

Sermon

Sunday 16th November, 2008

Lessons

1 Thessalonians 5: 1 - 11

St Matthew 24: 29 – 31

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

Most Loving God, let Your Word illumine our minds; and while now we see but darkly, may we never lose our zeal and passion for the light of Your Truth, or the peace which this world cannot give, or the strength that comes to those who wait upon You. Grant this prayer, we beseech You, in the name of Jesus, our Saviour. Amen.

St Paul wrote, ‘We belong to the day, and we should be sober. We must wear faith and love as a breastplate, and our hope of salvation as a helmet.’

1 Thessalonians 5: 8

Do we have a soul? The psalmist wrote, ‘Bless the LORD, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits...Bless the LORD, O my soul, all his works in all places of his dominion: bless the LORD, O my soul.’ But, do we have a soul? At the beginning of the nineteenth century, there was a great controversy which became known as the Vitalism Debate. Forty years before Darwin and his theory of evolution, Vitalism was the first great scientific issue to seize the imagination of the British public. It was a debate over a number of years with significant contributions from surgeons, poets, theologians, philosophers and writers. The Vitalism Debate was a very public discussion, almost a battle, between those who believed that human beings comprised of mere matter and those who believed in a Life Force, a spiritual reality which was intermingled

with flesh. 'Bless the LORD, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name,' but do we have a soul?

The origin of the public debate began with the lecture given by John Abernethy, who was Professor of Anatomy at the Royal College of Surgeons and would later become Senior Surgeon at St Bartholomew's Hospital. Abernethy has been described as 'a squat, sandy-haired figure...a pious, plain-spoken Scot.' Brought up a Calvinist, he was said to have an 'unconquerable shyness' in society while, at the same time, a blunt bedside manner with his patients. He made no secret of his opinion that 'most of the diseases of his richer clients could be cured by cutting back on food and alcohol, and saying their prayers.' It is not a bad opinion! At the height of his career, Abernethy said that human life is based on 'a semi-mystical concept of a universal, physiological life force. Blood itself could not explain life, though it might carry it.' He said this universal 'Vitality' was 'a subtle, mobile, invisible substance, super-added to the evident structure of muscles, or other form of vegetable and animal matter, as magnetism is to iron, and as electricity is to various substances with which it may be connected.'¹ The Life Force, he said, was super-added by an outside power. Electricity became a metaphor for life itself. Electricity was the connection between dead and living matter. Electricity was a metaphor for the

¹ Holmes, Richard *The Age of Wonder* p309

Life Force and this ‘scientific theory’, Abernethy believed, brought scientific evidence to the theological notion of the soul.

It was one of Abernethy’s students who, in 1816, stepped forward to challenge the great man. With passion and unforgiving rhetoric, William Lawrence said that there was ‘no such thing as a mysterious Life Principle, and that the human body is merely a complex physical organisation. In a phrase that became notorious, [Lawrence] claimed that the development of this physiological organisation could be observed unbroken, ‘from an oyster to a man.’ With complete condescension, he said, ‘To make the matter more intelligible, this *vital principle* is compared to magnetism, to electricity, and to galvanism; or it is roundly stated to be oxygen. ’Tis like a camel, or like a whale, or like what you please...’ Lawrence said that science must ‘discern objects clearly’, shun ‘intellectual mist’ and dispel and dissipate ‘absurd fables.’ Lawrence concludes, ‘An immaterial and spiritual being could not have been discovered amid the blood and filth of the dissecting room.’ The psalmist wrote, ‘Bless the LORD, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name.’ In the twenty-first century, in a scientific, information age, in a post-Christian, multi-faith society, it is a pertinent question for us to face: do we have a soul?

Arguably, the most interesting, if not most important, literary response came from the pen of an eighteen year old, Mary Shelley. Her novel, *Frankenstein*,

or *The Modern Prometheus*, is the story of a life which is physically created but the soul or spirit is irretrievably damaged. The films of the book do a great injustice to the novel. Dr Frankenstein becomes 'a mad and evil scientist' while in the novel he is a romantic, idealistic figure determined to benefit humankind. In the films, his laboratory is demonic with 'fizzing electrical generators, sinister bubbling vats and violent explosions' while in the novel Dr Frankenstein works calmly, patiently, by candlelight at a surgical table. The unnamed Creature of Mary Shelley's novel becomes in the films the 'Monster.' In the films, he is dumb but in her novel he speaks. With electricity, with electrical reanimation, Dr Frankenstein brings his unnamed Creature to life.

Listen to this:

It was on a dreary night of November, that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils. With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony, I collected the instruments of life around me, that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet. It was already one in the morning; the rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when by the glimmer of the half extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open. It breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs.

Once alive, the Creature steps outside, observes the moon and is frustrated that it has no words for what it sees and experiences. Soon, the Creature learns to use fire, cooks and reads. The Creature turns to European history, to Plutarch, Milton and Goethe. His conscience is aroused and so too his sense of justice. But, above all, he discovers his need of 'companionship, sympathy and

affection.’ This is the point to which I have been moving and, in a slightly surreal moment, let us listen to Dr Frankenstein’s Creature:

And what was I? Of my creation and my creator I was absolutely ignorant...Where were my friends and relations? No father had watched my infant days, no mother had blessed me with smiles and caresses; or if they had, all my past life was now a blot, a blind vacancy in which I distinguished nothing....I was, besides, endued with a figure hideously deformed and loathsome. I was not even of the same nature as man...When I looked around I saw and heard of none like me. Was I, then, a Monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled and whom all men disowned? I cannot describe the agony that these reflections inflicted upon me...Oh, that I had forever remained in my native wood, nor known nor felt beyond the sensations of hunger, thirst and heat!

The Creature craved companionship, sympathy and affection. In a sense, the Creature became a Monster, violent and destructive, because his soul, his spirit, was tortured by loneliness, by his enforced solitude and isolation. He was alone and craved companionship. His being was more than material substance. Mary Shelley powerfully portrayed life in its totality as being more than what surgeons can dissect or Dr Frankenstein can put together. The psalmist said, ‘Bless the LORD, O my soul.’ It is true that no spiritual being will be discovered in a dissecting room. It is true there is always a need to clear away intellectual mist and to dump absurd fables, but there is more to life than material matter. We know it. At the very core of our being, we know it. St Augustine expressed it most wonderfully. Addressing God, he said, ‘Our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee.’

Do we have a soul? St Paul wrote in his Letter to the Thessalonians, ‘We must wear faith and love as a breastplate, and our hope of salvation as a helmet.’ We must wear faith. What is our faith? Do we have a soul? Jesus said, ‘The great trumpet will sound, and [the Son of Man] will send out his angels to the four corners of the earth, and they will gather his chosen people from one end of the world to the other.’ What will be gathered together? On death, our bodies decay. They are buried or burned. Do we have a soul? John Donne wrote of men and women being partakers in the Divine Nature. Donne wrote:

That God should be all in all, so as that at last, the whole nature of mankind...should be swallowed up, and drowned in the very substance of God himself.

The poet and priest wrote of us being ‘drowned in the very substance of God.’ Did he mean our souls? At the moment, I am reading the sermons of the Revd James Bell, Minister of Coldstream, sermons he preached before the University of Glasgow in the late eighteenth century. In a sermon entitled, *On the Love of God*, he wrote these most wonderful words. I find them to be a treasure and I hope that you do to:

It ought further to be attended unto in this argument, that there is none else besides God, on whom we can rely for certain good. We are weak and dependent creatures, and have nothing we can call properly our own. Mankind may give to one another temporary aid and relief, but cannot communicate what they do not possess themselves, pure and lasting felicity. The little they have in their power, they have not always the wish to bestow. The generous and beneficent do not form a large class, and their worth is the more to be valued. In general the patronage of the rich and powerful is precarious, as the testimony of those who have been

disappointed by them, and experience with the world, sadly attest. Others, whom we had fondly numbered among our well-wishers, desert us when we have need of their assistance; and our real and sincere friends have it seldom in their power to promote our interests as they would desire.

But however supported and countenanced in the course of our lives, human aid can be of no avail to us, when disease and sickness come upon us, and death approaches. We must then fight the battle alone, independent of patrons, relations, and friends. Our alliance with this world is at an end, and the arm of man cannot save.

But God is truth, he cannot deceive. He is omnipotent; who hath resisted his will? He is unchangeable; all who are worthy of his favour will assuredly meet with it. The love of friends may wax cold; affection may turn into hatred; and our kind deeds may be repaid with ingratitude; *but they that seek the Lord shall not want any good thing.* He will guide them by his counsels, and will never leave nor forsake them in their distress. He will inspire hope and comfort into their fainting heart. When they walk through the valley of the shadow of death, they will fear no evil; for he is with them, his rod and his staff will comfort them. He will make them to lie down in green pastures, and lead them beside still waters.

We need to trust and trust deeply the intuition of our hearts and the reason in our heads which led us in the first place to believe in God. St Paul wrote of our heavenly body, our spiritual body, being raised from our earthly body: the imperishable from the perishable. He spoke of our earthly frame and of the building in heaven we would possess not made by human hands. In the New Testament, resurrection does not mean the passing from this life to the next of our immortal soul. Unlike other religions, the Christian faith is that in death we die. We die one hundred per cent! It is God who chooses to recreate or resurrect us. Our faith is not based on the fate or chance of our immortal soul passing into the next life. Our faith stands on the promise of God. What is at

issue is the faithfulness of God. In Christ, he has told us that we are His children and, in death, He will raise us to new life. We will be swallowed, drowned in the very substance of God. In the eighteenth century, the surgeons told us that there was no soul hiding behind the muscles and sinew of our flesh. In the twenty-first century, the psychologists, no doubt, will tell us that there is no soul lurking in the darkness at the back of the human mind. It matters not a jot whether or not we have what has been traditionally described as the soul. Our faith is that God knows who we are. He knows our name, personality, life, character, and every fibre of our being. We can be sure that He will not forget. Our faith is based on His faithfulness to us. We will be swallowed up, drowned in the very substance of God. We have nothing to fear. That is our faith. Amen.