



## god behaving badly

I'd like to say something about God behaving badly.

I'm using that phrase provocatively as a way of talking about the God surprises, God who upends our expectations of what God is or is not, what God should or should not do. That happens each time we read about Jesus at the Wedding Feast in Cana: Jesus shows us the God of creation, of overflowing abundance and feasting.

In the end, there is so much wine at the wedding banquet, and of such quality, that the groom gets credit for something he really has nothing to do with. Surely this is the work of the God of excess, whose gift to us is always unconditional, always unlooked for, and never equalled.

I'm saying "God behaving badly" to help us, I hope, recognise and break through the limits we impose on who God is and on the grace that comes into our lives. That's the provocative part. But I also use the phrase advisedly. Few things are more precious than faith, and nothing could be more vulnerable than the images we have of God, many times from childhood, but also the language we use to speak to God: whether we speak to God as Creator, or God the Father, God the One great mystery, God our Mother and Life-Giver, and so on.

But, taking a cue from our Gospel passage, how about God behaving badly and working in strange and mysterious ways.

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I used to know a scientist who had, as a young man, become a Christian. Dr Nishimura became a distinguished Professor

of Chemistry, but also had a PhD in physics. Professor Nishimura started reading the copy of John's Gospel he was given at his baptism. But he didn't get very far. He stopped at Chapter 2: the passage about Jesus at the wedding at Cana, when he changes water into wine.

That sent the professor's scientific mind into hyper-research mode. He set out to work out what it would take for water to acquire the properties of wine. Never mind whether it was wine as the fine wine John tells us Jesus came up with at the wedding, or cheap £1.99 plonk: for Nishimura, the problem was the same.

Water, as we all know from school, is two particles hydrogens and one oxygen. Wine has ethyl alcohol, and that means it needs a third basic element: carbon. Nishimura was interested in how much energy it would take to create carbon from plain hydrogen and oxygen molecules, presuming, that is, that such a thing was even possible. He quickly realised he was looking at Big-Bang kind of energy! His mathematical model tried capture the kind of astonishing energy that astrophysicists speak of when talking about the very creation of our universe.

The truth is that Professor Nishimura's animated and detailed description of equations, conditions, and constants he was fitting into his model was all Greek to me.

The unimaginably-vast amounts of energy involved required a that took into consideration the energy density of inflation. Inflation: the universe is constantly expanding, and at an ever-increasing rate. So the model would need to account for that

inflationary energy as a magnitude bigger than fusion. And fusion as a magnitude bigger than fission. And fission is a magnitude bigger than a simple chemical reaction like TNT. I understood TNT, but nothing else.

Now, this being St James's Piccadilly, there is bound to be someone in the congregation today with a PhD in chemistry or in astrophysics, or both! who probably knows better and could explain it all to me after the service. Or at least I hope there is, and very much look forward to that.

One thing Prof. Nishimura said, however, did stay with me:  
15 billion suns!

Nishimura concluded that – for that water to turn into wine – it would have require the energy equivalent to the nuclear fusion firing 15 billion suns. John's gospel describes six jars of water, each holding about two or three measures, or firkins. Richard Burrige, head of Theology at King's College London tells us that this is somewhere between 20 and 30 gallons. So about 150 gallons, or 800 bottles of the best quality wine. And he adds a note to say that it was sure to be some wedding party! And, as is the custom in middle-eastern weddings, a party lasting over many, many days.

But for all that, – my scientist friend pointed out, – all that energy was unleashed imperceptibly and in the blink of an eye. Call it hiding in plain sight, call it a miracle visible only to the eyes of faith, call it what you will. The point is that the fusion, fission, friction, fracking, or whatever it is that happened at that moment, there was no hint of 15 billion suns worth of energy mysteriously remaking molecules of hydrogen and oxygen into a unique combination of carbon, oxygen, and hydrogen to come up with, – by all accounts, – a very fine Dom Perignon. In other words, the kind of wine I've only heard about, and can't afford to drink. And it happened so economically that there wasn't even a puff of smoke.

I'm reserving judgement on Prof. Nishimura's method and aims. I'll come back to that later. Frankly, I think I learned more from a conversation I had with a scientist at the Royal Astronomical Society earlier this week, ... as you do. We were talking about the limits of human knowledge, scientific and speculative.

We both concluded two things: 1) it's an amazing time to be alive. Discoveries being made almost daily not only expand our knowledge of the universe we live in, but increase exponentially our appreciation for the deep mysteries of a universe made up of 95% dark energy and dark matter. And 2) we concluded that – therefore – conversation between science and religion is absolutely vital. Science probes the outer extremes of the material universe, and religion asks us to go beyond and explore the ultimate origins and possibilities of life itself.

Jocelyn Bell Burnell is the physicist who discovered pulsars. She is also a Christian in the Quaker tradition. She says in Christianity "your understanding of God is revised in light of your own experience, while in research science you revise your model in light of data from experiments." In other words, in both the scientific method and in Christian faith, we continually develop and revise our understanding given experience and experimentation. In the end, the scientific and religious imagination are all probing the one great mystery. And this is precisely where I think Stephen Hawking's earlier search for "a theory of everything" should turn out for us, perhaps for the first time, a serious conversation between science and faith.

Still, 15 billion suns! is a pretty awesome number. John the evangelist, in beautiful economy of word, simply calls it the first of Jesus' signs, a sign of his glory. I call it, God behaving badly: marshalling all that energy for the sake of celebration and feasting. And, yes, so that you and I would have a surprising, picture of God grace, of God's delight in who we are, to work from.

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That said, God behaving badly takes a different meaning when we or someone else is in the grip of suffering.

When we find ourselves asking: Why? Why, o God, why? Or simply, Why is god not doing more to help? Friends of mine from Vancouver were opening Christmas presents with their seven-year-daughter. Later that evening, the child felt tired, and achy. She went to bed. By morning, she could hardly move. She is as we speak receiving intensive cancer treatment at Children's Hospital in Vancouver. Seven years old. It just isn't fair.

The family and everyone they know are praying for a miracle.

So are the patients I was visiting in a cancer ward earlier this week. Everyone I met there is waiting for a miracle. Call it what you will: a miracle of medical science, divine intervention, or both. Whatever we chose to call it, everyone in that ward wants 15 billion suns worth of miracle, zeroing-in to target and reverse the effects of cancer cells.

I met a woman who, through her agony, somehow, somehow, manages to keep a gentle smile. All she wants is to be able to go home from this round of treatment later this week. Her son is turning five on Tuesday. And she just wants to be home for the birthday party. Her eyes shone brightly when she told me about her husband and extended family, and how they have organised games, music, and a cake for her son and his friends to enjoy.

Yes. I think on this one, I want God behaving very badly: I want God to intervene, to marshal all the laws of physics and laser in on that cancer.

Coming into church you may have seen the artist Tracey Emin's neon motif over the portico: It reads "Be faithful to your dreams" It is here – along with other works – as part

of Lumière London, the light and art festival around Westminster, which you can see until tonight.

I want God behaving badly: I would like to see God being faithful to that woman's dreams. And to do it in the most surprising and unexpected way.

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The great Jewish scholar, Rabbi Abraham Heschel, had his own version of God behaving badly. He summarised it in five words that became the title of his book of 1955 (and so you'll understand the gender specific language), he titled his book *God in Search of Man*. According to Heschel, this was the entire message the Hebrew Bible.

For Rabbi Heschel the message and mystery is that, somehow, God takes an interest in his human creation, that, somehow, God involves us in the work of redemption. That somehow God takes us seriously, and cares about who we are and how we live.

Heschel had in mind a passage like Psalm 119: "...what is humankind that you are mindful of them, mere mortals that you should care for them?" And so Heschel's conclusion that it is not that humanity is in search for God. But that God is in search of us! Pursuing us with over-abundant grace.

The prophet Amos would paint a more colourful picture: "On the day of the Lord, the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it..." (9.13). So does the prophet Joel: "the mountains will drip new wine, the hills will flow with milk, and the ravines will run with water" (3.18).

Our passage from the revelation of St John puts it yet again in the language of a wedding feast: "Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage feast."

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But let's come back to Prof. Nishimura. Was he taking the gospel text too literally? It was only a hypothetical model. But if I had to guess, I would say he was hoping that proofs of science would render Jesus more credible to an incredulous, scientific age. To be clear, though, I just don't think it works that way. I don't think finding naturalistic, scientific explanations behind the Gospel accounts will get us very far. One reason is that if we think we can explain the mystery that is God, then we can also explain it away.

The real miracle in the story of the Wedding at Cana is not that 15 billion suns zero-in to turn water into wine. The real miracle is that, on that, faith is born in each of the people Jesus calls to be his disciples.

John's gospel text ends with these words: "Jesus did this first of his signs, revealing his glory, and his disciples believed in him."

How will you believe today? How will you celebrate that you already believe? And how will you follow Jesus in your search for the one great mystery we call God? Or to put it more provocatively: how will God behave badly in your life?

Where would you like to see God behaving badly in your life? I mean badly in that surprising, expectation-upending sort of way? And does that idea bring you a sense of

humility? Does it fill you with expectation? Or does it bring fear? Does it make you recoil, and afraid of where it might lead?

Does it – on other hand, -- like the wine at the wedding feast. Had God has kept the best for last? This isn't the end. God isn't done with me. There's more yet to come? But what?

Or does that kind of questions it make you cringe? Does it make you draw up the bridge, and do a spiritual Brexit? Does it make you say: No thanks. That's too much. Too close to the bone. Too soon?

The disciples were not much different than we are. They were certainly just as human as we are: same human hopes, same dreams; same reticence, self-protection, same walls, same fears. But I think they knew, as they reached for yet another cup of wine being passed around, what we ourselves know today:

We don't need 15 billion suns firing behind us. Sometimes it is just enough – as we will see when we gather for around the altar for communion – it is just enough to stand, put out your hand, receive, bow your head, and say AMEN.

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