

# St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Overview Effect

19 April 2026

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Sermon by the Revd Canon Matthew Vernon

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On Easter Day, the astronauts of Artemis II were speeding towards the moon. Two days later they reached the far side of the moon and one of the astronauts said “No matter how long we look at this, our brains are not processing this image in front of us. It is absolutely spectacular. Surreal. There's — I know there's no adjectives. I'm gonna need to invent some new ones to describe what we are looking at out this window.” (Reid Wiseman)

Artemis II boldly went where no human has gone before – further from the earth than anyone else has been. And thanks to amazing orbital mechanics and engineering and imagination, Reid, Victor, Christina and Jeremy returned to Earth safely last weekend. I followed their journey so much that I feel like I know them by name!

“But the end of their journey from the far side of the Moon also marks the beginning of another.”<sup>1</sup> And, if the astronauts from the Apollo missions, 50 years ago, are anything to go by, Reid, Victor, Christina and Jeremy have challenges ahead. “One or two of their predecessors had epiphanies. But more suffered serious difficulties. Neil Armstrong was afflicted by depression. Buzz Aldrin and Charlie Duke succumbed to alcohol. Al Bean became an artist with one subject on repeat: lunar scenes. The voyagers partly had to deal with fame, but more importantly what is sometimes called the overview effect. Seeing the Earth as a blue-green ball floating in the velvet blackness of space provokes feelings of awe that can be both amazing and troubling. Connection with humanity may follow, but so might anxiety about the alarming fragility of things.”<sup>2</sup>

The overview effect is not limited to astronauts. Many spiritual writers have contemplated the impact of viewing their lives from the vantage of the heavens – not in a spacecraft, but in their imaginations. Dante is one example. In the Divine Comedy, Dante looks down on Earth and from the cosmic viewpoint he has reached. His home planet seems like a puny threshing-floor. Dante has discovered another dimension from which to embrace life, the divine perspective. Dante discovers a viewpoint that can absorb any and all of mortal life's shocks.

“The overview effect can both inspire and frighten, spark bombast and point to wider horizons. But there is an inner, eternal space needed to embrace well what journeys into outer space might show those who go.”

The disciples walking to Emmaus were hardly going when no human had gone before. But they were the first to experience Christ in the breaking of bread. A transformative journey - their overview effect. Their journey of discovery is so appealing, isn't it? We recognise how their hearts were burning within. The disciples eyes being opened is so appealing. Notice the story doesn't end with them seeing Christ. “That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem”. For those of us whose life of prayer is centred on the Eucharist, the story is wonderfully uplifting. But for the Emmaus

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Vernon, “Splashdown. Now Comes The Greatest Danger”. Substack, 11 April 2026

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

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disciples, seeing Christ in the breaking of the bread is a sling shot, not their final destination. They don't stay in Emmaus transfixed. Jesus vanishes from their sight and their journey continues.

And so it is with us. We catch glimpses of Christ. As poets put it: like the flash of a kingfisher, or like a figure disappearing into the next room. Our hearts burn within us – and our hearts yearn within us. It's the overview effect of faith. We experience the divine, we know the transcendent, and we live on the ground, on earth, with every day challenges and life's distractions/pains. The overview effect can both inspire and frighten - calm and unsettle, bring peace or leave you bewildered.

Most of us, do not feel on a spiritual high most of the time. Some Christians suggest they do - I'll hope they grow out of it. Most of us are on the way to learning "to love the God of consolations, more than the consolations of God." Which is good and how it must be. God is God, beyond our comprehending, more mysterious than the cosmos.

We could describe the life of faith as walking the road to Emmaus over and over again. Our eyes are kept from seeing Jesus. Then he is revealed in the breaking of bread, or in a person we meet, or in growth of self-knowledge, or in some suffering. We return home renewed and invigorated. And the loop begins again. But each loop we are led higher. We realise more deeply how "our existence as individuals is actually a sharing in the existence of God." Our perspective expands. We are further converted. As "this transcendent awareness becomes a steady part of life." We "don't privately possess it, let alone control it, but rather it holds us and we might collaborate with it more fully." <sup>3</sup>

The road to Emmaus was just the beginning of their resurrection experience. The far side of moon is just the beginning of our space exploration. We are all just beginning in our awareness of God.

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Vernon, Radio 4 Thought for the Day, 10 April 2026