

The idea of a parallel universe used to belong firmly to the realm of fiction or fantasy. Modern examples are C.S. Lewis's Narnia and Terry Pratchett's Discworld. Mainstream post-Enlightenment thought has been rather sniffy about such things. That began to change in the early 1950s, when the Nobel prizewinning physicist and former Fellow of this College, Erwin Schrödinger, announced that when his equations seemed to describe several different histories, these were 'not alternatives, but all really happen simultaneously'. The idea of multiple universes, or of a 'multiverse', had come of age.

Some scientists went on to suggest that the Big Bang might have given rise to infinite types of universes with infinite variations in their laws of physics, but Stephen Hawking's final research paper, submitted ten days before he died in 2017, argues that our Universe is in fact typical, and so observations we make from our viewpoint will be meaningful in developing our ideas of how other universes emerged. This week's *New Scientist* describes a new theory that each point in space is constantly expanding and contracting. These infinitesimally small universes are brought into existence with their own big bang, then snuffed out in a trillionth of a nanosecond with a reverse big bang, or 'big crunch', becoming a singularity.

I don't know where you stand on that. Suffice it to say that it is no longer silly or deluded to believe in the existence of parallel universes. The ancient world of course had no problem with the idea, and nor did that of the Hebrew Bible or the Greek New Testament. You may know the story in 2 Kings, when the prophet Elisha's servant is afraid of an approaching army. Elisha says to him: 'Do not be afraid, for there are more with us than there are with them.' Then Elisha prayed: 'O LORD, please open his eyes that he may see.' So the LORD opened the eyes of the servant, and he saw; the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.'

The account of the Ascension of Jesus in Luke and Acts is very matter-of-fact, because the existence of a parallel, spiritual universe is not in doubt. Jesus is there with his disciples one moment, visible, tangible, and the next he is not. The text of the Gospel says he parted from them; in Acts one of the verbs used must refer to physical movement upwards, but the other two usually mean simply to take up, or take back, without any particularly vertical emphasis. The point is that the physical presence of Jesus was definitively removed from them, and an exchange was taking place. He was received into another dimension, and in return they would shortly receive – the same basic verb – the promise of his presence in a different form, the Holy Spirit. The two dimensions coexist. In normal circumstances there is no sensory contact across the boundary, but the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus have made it permeable.

Early in St John's Gospel, Jesus says to Nicodemus that if he wants to see the Kingdom of God, he must be born again. The Greek word for 'again' can also mean 'from above'. All musicians present will be familiar with the instruction 'From the top', meaning 'Start again from the beginning'. But 'from above' also implies 'from the spiritual dimension', from that other parallel world which is just as real as the visible one. New birth, from above, is an initiation into the fuller life in which the material and the spiritual coexist. The born-again person belongs fully to both dimensions.

The Archbishops of Canterbury and York have commended an initiative called 'Thy Kingdom Come', now in its fourth year, which has been taken up enthusiastically by a large number of Christian churches, including the Catholic Church. You may have seen the video recorded recently on the Pope's mobile phone, and widely circulated in the media. They are inviting individuals, groups and congregations to commit themselves to praying during the eleven days from Ascension Day, today, to Pentecost, on Sunday week: and to pray specifically that God's Spirit might work in the lives of five friends who have not yet responded with their 'Yes' to God's call, granting them that new birth from above. Will you pray that your friends' eyes and hearts may be opened, to become aware of the parallel universe of God's love, grace and forgiveness, and to enter it through Christ? And in so doing, may your own Christian faith be deepened and enlarged. Amen.