



Hope for the world

One Hundred Million Plankton

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As I am sitting here, reflecting on Christmas and the hope found in the birth of our Saviour, I am reminded that so much of the natural world is unseen.

When Jesus was born, he was born in a stable surrounded by a few animals – not an adoring crowd of human well-wishers. He wasn't born in a well-known place, but in a back street. He wasn't born outside for all to see – but probably at night, in a place that few would recognise or know.

And yet this seemingly unimportant birth, in a dark street, in a barn, out of the glare of public attention, was just the beginning of an incredible journey culminating in the death at Calvary of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And it is through his life, death and resurrection that we, too, have life and in whom all things hold together – both visible and invisible.

In the natural world, too, it is often the unseen and seemingly insignificant that underpins so much. At this time of year, when the temperatures falls below freezing, the invisible, icy air is responsible for the patterns of frost we see on the windows of our cars the following morning.

The ice has appeared as if by magic – almost as if some great hand with a paint brush has come and changed the windscreen into a wonderful crystal canvas of swirls, eddies, sparkling diamonds and intricate shapes.

But the invisible holds far more power than just ice on a car windscreen. In front of me I have a one-litre bottle of seawater. In each bottle of seawater there could be as many as 100 million plankton. Some of these will be microscopic single-celled animals known as zooplankton – other are simple plants or plant-like bacteria called phytoplankton.

Most of you will know that these incredible little fragments of life are the basis of the food web. And without them, many ocean-dwelling species could not survive. More critically, just one genus of phytoplankton known as prochlorococcus is responsible for creating at least 20 per cent of the planet's oxygen.

There are an estimated 100 billion, billion, billion in our oceans. One hundred laid end-to-end would just about be the width of a single human hair – and yet we depend on them for life.

So what has this got to do with hope?

The little plankton I mention was only discovered in 1979, its role in oxygen production only understood in 1999. In Colossians, Paul talks about the importance of the invisible for holding all things together.

We live in challenging times. I sometimes despair when I think about the affect climate change and pollution is having on our oceans.

But if, through good science, we can better appreciate the interconnections between creator and the created, we will discover a much greater reverence through that knowledge. And that, in turn, will make hope-filled solutions to the current crisis all the more possible.



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