

MILLIONS of names on Mars...

(and somewhere else)

by Richard Fowler

Watching with eyes wide open, I was captivated by the first-ever recording of a spacecraft landing on Mars.

Seeing the Perseverance rover filmed parachuting, then descending by “sky crane”, onto the red dusty surface of this strange world, you couldn’t quite believe what you were watching happened some 212 million kilometres away. This was NASA at its best, but not far behind is Elon Musk’s SpaceX whose goal is to colonise the place! An achievement that would make humans a multi-planetary species.

For those who are happier on terra firma, there’s a simpler way to get you to Mars. Well, at least your name, that is. Over 16 million have already signed up and got their “boarding pass” for the next trip.¹ This time, 10.9 million names were

stencilled by electron beam onto three fingernail-sized silicon chips and sent to Mars.

But have you ever asked what it would mean if we did colonise another planet? What would it mean to export humanity? You know, warts and all. Yes, we have a lot going for us, a lot to give, but what about all of the other stuff? The icky, bad things, the stuff we get wrong. Thinking about it. I’m not sure whether “human” is a very good brand to export to the final frontier.

I’m not throwing stones at my own species, but let’s face it, we wouldn’t want to export Covid, would we! As I write we have a powerful reminder of its destructive potency as the USA reflects on passing 500,000 deaths from this wretched virus. Ironically, this is similar to the number of US names currently signed up to go on the next trip to Mars via micro-ship (...I mean chip!). Actually, on second thought, with so much death and

despair, I wonder whether leaving this planet for another is actually a good idea. Is being a multi-planetary species our only hope for the future?

As I consider the names, and lives, of those who have boldly gone where no man has gone before (to quote Captain Kirk), now cradled in a crater on Mars, I am reminded of another source of hope. Another place where our names are etched. A place of safety and comfort, a place where those who die from Covid are not forgotten.

Coming from the lips of a star-gazing prophet who asked whether he too was forgotten by his God, his answer came in beautiful poetry: “Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne?” God replied: “Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands”.² I don’t suppose I know all of what this means, but I know if my name is in God’s palm, then I can have hope. And I believe you can, too.

We are a peculiar species. Simultaneously full of wonder and woe. We can send the etched names of millions to Mars, yet we are plagued by problems we can barely solve. It’s not being a multi-planetary race that gives me hope, it is knowing our names are written on the palm of God’s hand. Meaning, we are not forgotten even in the toughest of times.

Notes

¹ <https://mars.nasa.gov/participate/send-your-name/future> .

² Isaiah 49:15–16.



A placard commemorating NASA’s “Send Your Name to Mars” campaign was installed on the Perseverance Mars rover, including three fingernail-sized chips affixed to the upper-left corner of the placard featuring the names of 10,932,295 people who participated in the campaign.