

Prayer of the Month • November 2010

O thou, who through the light of nature hast aroused in us a longing for the light of grace, so that we may be raised in the light of thy majesty, to thee, I give thanks, Creator and Lord, that thou allowest me to rejoice in thy works. Praise the Lord ye heavenly harmonies, and ye who know the revealed harmonies. For from him, through him, and in him, all is, which is perceptible as well as spiritual; that which we know and that which we do not know, for there is still much to learn.

Johannes Kepler, 1571–1630

This prayer comes at the end of Kepler's *Harmonices*, a scientific work peppered with pertinent religious comments. Kepler's understanding of nature led him towards a pantheistic understanding of God, though he accepted the traditional authority of the Bible. This prayer, at the end of the *Harmonices*, is a prayer of humility in thanksgiving. Kepler is able to apprehend that creation itself praises its creator. Human beings should join in with this praise. However much we understand about the universe, there is always more to learn.

Johannes Kepler was born on 27 December 1571, in the Free Imperial City of Weil der Stadt, and educated at Tübingen, where he learnt Copernican principles. Although he expressed his desire to become a minister he was appointed in 1594 as teacher of mathematics and astronomy at the Protestant School in Graz. In 1600 he went to Prague where he became assistant to Tycho Brahe; he was appointed court astronomer the following year. His fame rests chiefly on his discovery of the three laws of planetary motion. He took part in the Diet of Ratisbon, where he supported the Gregorian reform of the calendar. He took the order of the universe to be an expression of the being of God himself, especially in the relations between the Sun, the image of God the Father, and the planets. Kepler had to move several times as he lived during The Thirty Years War, and his life was sometimes in jeopardy. Towards the end of his life travelling between the imperial court in Prague, Linz and Ulm. Finally, he moved to Regensburg, but fell ill soon after his arrival. He died on 15 November 1630; his dying words were recorded as "Only the merits of our saviour Jesus Christ. It is in him, as I steadfastly testify, that there rest all my retreat, all my consolation, all my hope." He was buried at Regensburg, although the location of his grave has been lost due to the subsequent destruction of the churchyard by the army of Gustavus Adolphus. Only his self-penned epitaph survives: *Mensus eram coelos, nunc terrae metior umbras / Mens coelestis erat, corporis umbra iacet.* (I measured the skies, now the shadows I measure / Skybound was the mind, earthbound the body rests.)

Colin Lunt