The painting above is the first of a series of reflections. In this case literally as well as figuratively.

I have, for a variety of reasons, been thinking a lot about 'Life, the Universe and Everything' to quote Douglas Adams, a favourite author, who, humorously suggested that the answer to that, framed as a question, was 42.

Through the course of the ongoing pandemic, like many people, we have experienced a fairly wide range of human experiences and stresses. I have been reflecting on these, as I know many other people have been doing. I have been thinking about love: love of my beautiful, patient, tolerant, vibrant and always fascinating wife Sue; love of my three wonderful children, who all choose to live nearby and who, when they get together as they do from time to time, carry on the conversation as though the interval apart had not occurred; love of my friends, so many friends, some really close friends, an extraordinary thing for a man no good at making friends; the love of God, the God so powerful that he made all that stuff the new space telescope is seeing and yet loves each one of us personally, whether we reciprocate that love or believe in it is academic, because that love exists first, because God loves every human being that there has ever been.

It is easy to find and bathe in passages about God's love, and an important thing to do in considering our place in the universe that He created. Two particular passages draw my eye as I reflect today on a difficult couple of days at the end of a difficult couple of years at the end of many years in which my struggle has been enriched by love. 1 John 4:7-21 contains two of the love statements which help me most as I reflect on life. 1 John 4:19 "We love because He first loved us". And a little earlier in the passage, verse 8 puts it like this "Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love." And verses 15 and 16, like this "If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them."

Another passage which has been a big help in my reflections was written by Paul, and often used at weddings. It has, of course, a more general application than that, not least because the word used for love by Paul here is agapē, the love which God has for each one of us, and which we might choose to reciprocate, and which we might also have for our siblings in Christ, our Christian friends. He does not use the Greek word eros, which also translates in English as love… So in reflecting on love and life, I find 1 Corinthians 13 is helpful.

Of course some of those human beings God loves have done terrible things and flagrantly done them without a hint of remorse. You can make your own list, but Hitler and Pol Pot come pretty high on mine. Hebrews is one of the more inaccessible books of the Bible, but our homegroup has been studying it and it has clarified much for me. I have, for many years, struggled with the enormous power of God, who didn't just make one piffling planet and one piffling star, but billions of galaxies each containing billions of stars, and all the evidence now suggests, billions of planets. Like other human beings, I have a natural tendency to look at the comfortable bits of the bible and not think too much about the challenging parts. Other people might be able to explain this much better than me, but I'm the one writing my reflections, so...

Hebrews 10:29 is preceded by consideration of people who deliberately continue to sin in flagrant disregard for Jesus, people like Hitler. It is uncomfortable reading until you put it in that kind of context. Someone like Hitler or Pol Pot trampled Jesus, the Son of God underfoot, treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that would have sanctified them had they accepted Jesus as Lord and turned away from their terrible path, and they insulted the Spirit of grace, the Holy Spirit, God's Gift to each of us when we accept Jesus. Unsurprisingly, God is not going to be very welcoming of such people. Of course, some people who have done terrible things do turn to Christ and ask for forgiveness. I'm glad that is God's problem not mine. So, turning my reflections back to my own life…

I find myself in the extraordinary position of having carried with me, from the age of four until just a few years ago, a tremendous burden of guilt, pain and dissociative memories (real memories, present inside my head, but not accessible to me except in the form of nightmares and flashbacks). Through the kindness and sacrificial exertion and struggle of two very kind and giving human beings, I was, over several years, able to process all of the dissociative memories so that they are no longer hiding but in their rightful place in my lifetime long-term memory. This means I am free to think of them or not as I wish. It means that I am free to forgive those who hurt me, and forgive them I have.

I am free from the prison that was created by all that unexplained unforgiven hurt. A few years ago, I wrote a blog article 'How to live with a dragon in your head', https://drrickblog.wordpress.com/2017/07/26/how-to-live-with-a-dragon-in-your-head/ . I'm glad that I did because it neatly documents a life that had already begun to make a tremendous turn. It documents the mental health problems that have been a part of my life to a greater or lesser extent for nearly 60 years. It documents a me that had existed for a very long time, but one which was already in the past when it was written. Never again will the black tide rise for years; or will I dissociate and lose myself, every now and again I catch a glimpse of them and feel for a few hours, just a hint of what it was like. Anxiety will be a fixture, difficult to remove after cPTSD and a symptom of my personal manifestation of MND. But anxiety I can live with. Life is so much better without the depression and without all the dissociative symptoms.

So I live with a motor neurone disease but because the beginning of the MND overlapped with the successful therapy for the cPTSD, and I have found something I love doing and am much, much better at than I ever imagined possible, I am happy. I have been happy before, throughout my time with Sue, but there is a difference now. Then I was happy because she loved me and I loved her and eventually found my way to Jesus and still greater happiness, but there were always the shadows of things unseen lurking in the background. Now I am just happy, I still love Sue and she still loves me, and I miss our cuddles but we still have love. Jesus is still My Lord and My God, ever more deeply as the months and years go by, but I don't miss the shadows, now gone, in the past, left behind. Love from Rick