

“Show me the Data”

Warden Keith Suckling at the SOSc retreat 2013, Scargill House

I had a colleague based in the USA who ran a department similar to mine. I would visit him every so often and I was always amused to read the slogan over the door of his office which proclaimed ‘*show me the data*’. He wanted to slow down the natural enthusiasm of his colleagues who would come to him with exciting and significant conclusions (as they thought), very often the ones they wanted, but his prime question was – do the data support the conclusion?

I think we would all agree that we should look at the data first, but this obvious and rigorous approach is not practiced as widely as it should be. It is easy to jump to conclusions before absorbing the data, even being selective with the data themselves, neglecting sources of error or ignoring ‘unhelpful’ statistics. Often the conclusions end up reflecting our own preconceptions and prejudices. That is serious enough just for one dataset from one experiment but if we want to construct a wider description, theory, model or narrative, it is important that the data hold together and provide a coherent picture.

So when we come to try to provide a basis for a coherent world view, in our case a theistic one, it is particularly important that we are able to make clear what the data are before applying the conclusion. In our case as ordained scientists we have a conclusion that is hard to appreciate and understand without reference to the basic data, and of course others may choose to interpret the same data in different ways. What data do we have available? Let’s look at some of it.

Over the last couple of days, Ruth has provided us with a fascinating and inspiring overview of that sense of wonder and awe which unites science with a sense of the divine. The data are indisputable. They are the shared experiences of us all. These natural experiences we all have directly from nature and from life provide an agreed starting point from which we can begin to develop our interpretation.

But in our worldview we have sources of data which take us further, beyond the observation of the natural. Taking the lead from Ruth’s synopsis, our readings this morning illustrate how scripture enriches our sense of wonder. Curiously, beauty in the wide sense we understand it now does not seem to be a major strand in the Bible. The sense of awe or even fear is much stronger, but hidden away in the book of Wisdom (Wisdom 13.1-9), we find the broad sense of beauty being referred and related directly to God, almost as a correction to the more fearful interpretation. It is curious that the more contemporary romantic-derived sense of the beauty of nature coincides historically with the beginnings of the historical-critical approach to scripture.

There is always a great sense of beauty, wonder and peace when we read the passage from Revelation (Revelation 21.1-4). For many it is one of the most comforting and beautiful in all scripture. Coming after the chaos of the last battles it offers us a sense of peace, beauty, comfort, wonder, care and love all at once. It reaffirms the goodness of creation with which the Bible begins.

Ruth talked about Jesus’ parables being an example of creativity, the mark of a good teacher. Here (Matthew 13.44-50) we see a number of very concise examples with different images to illustrate the same thing. At least one image, the pearl of great price, is intrinsically beautiful as well as valuable. The robustness of the parables to telling in many different ways emphasises the power of the images and of imagination.

Much of what we have shared over the past couple of days relates to experiences that everyone has access to, so these are excellent data for us to build on. But I’d like to add one further element to the dataset which we partially referred to in our discussion yesterday when we talked about presenting science and religion in the church community and wider. The further element in the data is ourselves and our Society. It is an inspiring thought for us that for many people we are part of the data, part of the evidence. People say when they hear about SOSc that they did not realise such a thing was possible. It means that those who have

divided their minds so that science and religion are kept safely apart may now find themselves able to be conceptually integrated people. Then they can't stop telling others about us.

Let me tell you a story of how this works. We have friends in the North East of Scotland and on one visit I was introduced to a very charming family. The father was a very experienced teacher with a strong Christian faith. He was curious but wary about my position as an ordained scientist. I can't say anything more about his views because we did not discuss it. I think he was, like many people who hear about us, impressed that we exist but cautious about the potential challenge to his position. So we had a delightful visit but did not discuss any theology.

Quite recently a friend of the teacher was diagnosed with terminal cancer. The friend had a technological career but no background of faith and was clearly desperately trying to find a meaning that gave his condition a context he could accept. Our teacher friend thought of us and asked if he could have a copy of the SOSc Anniversary Collection book for his friend. He had seen the book on one of our visits. I posted one to him right away.

I don't know how the story has progressed, but I am moved and impressed that someone who has a theological position that we probably would not agree with has been sufficiently struck by our existence to be willing to offer our perspective to help in a case of deep pastoral need. This is perhaps the strongest example I have come across, but I know of many similar situations where just our existence has been significant point. No detailed debate was necessary.

This is why I think we need to be as aggressive as we can in making people aware that we exist. I don't mean going out recruiting, though we do need to keep that going. I mean simply saying clearly 'here we are'. We know we don't have a final and definitive model based on all the data that we have access to. We don't all express the model in the same way. Some of us, including me, would want to say that the limitations of our language and intellect prevent us from getting anywhere beyond a deep sense of longing. Yet that too is coherent with scripture and so can be part of the overall story.

As we drive away this afternoon there will be many things we will be thinking about from what we have shared together, and no doubt we will share them with others when we get home. I hope it is not too fanciful for us also to amuse ourselves with this thought: *we are the data*. We as individual people and as a Society support the model. When we show the data, which is ourselves, to others we hope and pray that they will come to the right conclusion.