

SCI- FI service – ‘May the faith be with you’

Written By Steve Finnie

Opening music: ‘Interstellar’ official soundtrack – ‘Cornfield Chase’

<https://youtu.be/JuSsvM8B4Jc?si=5YhtbnERV1IGdIME>

Welcome and Introduction

Our service today is a science fiction themed service called ‘May the faith be with you.’

It was written by Steve. Steve doesn’t like speaking in public, so he asked me to deliver the service today.

He’d like to dedicate the service to the memory of Mitch who died in August last year.

It was inspired by Star Wars Day, celebrated annually on May 4th, and sometimes called ‘May the 4th be with You’, but mainly by National Science Fiction Day on January 2nd, commemorating famed SCI-FI writer Isaac Asimov’s birthday.

Asimov was both a writer and professor of biochemistry at Boston University.

He is considered one of the big four Sci-Fi writers along with Robert A Heinlein, Arthur C. Clarke, and Ray Bradbury.

Asimov wrote or edited more than 500 books and in 1966 the Foundation trilogy won the Hugo Award for the all-time best series of science fiction and fantasy novels. They along with the Robot series are his most famous works.

We have held a sort of similar space themed service before in 2019 when I gave a service to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the moon landing.

Steve said this was one of his favourite services since he began coming to the church and has used some of the material from that service with my permission.

Chalice is lit

Reading

A short reading from Psalm 8 – a Psalm of David. verses three and four.

‘When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,
The moon and the stars, which you have set in place.

What is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?’

Prayer

We now have a prayer Steve created using an online prayer generator.

He typed in the words ‘alien’ and ‘science-fiction’, and this is what was created.

“We are here today with open hearts, seeking understanding and connection beyond our earthly realm.

We pray for wisdom as we ponder the existence of beings from other worlds.

May we approach this mystery with curiosity and respect, embracing the possibility of life beyond our own.

Help us to remember our shared existence in the universe, and to treat all forms of life with kindness and reverence.

In this vast universe of imagination and possibility, we gather in gratitude for the wonders of science-fiction.

Thank you for the minds that dream beyond the stars, crafting tales that inspire and challenge our understanding of reality.

We recognise the importance of using science-fiction to explore deep questions about humanity, morality and the search for truth.

Bless the writers, thinkers, and innovators who use science-fiction as a lens to reflect on our world and guide us toward compassion and understanding.

May these stories ignite our curiosity and spark our creativity, encouraging us to explore the unknown and envision a better future.

Finally, may we be given the courage to boldly go where we feel your spirit calls us to be, and use our gifts and talents to make a positive impact in the universe.....*Amen*.

1st Hymn_Sing your Faith' (aka 'Purple Book') 186 'We are Travellers on a Journey'

We are travellers on a journey
which brought us from the sun,
when primal star exploded
and earth in orbit spun;
but now as human dwellers
upon earth-planet's crust,
we strive for living systems
whose ways are kind and just.

We are travellers on a journey
which grows from human seed,
and through our birth and childhood
goes where life's path may lead;
but now we are delving deeper
in quest of greater worth
and reaching unknown regions
and planets of new birth.

We are travellers on a journey
through realms of inner space
where joy and peace are planets
that circle stars of grace;
and when we find the stillness
which comes at journey's end,
there'll be complete refreshment,
a resting place, a friend.

Words ©Andrew M.Hill b. 1942, used by permission. Music, Tune 'Ascension' Henry Hugh Bancroft, 1904 - 1988.

Part A

SCI-FI whether books, TV shows, or movies is one of those genres that seem to inspire real extremes in people, love or hate.

If you've read Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* published in 1818, then you might be interested to know that this novel helped define the form of the SCI-FI novel and is often considered to be the first work of science fiction.

One of the earliest religious themes or tropes in both SCI-FI and horror is the mad scientist; science divorced from morality.

Inspired by books such as *FRANKENSTEIN*, *THE INVISIBLE MAN*, *THE STRANGE CASE OF DR JEKYLL AND MR HYDE*, and *THE ISLAND OF DR MOREAU*, these books and subsequent film adaptations emphasise the villainization of science, man trespassing God's domain in matters of life and death.

The mad scientist trope can be considered a response to Charles Darwin and his 1859 publication '*ON THE ORIGIN OF THE SPECIES*', a direct contradiction to the biblical creation story in Genesis and that life has developed due to natural processes rather than as the creation of a loving God.

Darwin was ridiculed and lampooned as the original mad scientist, and his theory of evolution is disputed even today, particularly amongst evangelical Christians.

In the age of science, religion is often seen as harmful superstition, and most SCI-FI writers identify quite openly as atheists.

Science is sceptical of religion because it is based on faith rather than empirical evidence.

The separation of church and science really gained momentum in the age of enlightenment, around the 17th and 18th centuries.

Perhaps the most famous conflict between the two would be the 1633 trial of GALILEO GALILEI by the Roman Catholic inquisition. A prominent scientist and astronomer, he proposed the heliocentric model of the universe, rather than the geocentric view of the church. His opinions contradicted accepted biblical interpretations, and the church sentenced him on charges of heresy to house arrest where he remained until his death in 1642.

That religious dogma was incompatible with science was solidified in the 19th century with the theory of evolution, and they have never reconciled.

A more recent example of this culture war between science and religion can be seen in the space race between the two superpowers of the 20th century, the atheist Soviet Union and the devoutly religious USA.

The Soviets went into the lead, with the launch of the first satellite in space, Sputnik 1 in 1957. In 1957 they also launched the first animal in space, a dog called LAIKA.

In 1961 the first man in space, Yuri GAGARIN, and the first woman, Valentina TERESHKOVA in 1963. Then the first spacewalk in 1965 by cosmonaut Alexei LEONOV.

However, it was the Americans who won the space race gold medal in 1969 and landed a man on the moon. Another first by the Americans was Apollo 8, the first crewed spacecraft to orbit another celestial body. The crew orbited the Moon ten times without landing and then departed safely back home to Earth. This incredible journey took place

between 21st December to 27th December 1968 and was a test run for Apollo 11, the first crewed spacecraft which landed humans on the moon.

On Christmas Eve 1968 the astronauts from Apollo 8 orbiting the moon read from the book of Genesis during a TV broadcast.

Each of the three astronauts read in succession the first ten verses from the Book of Genesis in the Hebrew bible.

YOUTUBE clip of the reading may be found here:

<https://youtu.be/hLIq9Amyizo?si=AO7pYmV1NRm-j5dH>

Bill ANDERS read:

We are now approaching lunar sunrise, and for all the people back on Earth, the crew of Apollo 8 has a message that we would like to send to you.

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.
And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep.
And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.
And God said, let there be light: and there was light.
And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.

Jim LOVELL read:

And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.
And God said, let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.
And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so.
And God called the firmament Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day.

Frank BORMAN read:

And God said, Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear: and it was so.
And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the waters called the seas: and God saw that it was good.

And from the crew of Apollo 8, we close with good night, good luck, a Merry Christmas, and God bless all of you, all of you on the good Earth.

The overtly religious commentary and choice of bible passage by the Americans was deliberate.

The second man to orbit the earth, a Soviet cosmonaut called Gherman TITOV famously said 'I was looking around attentively but I didn't find anybody there. I saw neither angels, nor God.'

His comments were used in Soviet anti-religion propaganda but were misattributed to Yuri Gagarin.

Many American astronauts stated that journeying into space did not destroy their faith, quite the opposite.

Buzz Aldrin, a Presbyterian became the first person to hold a religious ceremony on the moon, with a private communion service using a kit provided by his church.

A signed message from Pope Paul VI was also included in statements from dozens of world leaders left on the moon on a silicon disk during the Apollo 11 mission.

Many astronauts described the experience of space travel as bringing them closer to God and a deeper faith.

This is termed the overview effect, a state of awe caused by the striking visual stimulus of space travel.

2nd Hymn: Green Book 40 'The Depths of Inner Space'

Once the fearless navigator
Sailing from some native shore,
Bravely crossed uncharted waters,
Finding new lands to explore.

Now we look beyond our planet,
Reaching upwards to the stars:
We have walked the lunar deserts –
Soon we'll tread the soil of Mars.

All that science may discover,
As the Universe it delves,
Will be only scraps of knowledge
If we fail to know ourselves.

So the journey of the spirit,
Which each human soul must face,
Takes us on a greater voyage
To the depths of inner space.

Music: 'Sharon' William Boyce, 1710 - 79

Words: John Andrew Storey, b.1935. Used by permission

Part B

How does SCI-FI perceive religion on a future earth?

There are so many SCI-FI books, movies, and TV shows to choose from, but we will have a quick look at three themes.

A common SCI-FI theme for a future earth is one where humanity faces a catastrophic global event which causes our near extinction.

What emerges is a utopian society, an ideal paradise that couldn't be more perfect.

The future earth has abandoned religion and adopted humanism as its mantra.

Religion is either eradicated, or the remnants that remain are ridiculed and considered archaic and extreme elements of society.

Star Trek is set on a future mid-22nd century earth, one that emerged from a cataclysmic nuclear World War III in the 21st century.

This TV show has been a cult phenomenon since it first aired in 1966 and details the adventures of the crew of the Starship Enterprise as they explore the galaxy, and encounter species where no man (or woman) has ever gone before.

Created by humanist Gene Roddenberry, he envisioned a post-religious earth, where religion has been jettisoned and is seen as the antithesis of progress.

Humanity has landed in a staunchly secular future and religion is a thing of the past.

Most of the alien species that are encountered seem to have transcended the need for religious belief and religion is obsolete.

In the original series, religion simply does not exist, and everyone is an atheist, but in other franchise spin-offs, there are more religious references and story lines.

Star Trek was a product of its time, the 1960s, one of the most radical decades of the 20th century. The show was a benchmark in ethnic diversity, for example the character of Lieutenant UHURA played by black actress NICHELLE NICHOLS.

This was a role very different than those available to black actresses in 1960s America, and she became a role model for a generation of young black women.

The show also featured the first Russian character in an American TV show, ensign Pavel CHEKOV; remember this was at the height of the cold war.

The actor Leonard NIMOY played SPOCK, the science and first officer. SPOCK'S mixed Human–Vulcan heritage was an important plot element in the series. NIMOY was Jewish and stated he used Judaism in his portrayal of SPOCK, as he said his status as a constant outsider was reminiscent of being Jewish in a gentile world. He also said the Vulcan hand salute was taken from a ritual he witnessed in a synagogue as a child.

I believe we can learn a great deal from Star Trek, including the need for compassion, diversity, equality, unity, and exploration of the unknown.

A second SCI-FI theme for a future earth is a dystopian one, a society that imposes a harmful, oppressive, and miserable existence upon its members.

It's the opposite to the utopian one and can be seen in the 1976 cult SCI-FI movie 'Logan's Run' starring Michael York, and Peter Ustinov.

This movie is set on earth in the year 2274, one plagued by overpopulation and dwindling resources. The surviving population live in a bubbled metropolis sealed off from the ravaged outside world. They lead a leisurely, hedonistic lifestyle, all their needs and desires met by robotic style servants.

There's a catch though. The equilibrium is maintained by killing everyone who reaches the age of 30. When your 30 years are up, you take part in a public end of life ritual called CAROUSEL, a soaring, spinning trip to eternity and supposed rebirth. Those taking part are told to 'be strong and you will be renewed.'

It's implied to be reincarnation, but those who know the truth become runners and are hunted down and killed, hence the name of the movie, Logan's Run.

It's a fantastic movie which won multiple awards for its visual effects including a Special Achievement Academy Award.

A third religious theme on a future earth revolves around AI or artificial intelligence. This theme dwells on the nature of humanity, empathy, and the existence of a soul. An example of this theme is the cult 1982 movie Bladerunner which is based on the Philip K Dick novel – Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?

We now approach a time of silence, personal meditation, and some music.

Prior to that we have a second prayer created online using only the words 'Star Trek.'

Perhaps imagine Captain Kirk is speaking directly to his crew prior to the maiden voyage of the Starship Enterprise.

Prayer

'As we embark on our journey through the stars, we seek both guidance and wisdom.

May we be granted the courage to face the unknown and the strength to forge new paths among the galaxies.

May we embrace diversity with open hearts, learning from every species we encounter, and foster peace in the vastness of space.

Help us to be curious, and compassionate, to boldly go where no one has gone before, while respecting the cosmos and all its wonders.

Guide our minds to seek knowledge and our spirits to find connection, for in unity, we can explore the infinite possibilities ahead.

And in the quest for understanding and adventure, may we display faith, compassion, and love, to lead one another through the darkest of voids that may lie ahead.....*Amen*'.

Silence

Music: 'To the Stars' from the movie 'AD ASTRA' soundtrack. 3.31 minutes.

https://youtu.be/PjzZ_0KSYVg?si=WRTi1JHbhJ4OubJS

Part C

It was Arthur C Clarke who said:

"Two possibilities exist. Either we are alone in the universe, or we are not alone. Both are equally terrifying."

So how does SCI-FI perceive religion on other planets?

Earth is estimated to be 4.54 billion years old, plus or minus about 50 million years.

It is simply inconceivable for anyone to comprehend how long a period that is. It's mind boggling, especially when you think the events detailed in the New Testament are only just over 2,000 years ago.

There are many estimates on how many earth-like planets there are in the galaxy. If you look at the numbers, things are looking pretty good.

However, the likelihood of other planets having some form of conscious, intelligent life with the advanced technology required to travel across such vast distances to meet us are miniscule.

On earth for example it took billions of years before multi-celled life was formed and intelligent life has only existed for around 200,000 years.

Perhaps aliens have travelled to earth but decided not to visit, as they saw no signs of intelligent life.

Perhaps there have been other civilisations on planets far, far away which had intelligent life millions of years ago, and no longer exist as their planets became uninhabitable.

This is the main reason we will probably never meet another alien species, as our evolutionary clocks are not in sync.

The American evangelist Billy Graham believed that there were intelligent beings like us far away in space who worshipped God and said we should not fear them, for they are God's creatures.

I disagree. According to most alien movies and TV shows we tend not to do well when we meet our extraterrestrial cousins.

We usually end up as intergalactic roadkill, and often as a food source. Aliens in SCI-FI are usually portrayed as predatory, reptilian, violent, and technologically superior. And the species who initially appear friendly, well, it usually transpires they have hidden motives which are hostile to both man and earth.

Two of the most famous SCI-FI franchises set on other planets are 'Dune' and 'Star Wars'.

'Dune' was created by Frank Herbert in 1965. It is one of the world's bestselling SCI-FI novels and considered a masterpiece of the genre.

Set in a complex fictional universe it is heavily influenced by religious and spiritual ideas including messianism, religious rituals, and ecological spirituality.

The main character Paul ATREIDES is a messianic figure called the MUAD'DIB who will bring about a great change in the universe as a saviour.

The connection between spirituality and ecology can be seen in the relationship between the desert world of ARRAKIS and the inhabitants called the FREMEN, who hold a deep reverence for the natural world.

And religion as a tool of power and control can be seen in the portrayal of the BENE GESSERT sisterhood and the PADISHAH Emperor.

We finish with a quick look at religion in in the most famous SCI-FI movie franchise set in another galaxy, far, far, away. 'STAR WARS'.

This cinematic space-opera phenomenon created by George Lucas has thrilled audiences since its debut in 1977.

What is the most common religion in Star Wars?

It is the force. An energy that connects all living beings and binds the galaxy together, a constant dualistic struggle between light and dark.

The main religions in Star Wars are dogmas devoted to the force such as the Jedi and the Sith, where the Jedi follow the light side of the force and the Sith follow the dark side.

Who is most famous character in this franchise? Darth Vader of course.

He is a blend of tragedy and evil.

The big V as he is sometimes called was once a Jedi Knight called Anakin SKYWALKER.

Seduced by the dark side he transforms into one of the greatest if not greatest villains in cinematic history, instantly recognizable with a visual presence which inspires awe in every scene.

He embodies the corrupting influence of absolute power, his fall into darkness reminiscent of Lucifer himself.

They have much in common. Even his name is a play on words, Darth Vader could translate as Dark Father.

'I find your lack of faith disturbing' is one of his most famous lines.

Unlike the Satan of the Hebrew Bible or the Devil of the New Testament, Darth Vader redeems himself through self-sacrifice to save his son Luke SKYWALKER's life.

He shows the potential for redemption, change, and forgiveness, even in the most wretched of creatures.

Light and darkness are common themes in all religions, good and evil, dual opposing forces in the world.

In the UK's 2001 Census, over 390,000 people - or 0.7% of our population described themselves as belonging to the Jedi religion, and there are Jedi Churches in the UK and New Zealand.

Star Wars is in summary a story of good, evil, redemption, destiny and the interconnectedness of all things in the galaxy.

It is a religious movie, but it's debatable whether the influences are more favored towards eastern religion, Taoism and Buddhism for example, or any Judeo-Christian heritage.

Green Book 247. 'A World of Wonder'

Tune: 'Laudate Dominum' Charles Hubert Hastings Parry, 1848-1918

Words: Sydney Henry knight, b 1923 1881 – 1965 used by permission

The sun at high noon,
The stars in deep space,
The light of the moon
On our upturned face,
The high clouds, the rain clouds,
The lark song on high –

The green grassy blade,
The grasshopper's sound,
The creatures of shade
That live in the ground,
The dark soil, the moist soil,
Where plants spring to birth –
We look down in wonder
Below in the earth.

The glad joys that heal
The tears in our eyes,
The longings we feel,
The light of surprise,
Our night dreams, our day dreams,
Our thoughts ranging wide –
We live with a whole world
Of wonder inside.

Conclusion

We end today's service with a final prayer created online using only the words 'Star Wars'.
It's called 'Pray for the force in our lives.'

Prayer

"In the boundless expanse of the universe, we gather our thoughts and hearts, seeking wisdom and strength.

May the force be with us, guiding us through challenges and illuminating our paths with hope and courage.

As we embrace the light, let us remember the power of compassion, unity, and understanding, just as the heroes of the galaxy do.

In times of darkness, may we find the resilience to rise, to fight for justice, and to stand against tyranny.

May we learn from the lessons of the past, striving for peace and harmony among all beings.

As we journey through our own lives and adventures, let us channel the spirit of friendship and bravery, inspiring one another to seek the greater good.

May we always remember that no matter how far apart we may be, we are all connected in this vast cosmos.

May the force be with us, now and always. Amen".

Chalice is extinguished.

Closing Video: – 'Star Wars'– Imperial March.

John Williams & Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra

<https://youtu.be/vsMWW4xtwl?si=5ICsGZrXGofOROHe>