

Chapter xi: *Kalendar and Collect*

Choreography

HERE ARE SOME DANCE STEPS. The *Gloria in excelsis* is being sung. Our freeze-frame of the Mass looks like this [❶]: the celebrant stands before the tabernacle, with his deacon to his right and his subdeacon to his left, sharing the angelic hymn of praise in front of God.

As the *Gloria* ends with its invocation of the Trinity, all make the sign of the Cross, as is normal when that ultimate verity is named. *O lux beata Trinitas!* – O Trinity of Blessed Light, about which all reality orbits, compared to Whom even the central Sun is a shadowy speck!

The deacon and subdeacon at once genuflect (diagonally, toward the tabernacle) and retire to their usual steps – I’ve marked this manouevre with dotty lines. They’ve finished helping to offer the *Gloria*, and now the celebrant, on behalf of all the people and indeed of all the world, is about to offer the pivotal prayer of the day’s worship: the Collect of the Day.

Practically speaking, the celebrant could just launch into the text of the Collect. But our ritual demands that God and man be explicitly gathered into a courteous circle before that focal petition, the Collect of the

Day, is uttered by us to Him. This is how God and man are called into assembly: as the *Gloria* ends, the celebrant salutes God’s altar with a kiss, and turns round, spinning clockwise, as is always the case when he spins westward.

The lesser ministers step aside, so that, for the first time in the Mass, the celebrant stands looking straight at the people.[❷]

We are about to offer the great prayer of the Collect to God, and by this salutation the celebrant gathers up the prayers of all the congregation. He cries to them: *Dominus vobiscum, The Lord be with you!* Then he moves over to the Missal; the Master of Ceremonies, marked MC in this diagram, points the place in the great book. The deacon and subdeacon, like orbiting moons, follow his swing to the right, and line up behind the celebrant [③].

Everyone's now back in a long procession up to God, about to utter the crucial prayer of today's particular worship. At the fore our celebrant, our representative, cries *Oremus, Let us pray*; then chants the Collect itself.

What to say?

SO MUCH FOR THE CHOREOGRAPHY of the Collect: precise and gorgeous, in its way, as the gyration of the planets – which is *apropos*, because last chapter we contemplated how astronomical and liturgical motion resemble each other. Indeed, they don't just resemble: astronomical motion *causes* Mass to shift and turn. And this is proper, because the stars and planets are God's largest works, and we are His most splendid. In our ultimate act of offering God His own Son's Body, it is right that we beckon Sun and Moon into our dance, and catch their motion in the ordering of our prayers.

The celebrant is now about to sum up the prayer of the Mass in a single Collect. What words should he use – some formula that strikes him as apt, or relevant to current events, or appropriate to his mood, or to the 'feel' of the congregation? No: the words are set for him according to the season. Since last Sunday the Earth's swift orbit about the Sun has turned the altar and vestments from gold to green. In a few weeks the Moon's orbit about the Earth will turn them violet. And now at this precise point in the Church year there is a prescribed form to utter.

What is it, exactly, that he says? We spoke last chapter generally, almost mystically about the Church's kalendar. The kalendar is a large part of our cultural inheritance as Christians: *therefore* it is menaced in this age of ecclesial dizziness. Now I want to describe practically how the

calendar works: in other words how it sets today's Collect as today's Collect. This'll involve a bit of work for readers, even a little mathematic, for which I do not apologise. Our effort is worth it. We need to understand our inheritance, particularly since the authorities mean to take it from us.

The Christian calendar.

HOW SHOULD TIME BE ORGANISED? Which natural cycles should we follow in our ordering of passing time?

Some of mankind's calendars – the Chinese calendar, for instance – are entirely solar, and ignore the cycles of the Moon.

Islam, emerging in hot countries where sunlight beats down with laughing fury, is fonder of lunar cool than of the Sun: Islam is a lunar religion, with the crescent moon as its symbol, and follows a purely lunar religious calendar. Thus the Muslims' holy month of Ramadan really does obey the phases of the Moon, and rolls through the solar year, occurring sometimes in midsummer, sometimes in winter.

The ancient Jewish calendar was '[lunisolar](#)'. It also calculated time by actual months, the real, observable cycles of the Moon; but every year the high priest inserted a few days at the beginning of the year to keep the lunar cycle more-or-less synchronised with the solar cycle of the season. Thus the month of Nisan, the first month of the year, although it began with the appearance of the new moon, always fell in the middle of spring, and the great feast of Passover on Nisan 14 was always at about the same moment in the cycle of the seasons.

Christianity emerged out of Judaism in a world dominated by the Julian calendar, the Roman civil calendar as modified by Julius Cæsar. We have largely inherited this scheme, slightly adjusted by Gregory XIII, one of the grim but efficient Counter-Reformation popes. The [Julian](#) and [Gregorian](#) calendar is tediously solar. It has 'months' in them, but, although 'month' obviously *means* 'Moon-time', these months are not at all real months – they vary, randomly, from 28 days (which is slightly too short) to 31 days (which is much too long), and thus never coincide with the actual phases of the Moon. If you want to find out what the

Moon is doing, you must either peer out the window, or decipher the little symbols supplied at the bottom of some wall-calendars, marking her phases. Her phases are without any connection with the sequence of dates. If you want to know how many days in a given month, you have to murmur to yourself the idiot mnemonic *Thirty days hath September, April, June and . . .*, for there's no pattern to the varying length of our months. Indeed, the arrangement is worse than random, it is arrogant: Julius Cæsar was born in a month subsequently named Julius after him, which was swollen to 31 days to show how important he was; Augustus was born in 'August,' with the same result; poor innocent February – no emperor was born in February – got whittled down to supply these days.

It would've been easy for the Church to fall in with this dull scheme, and date all her festivals according to the pagan Roman civil calendar. The reason she wouldn't – and doesn't –do this is that Her Lord was killed at, and because of, Passover. Christ came to the dangerous city of Jerusalem at the spring equinox's full Moon, to participate in the vernal festival of redemption. He was killed because the authorities were afraid of His presence amidst the thousands of other pilgrims. By dying and rising at that local lunar *fiesta* He established universal redemption. When the sky turned dark on Good Friday, it was a full Moon that was darkened, for Passover is a lunar feast. Therefore the festival of Christ's death and rising must, in all decency, be a lunar feast too, following approximately the same cycle as Passover itself, and not falling in with the solar year of those despots of Rome, Julius and Gregory, with their bogus months and contempt for the moon.

Christian lunar time: Easter.

CHRISt DIED THE DAY AFTER PASSOVER, Nisan 15. Nisan 15 happened to be, that year, a Friday. Christ, having lain in the tomb over the Sabbath or Saturday (when His friends were forbidden by ritual law to go near a tomb), was discovered risen a little before dawn on Sunday, Nisan 17.

Christ's followers took both weekly and lunar cycles of prayer with them into the new Faith. They celebrated the Resurrection on the first

day of every week, Sunday, the day after the Jewish Sabbath, first day of the Jewish week; and they particularly celebrated it on the first Sunday after the annual Jewish Passover on Nisan 14. These were the first Christians' facts of timing. St Paul, that radical, wasn't very keen on keeping Sunday – he didn't like anything to be tied down – but by the end of the first century Sunday was kept by all Christians as the climax of their week, and Easter as the climax of their year.¹

Meanwhile, Jerusalem and its Temple having been destroyed (in A.D. 70), the Jewish race, dispersed over the Empire, became a bit erratic in its dating of Passover, and indeed of the month of Nisan. Christians could therefore no longer simply keep Easter at the same time as the Jews' Passover, and had to calculate the date themselves. This mattered to them so much that in the early centuries the Church was almost torn apart by fights over exactly which method of calculation to use for the [Paschal](#) feast (*Paschal* means *Easterish*). Parties with such wonderful names as Quartodecimanists, Audiani and Protopaschites fought terrible battles with each other; long afterward, at the the Synod of Whitby, the backward English were still being difficult. Such bad temper is regrettable, but I'm sure the early Christians were right to care so much about the kalendar. They knew the dating of Easter is not a clerical trifle. It concerns obedience to the divine order of the universe. And the Council of Nicæa of A.D. 325, which formulated the Creed we recite at Mass, put almost as much energy into defining the formula Christians were to use to locate Easter.

You may have been told – I was told, as a boy, and in my childish innocence I believed – that the Nicene Council fixed on this system: *find the spring (or 'vernal') equinox, which is 20 March. Wait for the first full Moon after that. The next Sunday is Easter.* – Alas! nothing to do with Christianity is quite so simple.

When the Council of Nicæa met, in A.D. 325, the spring equinox (which varies each year, moving between 18 and 22 March) happened to fall on 20 March. The Council, or its committee of astronomers, therefore decided to fix the twentieth as imaginary motionless equinox, and came

¹ Colossians ii¹⁶, I Corinthians xvi²; Revelations i¹⁰, Barnabas 15, Acts xx⁷.

up with a table of the date of the first full moons after 20 March each year. This table was designed to last for eternity, and is still obeyed. But the “[Ecclesiastical Full Moon](#)” it describes is, as it were, an imaginary Moon, a legal fiction, following a simpler motion than the Moon herself.

In other words, Easter is the first Sunday after the Ecclesiastical Full Moon – *not* a real full moon, up in the sky! – which occurs after the date of the vernal equinox in the year of the Council of Nicæa – *not* the actual equinox of this year! Easter Sunday can fall anything from two days before to ten days after the actual night of the ‘Pachal’ full Moon. The full Moon which ought to be fixing Easter can appear in the night sky as late Easter Tuesday, or as early as the Thursday before Palm Sunday!

I can’t defend the details of the Nicene system except by pointing out how old and intellectually beautiful the Council’s table is, even if it’s not quite accurate.

If you have a Prayer Book handy, you’ll find tables showing how to work the Nicene table, and you can ponder such mysteries as the Golden Number, the Domincial Letter, and the Epact. I wish you joy of it.²

Paschal time.

² The tables are on pages liv-lv of the small, crimson American Prayer Book of 1928.

I suppose the real defence of the Nicene system is that utilitarian moderns would not want to make Easter move obedient to the motion of the Moon: they’d like to wreck the lunar obedience altogether, and fix Easter to a certain solar date each year.

An added complication: Gregory XIII’s reform of the calendar readjusted the date by a dozen days or so; Easter dates were to follow the new calendar. Roman Catholic Europe accepted his reform almost at once. When Protestant Britain – and British America – reluctantly and belatedly obeyed, the date jumped overnight from Wednesday, 2 September, 1752, to Thursday, 14 September, 1752, and Easter in 1753 and subsequently followed the new rules. But Greek Orthodox nations, disliking Papal fiat even more than Protestants, did not fall in civilly with the Gregorian calendar until the twentieth century; even then, they refused to abandon the Julian calendar when calculating the date of Easter. Thus the Orthodox Easter can be three weeks later than ours (the gap varies each year) and is entirely divorced from the literal cycles of the Moon. This issue is one of many that stands between reunion between Latin and Greek Christianity. (For more information on this, see http://serendipity.magnet.ch/hermetic/cal_stud/cal_art.htm#Gregorian_Reform. If you want to hear even more about the date of Easter – which seems unlikely – go to these excellent sites: <http://users.chariot.net.au/~gmarts/easter.htm>.)

THE CALCULATION OF EASTER concerns more than just Easter Sunday. For, just as the Resurrection is at the centre of our creed, and Easter Sunday is the centre of our worship, so a good many other feasts follow the date of Easter each year. What this means is that for about a third of the year the Church is either preparing for Easter, or in the happy afterglow. The whole span of days that moves with Easter, before and after, as follows:

BEFORE EASTER: Palm Sunday and Holy Week occupy the seven preceding days. Before that there's a period of forty days' fasting, called [Lent](#). Forty days ($40 = 5 + 5 \times 7$) is five weeks and five days before Easter Sunday, therefore always a Wednesday: [Ash Wednesday](#), the start of Lent. And before *that* there's a still larger period of austerity beginning seventy days before Easter, starting at the Sunday called [Septuagesima](#) (which means *seventy*), exactly nine Sundays before Easter.

AFTER EASTER: forty days after His Resurrection, Christ ascended; so forty days after every Easter Sunday ($40 = 5 \times 7 + 5$) comes a Thursday, when we celebrate the [Ascension](#). The coming of the Holy Ghost was ten days after *that*, fifty days after the Resurrection, at the Jewish festival of Pentecost: thus, exactly seven weeks after Easter, comes [Whitsun](#). By ancient tradition, we keep the Sunday after Whitsun as [Trinity Sunday](#), rounding off the Paschal time with a festival of the central Christian mystery; and the Thursday after that (Thursday because the Last Supper was on a Thursday) is kept, out of mere *joie de vivre*, as [Corpus Christi](#).

For 130 days every year, then – between Septuagesima (seventy days before Easter Sunday) and Corpus Christi (sixty days after Easter Sunday) – we are in Paschal time. During this Paschal time the Church obeys the Moon rather than the Sun. When there is a clash, the solar date generally gives way. Thus this year the Annunciation, which (as we'll discuss in a minute) follows the Sun and falls a little after the spring equinox, on 25 March, smashes into Holy Week, and gets knocked, or 'transferred', right outside the immediate range of Easter, to 9 April.

The changing shape of the year.

WHEN DOES THIS PASCHAL TIME occur? Ah! now things get more difficult, or, if you like, poetic.

Here come two diagrams: of the Church year that just ended, 2000-2001; and of the year that's just beginning, 2001-2002. (Remember that Church years begin on Advent Sunday, not on 1 January.)

I know how hideous and frightening all diagrams look at first glimpse; but soothe your quaking heart. The medium gray, inner rings simply represent the cycles of the Moon, and the pale gray rings are the cycle of Sun (as described last chapter, on page 101).

The dashed line in each diagram marks the first Ecclesiastical Full Moon (which is not quite the same as the real full moon) after 20 March, 2001 (which was not quite the real spring equinox). In 2001, on the left, it is 8 April – a Sunday. Easter Sunday – a thick line – therefore fell a whole week afterward, on 15 April. That was late: the latest Easter can possibly fall is 25 April. Last year it was near the top of the range. Septuagesima and Trinity Sunday, which were also therefore late, are marked with dotted lines: the dates within them, set by the Moon's cycles, were Paschal time.³

In the second diagram, you'll see that this year a full Moon slips in just in time after the ecclesial equinox: on 28 March, a Thursday. Easter Sunday, three days later, is therefore very early – the earliest it can fall is 22 March. All the other Paschal dates are early, too.⁴

What all this means is that the whole Paschal portion of the year falls almost a month later this year than it did last. The shape of the Church's prayer in 2001-2002 is quite different from the shape of 2000-2001. I've shown how by putting a dark gray rim around 'green', or Ordinary time. You'll see that this year's Trinity Season (the long green quiet time between Corpus Christi and Advent) is going to be almost a month longer than it was last year, and we'll probably feel that it has gone on for ever, peaceful and predictable, by the time it suddenly stops on 1 December. Conversely, the shorter Ordinary time between Epiphany and Septuagesima is very short indeed this year: and we are soon going to be startled, with Christmas not far behind us, by a sudden

³ Septuagesima was on 11 February; Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent on 28 February; Trinity Sunday and the start of Trinity Season on 10 June; Corpus Christi on 14 June.

⁴ Septuagesima comes up very soon, on 27 January, Ash Wednesday 13 February, Trinity Sunday 26 May, Corpus Christi 30 May.

shift into darker and more penitential prayer that begins with Septuagesima.

Astronomy changes the shape of our year. When Easter is very late there are six merry Sundays after Epiphany before Septuagesima and the gloomier time of the year begins. Last year, when Easter was fairly late, there were five; this year, when Easter is early, there are only two. We hardly get to ease our intensity: we pass from marking Christ's birth, through His revelation to the Wise Men (last Sunday) and the Baptist (this Sunday) to the crisis of His life. This year *tempus flendi et tempus ridendi, a time to weep and a time to laugh, tempus plangendi et tempus saltandi, a time to mourn and a time to dance*, run very close together. Right through Epiphany, and even now, we feel the nearness of the crucial time. The moving Moon has moulded our worship to a different shape and mood.

Christian solar time: Christmas.

JESUS CRIST DIED AT A FULL MOON *because* it was the full moon, for He died under the Jewish Law, and Judaism is a lunar Faith. But Christ is Himself a Sun-God.

I'm not speaking like a pagan; or rather I'm speaking with a touch of paganism because Christianity envelopes paganism, rather than obliterating it. Once we grasp that the movements of the Sun and Moon and Earth are to be regarded piously, as part of the machinery of revelation, then we are not going to sneer at the pre-Christians who adored astronomical bodies and movements as divine: for so, in a way, they are. The One God made the glorious Sun and pure Moon, as He made the incomparable Earth; He made them knowing that men would look at them, and wonder. He *set them in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth, and to rule ... and to divide the light ...*⁵ Their motions inevitably rule and divide our notion of time and of sublimity. They are meant to do that; they are not mere dead orbs of rock or balls of nuclear fire. Sun and Moon are humane creations, the work of the

⁵ Genesis i¹⁶⁻¹⁸.

blazing figure of a Man Ezekiel saw enthroned above the turning wheels of time.⁶

And since we are allowed to think like this, we are allowed to go further: we are permitted to say that the most sublime object man can perceive, the Sun, was made as a sort of self-portrait of the Word, *without* [Whom] *was not anything made that was made.*⁷ Anyone can see – and almost every nation on earth has seen – that the Sun *is* (that is, the human imagination must see it as) a blazing youth, an Apollo or Helios or Ra or (indeed) Huitziliopochtli. The monotheist imagination is not foolish: we know the Sun is not God. But we see him as the vigorous young son or word of God. *At the horizon of the world, declares the psalmist, is the tabernacle of the Sun, who leaps out like a bridegroom from his chamber on the morning of His wedding, and runs across the sky like an athlete: nothing is hidden from His searching heat.*⁸ Christians soon identified Christ, the Bridegroom of Man, with the light that heats and controls the planets: the Son is the Sun (the words happen to sound the same in English, although of course they don't in Greek or Latin).

Jesus Christ was born we don't know when – for although His Death was a public event, inflicted outside a gate of the capital, His Birth was in a cave behind a village tavern. There is no way, historically, to assign it a date (even its year is in dispute). But just as it is fitting that the Son's resurrection should fall around the spring equinox, when the Sun at last prevails over winter; so it is fitting that the celebration of His birth should be placed at midwinter, when the pagan Romans already kept the feast of *Natalis Sol Invicti*, the Birth of the Unconquerable Sun – who begins his long triumph at the moment of greatest darkness. The early Christians, knowing the greatness of Christian truth, were not afraid to incorporate paganism. The winter solstice hovers around 21 and 22 December; the early Church fixed Christ's nativity on 25 December.

⁶ Ezekiel I²⁶ (see page 102, in last week's notes).

⁷ From the Gospel for Christmas Day.

⁸ Psalm xix^{4b-6} in the Authorised Version, but xviii^{5b-7} in the Vulgate: *in fines orbis terræ verba eorum : in sole posuit tabernaculum suum et ipse tamquam sponsus procedens de thalamo suo exultavit ut gigans ad currendam viam suam; a summo cæli egressio eius et occursus eius usque ad summum eius nec est qui se abscondat a calore eius.*

Certain fixed dates follow from 25 December. Christ's circumcision, which certainly occurred on His eighth day, as it does on the eighth day of every Jewish boy, is therefore 1 January. The arrival of the Magi from the East is celebrated on the Twelfth Day of Christmas, 6 January – last chapter. In my two diagrams I've marked these twelve days of Christmas – fixed solar dates, 25 December to 6 January – as a gold wedge of time within the circle of solar time. Moreover, Christ's conception, the feast of the Annunciation, is kept exactly nine months before His birth: 25 March. This date was, until quite recently, the start of the civil year (although, as happens this year, it often bumps into Easter and gets moved.)

Advent, the time of preparation for Christmas, comprises the four Sunday. Advent Sunday, the beginning of the Advent season, is the first day of the Church year. It's anywhere from 29 November to December 3.

Exactly what day Advent Sunday falls on depends on the way the solar cycle intersects with the weekly cycle. Imagine – if you can bear to – what would be impossible to draw, too difficult even to construct in three-dimensions: a model of the golden solar and silver lunar cycles intersecting with the third sacred cycle, the cycle of weeks (which we might picture as a circle of clear crystal, spiked with seven cogs, one of them scarlet). This scarlet cog is Sunday, and as the cycle of weeks spins, much faster than the gold and silver cycles, the scarlet cog catches on the other circles and pushes them forward or back.

Sacred time shimmers and takes shape as the wheels spin, passing and around through each other, dancing hoops of light –.

Today, now

SO THESE ARE TODAY'S FACTS. The Sun passed his low point or winter solstice, and three days later the Sun of Righteousness was born; twelve times since then the redeemed world spun; then came the twelfth day of Christmas, or Epiphany. The cycle of weeks has spun once since then: it is a Sunday once more, the first after Epiphany: congregation and choir, obeying that weekly cycle, appear in church, decently robed.

And the globe, obeying the fourth cycle, the cycle of hours, has rolled round until the Sun is three quarters of the way up the sky.

In other words it is ten o'clock on the morning of Sunday, the thirteenth of January. Our altar guild has therefore laid out vestments of the proper colour, green. Our priest and his ministers have therefore begun to celebrate High Mass of Epiphany I, and the choir, orbiting like a moon around the kalendar, has just sung the Introit for Epiphany I: *Thou hast loved righteousness, and hast hated iniquity* Now, at last, having completed the dance steps on page 103, the celebrant reaches the moment when he is to recite the Collect of the Day, and the cosmic movement of time (delegated to the Master of Ceremonies' finger) points to the Collect of Epiphany I: *O Lord, we bessech Thee mercifully to receive the prayers ...*; then the Collect for Epiphanytide: *O God, Who by the leading of a star*⁹

Amen ; and then the people do something amazing: they sit down. After these sublime movements and leadings of stars, there comes a break and thorough release of tension.

For the first third of Mass is now completed. God, Who has been moving us through the swirling of orbs, now begins speaking to us in a very different fashion: through the reading of fragments of ancient documents (poems, church bulletins, chronicles, mysticism, pamphlets, laws, tactful letters ...). The work of [the Word](#) is about to begin.

Afterthoughts: heaven and the heavens.

A LONG, LONG TIME AGO I suggested that to understand why the Church uses incense would be to understand Catholicism (pages 24-26). The Church is so organically knit together – *Hierusalem quæ ædificatur ut civitas cuius participatio eius in id ipsum : Jerusalem is built as a city that is at unity in itself*¹⁰ – that we can get to her heart by piercing a single one

⁹ In a faraway chapter (pp. 13-14) we discussed the Collect form. The basic rule is that every Mass has one Collect; the exceptions are the intense seasons of Lent and Advent, Easter and Christmas-Epiphany, which have a second seasonal Collect as well. Today being the [Octave](#) (or one-week-after-day) of the Epiphany, there are, unusually, two Collects.

¹⁰ Psalm cxxii³ (Prayer Book); Vulgate cxxi³.

of her ritual gestures. Similarly, if we grasp *why* (the *how* is almost too complex to grasp!) she times her prayers by the physical movements of the worlds, we understand the Catholic Faith.

What is time? – the shadow of eternity: not the tick-tock-tock of a watch, but objective cosmic change – this week the *aurora borealis*, next week the first white cherry blossom, last week the solstice. God the Creator sketches His eternity in these swift cycles, and God the Man shows us that this beauty and order was made with man in mind. It is not naïve to humanise the heavens. We realise that the Sun is not just a spinning furnace, that the Moon is not just a big dead lump of rock. Christ is a solar God, properly pictured as the Sun (and if it comes to that, there is deep wisdom in the traditional identification of Mary with the Moon).¹¹ The Sun and Moon and stars are evangelical truths. Their motion is a sort of liturgy. They are not mineral lumps hanging in dead space.

For space itself does not exist. The idea is a fraud. Outside the cloudy atmosphere or sheltering sky of this world is an illimitable realm of light. Nothing veils the solar and stellar shafts of light, radiant in every direction, and nothing blurs the velvet sable (that merry colour). The glory of night and the glory of day are one up there, in the realm of perfect mathematics and immaculate brightness. – The hero of C.S. Lewis'

¹¹ Human imagination cannot help seeing the Moon as a pale goddess (women's bodies move by her rhythm): the Virgin Mother, whom the Greeks called Athena and the Romans called Diana and the Christians call Mary. Of course Mary is a historical figure, a Jewish woman who lived obscurely in Palestine and Asia Minor. But the Christian principles are that *The heavens declare the glory of God*, and that the glory of God became human. Mary is the Mother of God, and thus a creature greater, older and more perpetual than any star or moon. Not only is she a fitting image of the glory of the heavenly bodies, they are images of her. – And Mary may not even have died before her foster-son John pictured her (Revelation xii¹⁻²) as *signum magnum ... in caelo, a great wonder in heaven, mulier amicta sole et luna sub pedibus eius, a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet . . . et in utero habens et clamat parturiens, and she being with Child cried, travailing in birth*. This birth in the constellations doesn't sound much like the humble nativity in a cave which we honoured a few weeks ago. But John's astronomical vision is true too: for we hold that the Mother of God was conceived in the mind of God before He conceived any other creature, flawless, immortal, tremendous: and the thought of her lies beneath His handiwork when He fashioned the silver Moon. – For an image of this idea, see Velasquez's extraordinary *Immaculate Conception* at <http://sunsite.icm.edu.pl/cjackson/velazque/p-velazq35.htm>; or <http://www.ascensionandsaintagnes.org/majorsermons/2000/sermon9xii00.htm> for a defence of this doctrine.

superb science fiction trilogy is staggered to find himself in such perfection of light when he is bundled onto a spaceship:

He had read of 'Space': at the back of his thinking for years had lurked the dismal fancy of the black, cold vacuity, the utter deadness, which was supposed to separate the worlds. He had not known how much it affected him till now – now that the very name 'Space' seemed a blasphemous libel for this empyrean ocean of radiance in which they swam. He could not call it 'dead'; he felt life pouring into him from it every moment. How indeed should it be otherwise, since out of this ocean the worlds and all their life had come? He had thought it barren: he saw now that it was the womb of world, whose blazing and innumerable offspring looked down nightly upon the earth with so many eyes – and here, how many more! No: Space was the wrong name. Older thinkers had been wiser when they named it simply the heavens – the heavens which declared the glory – the

*happy climes that ly
Where day never shuts his eye
Up in the broad fields of the sky.*¹²

Our alienation from the heavens is one reason we can't take this planet seriously enough. We profanely regard it as a sort of comfortable life-raft, a fragile refuge from infinite emptiness and death. But *the heavens declare the glory of God : One day telleth another; and one night certifieth another;*¹³ and a well-constructed human mind is moved beyond earth, looking up to venerate, not the dead emptiness of 'space', but the divine and friendly splendour of visible heavens. The best way to do that is to move and pray with the night and day as they certify each other of God. We lose our self-concern in the motions of the kalendar; those immense cycles become ours. Our littleness and lowness becomes a sort of joy:

*looke how the floore of heauen
Is thicke inlayed with pattens of bright gold.
There's not the smallest orbe which thou beholdst
But in his motion like an Angell sings,
Still quiring to the young eyed Cherubins.*¹⁴

¹² C.S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet* (1949), chapter v (pp. 29-30). Lewis in the last lines of this passage quotes our old favourite, Psalm xix, and Milton's *Comus*, lines 977-979.

¹³ Psalm xix^{1,3}.

¹⁴ *The Merchant of Venice*, v, 1.

Shakespeare is playing here with the ancient idea of the [music of the spheres](#): the immense harmonic noise made by the planets as they swing about their paths. This music exists: it is caught by the human intellect, muddy as the human intellect is; to the angels the glory of these moving bodies must be cascading song, almost unbearable (when the handiwork was laid down, and the morning stars first sang together, those *sons of God* shouted for joy¹⁵). When the Maker of stars became a Man the heavenly host began repeating that song over the Judæan hills where He lay hidden: *Gloria in excelsis*. We caught the sound, and sing it back. The Maker is with us, even physically, still hidden. The music He once made with the constellations He now (this *hour*, in this *building*) makes with us. The music of the spheres is the Mass.

¹⁵ Job xxxviii⁷: *cum me laudarent simul astra matutina et iubilarent omnes filii Dei* :
When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy.