

Reflections on the Moon in anticipation of the Cathedral's Festival of the Moon

Assembly by David Rowley, Head of Years 7 and 8 and Head of Geology, October 2021

“Alright bruv, d’yow know anywhere good to stay close to the Cathedral for a group of musicians?”

Not perhaps an uncommon question to be asked for a member of the Wells community, but the request came from my brother in Birmingham (could you tell?) and the musicians are a Pink Floyd tribute band in which my brother’s best mate plays.

The band are known as ‘Darkside’ and are performing here in the Cathedral as part of the Festival of the Moon. You may have seen posters outside Claver or Cedars Hall about the festival which starts tomorrow. The name of the Band; Darkside comes from a Pink Floyd album titled ‘The Darkside of the Moon’. A classic album, but somehow the name bugs me, as in fact there is no such thing as the Dark side of the moon, only the ‘far side’ but we’ll save the explanation and my liking of things to be just right for another time.

That polite enquiry by my brother at the height of the Pandemic was the first I had heard that a 7m art exhibition by Luke Jerram was coming to Wells. Tomorrow is the first day of the ‘festival of the moon’ during which a large inflatable replica of the moon will be suspended in the nave.

If my two volunteers could stand up for a moment, that gives you an idea of the width, the diameter of the replica moon, but you’ll have to pop down at some time this week or in half term to get the full effect.

I really do hope you will be able to come to visit, and when you do perhaps you will ponder that at the same scale the earth would not quite fit into the height of the nave, and we’d have to put the earth in the noodles and pasta section of Tesco to be the right distance away!

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What do you think about when you gaze at the moon? Do you have any poetic, romantic, scientific or religious thoughts? What cultural, historical, scientific or religious associations do you have? I hope that I will point out some possibilities of the ways in which the moon influences and inspires us in the next few minutes.

I like to look at the very edge of the moon through a telescope or binoculars and see the light grey mountains against the darkness of the night sky. Maybe when you look up at the moon you imagine the 'Man in the Moon', or have other ideas pop into your head such as:

- Wallace and Gromit's Grand Day Out
- Tintin's Destination Moon
- Watching Button Moon or Lunar Jim on TV
- Reading or having read to you 'Bob, Man on the Moon' or one of the many other children's books like 'Hello Moon.'
- Maybe astronomy, stargazing or photography is your thing
- Or the movie Apollo 13
- Beethoven's Moonlight sonata perhaps
- Or stories of creation from the book of Genesis or in the Psalms,
- singing Haydn's Creation in which the verse from today's Bible reading features
- 'Robin the caveman' in the BBC comedy series Ghosts saying "Before you, was moonah. Before house, was moonah. Everything come, everything go... but always there... moonah."
- Bruno Mars talks to it, Frank Sinatra wants to fly to it, Van Morisson, Bruce Springsteen & Toploader fancy a dance and there are well over 100 other songs listed on the internet with the word 'moon' in the title.
- Some of you may know the photograph 'Earthrise' taken on the Apollo 8 mission when they turned the camera back towards earth to see it rise above the moon's horizon and begin the environmental movement we see today. As one of the astronauts at the time said "We set out to explore the moon and instead discovered the Earth"
- Still further away from my particular areas of expertise we have the watery moonlight in Turner's painting the Fighting Temeraire & the moon featuring in Van Gogh's Starry Night; it features in many well known works of art
- Yet artists, singers and songwriters are not the only ones to convey the moon's beauty and influence over us, or the wide range of emotions associated with love, romance, and heartbreak by writing about the moon.

***The Moon* by Robert Louis Stevenson**

*The moon has a face like the clock in the hall;
She shines on thieves on the garden wall,
On streets and fields and harbour quays,
And birdies asleep in the forks of the trees.
The squalling cat and the squeaking mouse,
The howling dog by the door of the house,
The bat that lies in bed at noon,
All love to be out by the light of the moon.
But all of the things that belong to the day
Cuddle to sleep to be out of her way;
And flowers and children close their eyes
Till up in the morning the sun shall arise.*

This is one of countless poems & stories from the most eminent authors to budding young writers across the land to take the moon as inspiration. Because of the length of the lunar cycle (it takes about 28 days for it to orbit the earth) in literature the moon is often seen as a symbol of femininity.

For most of history, the moon was people's only night time source of light, (though the moon merely reflects the sun's light and doesn't actually glow itself). Moonlight was used by travellers to navigate, and allowed people to work at night; it governed when early humans could hunt or when it was likely they would start families as the light varied over the 28 day cycle.

Since the invention of candles, gas lamps and recently electric lighting, the importance of moonlight for humanity has been diminished. Living in towns and cities surrounded by tall buildings, our relationship with the night sky isn't what it once was. Moonlight however, still plays a significant role in nature, triggering procreation and migration in many animal species.

After the telescope was invented, it was mapped by early scientists. Each crater and 'sea' was successively named and renamed. The large flat areas on the moon are called "maria" or "seas" because, for a long time, astronomers believed they were large bodies of water. They are actually areas of lava which cover up old craters.

This lava is what gives the appearance of the Man on the Moon: A longstanding European tradition holds that 'the man' was banished to the moon for a crime. Christian lore commonly held that he 'the man' is a man described in the bible (book of Numbers) caught gathering sticks on the Sabbath and sentenced to death by stoning. Some Germanic cultures thought he was a man caught stealing from a neighbour's hedgerow to repair his own. There is also a Roman legend that he is a sheep-thief.

In Chinese tradition, the full moon is a symbol of peace, prosperity, and family reunion. On the 15th day of the 8th month of the lunar calendar, the moon is full and it is time to mark the Moon Festival, or the Mid-Autumn Festival which we marked at school on 21st September.

The moon is just the right distance from the sun for us to experience total eclipses, if you ever get the chance to see one take it! It is also just the right distance away to minimise the earth wobbling too much, thus maintaining conditions favourable for life to exist on earth.

Some of you will be able to see moon rocks up close this week as we have been able to borrow some to coincide with the festival of the moon in the cathedral.

It is 'wonder full' to be able to handle the lunar samples even though the moon rocks themselves are inside a plastic disk, I really am 'full of wonder' when I see them.

Moon rocks are older than any on earth, they tell the story of the formation of the solar system, they also tell a human story of the quest to collect them and bring them back to earth. In them are the amazing tales of 12 humans who have actually stood on the moon and of the remarkable technological innovations that enabled their journeys and that have enriched our lives on earth by incidental inventions of non-stick teflon, velcro and much more.

So, whether you are a school pupil, astronomer, poet, engineer, composer, artist, teacher, performer, geologist or rock musician from Birmingham and from whatever cultural background you come.....

Look up, be curious, take inspiration in whatever way it grabs you, and be your own wonderful selves.

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