with Christ to evil – and we rise with him for good. Jesus actually allowed himself to be killed by those dark forces to demonstrate the extent of his love for us. Then he defeated the power of death by rising again, and as the ultimate ‘Rise of the Skywalker’ he ascended into heaven to sit at God’s right hand. From there he sent the omnipresent Holy Spirit to us – a gift we receive in baptism. And so both physically and spiritually God truly lives within us and around us.

I read somewhere a speculative article on possible other worlds in the universe. The question raised was, Would these worlds need their own Jesus Christ, their own Incarnation? Well, yes they would! That is the whole point of the Incarnation: the omnipresent God of love made himself present as one of us: a ‘Christmas present’ of ‘particularity’. Surely, he would want to have done the same elsewhere in the universe, if indeed we are not the only ‘humanoids’ he created. However, for what it’s worth, I personally am content to believe that we are alone in the universe: that the extravagance of God’s love for us means that he has surrounded us – the ‘crown of his creation’ – with such unlimited evidence of his presence!

And so it is of vital importance that we work with God as co-creators in safeguarding the beautiful planet he has given us as our home. Part of that work will be to travel into space so that we can learn more about ourselves and our environment. And part of that work will be to create myths to help us understand more of our responsibilities to tune in to and receive the omnipresent Force for good which will ultimately defeat all that is evil.

As you leave this service you will enter the darkness of this Christmas night. But everywhere you look, from the stars above to the Christmas lights in homes and on the Friary Gardens, you will see that ‘The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness [does] not overcome it’. Just as light overcomes darkness, so good must triumph over evil. God, the force of all that is good, is with us for good – that is, for ever. Jesus – Emmanuel – said, ‘Remember, I am *with you always...*’.