

## **'Hymns We Love' series: HOW GREAT THOU ART**

30 years ago this April, the Hubble Space Telescope was launched with a mission to explore the furthest reaches of the universe. Immediately it began to change our view of the cosmos, capturing new stars and details that were impossible to see from earth.

However, no-one was prepared for what happened at the end of 1995. Over the Christmas holidays that year, the Institute director, Robert Williams, decided to use the 10-day break to point the telescope at a tiny, black, apparently empty, patch of sky no bigger than the size of a grain of sand held at arm's length.

When the team returned after Christmas and looked at the images it had captured, they were astonished – there was no empty black patch of space, they found not one or two new stars, but hundreds and hundreds of galaxies, each one containing billions of stars.

As a result of this discovery astronomers are now confident that there are trillions of galaxies each one with billions of stars and that the universe is far bigger and more glorious than we ever could have imagined.

As Professor Jim Al-Khallili, the well-known theoretical physicist and broadcaster said “it is impossible not to ... be intimidated by the extraordinary depth of the cosmos”.

Now Carl Boberg, who wrote today's wonderful hymn, didn't have the benefit of knowing all that the Hubble telescope has shown us, but he still knew how to find wonder in creation.

Carl was born the son of a carpenter in Sweden in 1859. He started out as a sailor, and you can imagine how at night, out on the northern seas, he might have looked up at the stars and wondered just how they came to be there.

After the sea, he went to Bible school and later became a member of the Swedish parliament. He published many poems, hymns and songs but this is easily his most famous.

He saw a universe of beauty, power and wonder, and in that recognised the fingerprints of a beautiful, powerful and wonderful God... a God so great he could create trillions of stars with, as the Bible tells us, just the power of His Word.

But he also saw a God who was interested in the detail, the forest glades through which he wandered, the birds singing sweetly in the trees. A God who not only knows every star, but lovingly created every tree, every leaf, who is so absorbed in the beauty and detail of life on earth, who finds joy in bird song just as we do.

But here's the funny thing – the Bible tells us little about HOW these wonders we've been singing about were created - it deals with the creation of billions of galaxies and trillions of stars with just 10 words

“in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” and then adds the throwaway line ‘and He also made the stars..’

You may have read the Bible, or you may not even own one. Either way it's clear that those who wrote it are not really very interested in the 'how's' of creation... that's what science is for, and the Bible was never meant to be a science textbook.

Instead the Bible is much more interested in the who and the why - Who is this creator God?, What is His character like?, Why did He make us?

Maybe you can remember some of the Old Testament bible stories like Adam and Eve, Joseph and that 'dreamcoat' of his, Moses and the Exodus or the ten commandments.

Well I would suggest that when you put all of the stories together they can be summarised as saying just two things:

Firstly they help us understand just how big, how powerful, but also how Holy the God who created the stars is....

But secondly, they then reassure us that this great awesome God, actually loves us and wants to be in relationship with us.

Let's just think about the first theme for a moment. In one sense it's obvious... if there really is a Creator God, He has to be utterly different from us – this is part of the meaning of the term "Holy" which literally means "set apart".

The book of Isaiah says: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways" declares the Lord, "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts"

Again, if we think about it, this makes sense, because if God wasn't holy, set apart, perfect, then he wouldn't really be God!

Let's imagine for the moment you and I are standing in New York, looking at the Empire State Building, and on the side of it someone has painted a scale from bottom to top where they have ranked every human who has ever lived in terms of how well they lived (how good they were).

Now, if you were doing that, who would you put at the top? Maybe Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela? ...and at the bottom? Perhaps Hitler or Stalin? And with that as the range, where do you think you fit in? Somewhere near the top? Or maybe a bit lower.

Finally having done all that, where should God be on the scale? Well, I guess He has to be above even the 'best' human, so maybe at cloud level, or maybe the moon. Well the Bible tells us he is far beyond that, infinitely further than even the Hubble telescope can see.

"For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways"

God isn't just a slightly better version of humans. The truth is that the whole range from the very worst of humanity to very best doesn't even register on the scale of God's goodness.

The gap is so big, there is no way you or I, by our own efforts, can ever close it. We are human, and, as one of our poets said, 'to be human is to err'. Even those whose lives we

most admire will acknowledge their own selfishness, or in Bible terms that old fashioned word “sin”.

It might not be that popular – for all sorts of reasons. But our difference from God isn’t simply about scale – it’s about our goodness. And actually I have never met a human being who – when being honest and candid – won’t admit that the heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart.

So many wars, so much environmental calamity, the recent economic crashes, our relationship and family difficulties – all these have, at their root and cause, an element of human selfishness be they individual or collective. And we have proved ourselves incapable of ridding ourselves of it.

Now, if we were to stop there that would be bad news. But there is good news... God never stops there.

Those Old Testament Stories of Abraham, of Moses, of David are all about God finding a group of people to get to know him and for God to teach about who He was and how He loved them, so they could pass it onto others.

Now if you do read your way through all of the Old Testament, you will find out that they were not always very good at that, and time after time they go wrong and lose the plot. But you and they are never out of God’s reach.

God didn’t mess up choosing them, because despite all of their failings, God kept loving and longing for relationship and wouldn’t be persuaded otherwise and so He comes himself in Jesus.

And coming back to today’s hymn, Carl Boberg saw the same link as he moves seamlessly from the wonders of creation in verse 2 to the story of Jesus and the cross in verse 3. ‘and when I think that God his son not sparing, sent him to die, I scarce can take it in....’

And that is the wonderful story of God’s love for you and me that we remember every Easter and which we will explore a little bit more tomorrow when we will sing Rock of Ages.

But first let’s sing again about the wonders of creation, the wonders of a holy God who loves you and me and together proclaim “My God, How Great Thou Art!”

## **Closing Prayer**

*Dear Lord*

*Thank you that you are a powerful, great God who created the entire universe and trillions of stars with just the power of your word.*

*Thank you also that you love the beauty and detail of life, taking joy in peaceful forest glades and exquisite bird song as well as in the splendour of the lofty mountains.*

*Thank you that most of all you find joy and love in your relationship with us, your people.  
Help me to know your love, to experience your joy and to see the world around me, and  
people around me, as you do.*

*As I listen to the Hymns We Love series this week, please help me to take a step closer to you  
each day to see you more clearly, love you more dearly and follow you more nearly, day by  
day.*

*Amen*

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