

First Sunday of Advent
Father Mike Holloran
December 2, 2018, Year B

Another year has run its course and brought us back again to another First Sunday of Advent. Nature has these kinds of repeating cycles, and in some religions a circle represents time that is cyclical, a repeating that goes nowhere, has no direction, serves no purpose.

In Christianity a circle represents God. He has no beginning or end. God is evergreen, like the branches of our wreath, but within His eternity is a created universe that does have beginning and end, and so a destination, and a purpose. We light candles in the wreath marking the times and seasons through which we move on our journey through life.

People have always pondered these realities-- time and eternity-- and asked themselves, Where do we come from? Where are we going? Who are we? Why are we? And so, a book by Carlo Rovelli caught my eye, entitled "The Order of Time". Rovelli has spent most of his life studying physics, seeking a theory that can harmonize quantum mechanics with Einstein's Theory of General Relativity. Among the books his quest has generated is this one addressing the order of time.

Rovelli's field is physics, and there is plenty of science in the book, but what's more interesting is the philosophy-- what he makes of what he knows, and what it means to him. His basic conclusion is that time does not exist in the universe itself, but within us, in the way we perceive and think about reality. I'm not convinced he has made his case. There seems to be some contradictions.

For example, he says that the universe had an origin in what's known as the Big Bang, and that the universe has been spreading out ever since, and that this is what gives direction to time-- the initial energy going out and passing through all kinds of changes, forming elements, stars, planets, and evolving life. He then poses the question: why is this? Why was matter and energy more concentrated at the beginning of the universe, a state known as low entropy? (p. 28)

This sounds like a question that needs an answer outside of time, before time began, but Rovelli does not go there. Instead he says that our sense of time and our perception of cause and effect are produced in our heads from an incomplete knowledge of reality. This puzzles me. He seems to be wanting it both ways. If the universe is evolving, then cause and effect really do exist in the universe. How then can it be just in our minds, a result of our ignorance? Is he trying to dodge the God answer? Does he have a bias that dismisses the unknowable as unreal?

By the end of the book, Rovelli becomes personal and reflective, noting the anxiety that

people typically feel as they begin to notice their own time passing, in one direction only. He says,
“It is in order to escape this anxiety that we have imagined the existence of 'eternity', a strange world outside of time that we would like to be inhabited by gods, by a God, or by immortal souls.” (p. 173)

An interviewer from Scientific American asked him,
Do you believe in God? No. Not if God is a person outside of time who created the world and responds to our prayers.
Do you fear death? No. He fears suffering, but not death.

He still loves life, its beauty, the kisses of the woman he loves, her presence that gives meaning to everything; but at sixty years of age he has already drunk deeply enough of life that if an angel were to come for him right now, saying “Carlo, it's time” he would not ask to be left long enough to finish this sentence, but just smile up at him and follow. Of course, the angel would be an imaginary cultural artifact, and he would not be following into another life but into non-existence.

He closes the book by describing the experience of listening to music. He writes,
“In the Benedictus of Beethoven's Missa Solemnis the song of the violin is pure beauty, pure desperation, pure joy. We are suspended, holding our breath, feeling mysteriously that this must be the source of meaning. That this is the source of time. Then the song fades and ceases.”

He then quotes from the most depressing book of the Bible, Ecclesiastes, as it describes old age and death, so that his paragraph reads, “Then the song fades and ceases. 'the silver cord is snapped, and the golden bowl is broken, and the pitcher is shattered at the spring, and the broken pulley falls into the well, and the dust returns to the earth as it once was.'”

He then concludes: “And it is fine like this. We can close our eyes, rest. This all seems fair and beautiful to me. This is time.” (p. 182)

It is usually fruitless to argue with someone over what they find fair and beautiful, but logic, bias, and the appropriate use of the evidence are fair game.

Rovelli quotes from the Book of Ecclesiastes, but it is a selective quote. It actually reads, “and the broken pulley falls into the well, and the dust returns to the earth as it once was, and the life breath returns to God Who gave it.” (Ecc. 12:6-7)

And for an abundance of evidence from physics and philosophy pointing to the logical necessity of a Creator you can read “New Proofs for the Existence of God”, by Robert

Spitzer. There's all kind of evidence out there, data produced by scientific observation and experiment. But theorizing about the meaning of it is philosophy, which proceeds by way of the laws of logic but also involves intuition. So there is something of a choice in how to interpret the evidence. You can decide that what is unknowable is unreal, and that there is no creator, no purpose, no flow of time from source to destination; and having arrived at that dead end make a virtue out of what you think is necessity by resigning yourself in stoic fashion and call it fair (enough) and beautiful (in its own way).

But it makes as much sense of the evidence, maybe more, to decide that the violin in the Missa Solemnis must be telling truth about the meaning of human existence, or we would not find it so beguiling; and to decide that our inability to quantify something and plug it into an equation does not render it unreal; and that when it is time for the dissolution of this world, or of our part in it, we will indeed enter a realm outside of time, an eternity that is not “inhabited by a God” , as if God were just some super human living in a big house, but a realm that is the infinite, all-embracing presence of God;

and that it will not be strange there but completely familiar as the true home for which we were made; and that it will indeed be full of immortal souls because that in us that loves the beautiful and rejoices in the truth is not physical, subject to death and decay. No, it is the image and likeness of God, a human soul to whom God in His graciousness never stops saying, “Let it be”.