

## Sermon

Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> June, 2007

Lessons      1 Kings 17: 8 – 24    Galatians 1: 11 – 24    St Luke 7: 11 – 17

### Prayer of Illumination

O Holy Spirit, Breath of Life; turn our minds to Your light while the Word is before us; that we may receive for our health, the illumination of Your truth; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Jesus said, ‘Young man! Get up, I tell you!’ The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.**

*St Luke 7: 14b – 15*

The Edinburgh-born philosopher, David Hume, was an atheist. He had a palpable contempt for the common man. On religion, Hume said that, ‘The ignorant multitude must first entertain some grovelling and familiar notion of superior powers.’ He said, ‘the incessant hopes and fears which actuate the human mind’ arouse a fawning belief in the existence of some unknown causes of human happiness and misery. These unknown causes are personified as beings that are to be flattered or cajoled into helping us. Hume stated that ‘the primary religion of mankind arises chiefly from an anxious fear of future events.’

The Scottish social anthropologist, James Frazer, was equally critical of religion.

Frazer said that ‘The movement of the higher thought, so far as we can trace it, has on the whole been from magic through religion to science.’ Magic is when humanity believes it can control the events of nature. An example is the scattering of water to make it rain or the performance of an act of sexual congress on a cornfield to make the corn fertile. Frazer said that it is when humanity realised that the sun would rise each day whether or not a maiden was sacrificed that it evolved towards religion. Religion is the belief that superior powers control the events of nature. Flattering or cajoling the superior powers can yield results. When humanity realises that the

events which befall us are determined by the nature of the universe itself it will evolve to science. A sick person will live or die according natural laws whether or not prayers are made to control events.

We live in a secular age when the intellectual arguments in support of religion are not heard all that often. Though many people say they believe in God, the truth is that it is almost impossible for people to escape the age and culture in which they live. Our age and culture is a materialist one: not only is our happiness to be found in the clothes we buy, the foreign holidays we have and the amount of sex we can get, but few people look into the distance with any seriousness: fewer and fewer people commit time to search for the Eternal in and through the finite. Churches tearing themselves apart over which style of worship, seating or missionary strategy should be adopted amount to almost nothing in the face of materialism. The intellectual onslaught against a faith-based worldview seems almost insurmountable. The criticisms of religion made by Hume, Frazer and many others resonate with many people in our time, namely that religion arises chiefly from an anxious fear about the future and a sick person will live or die whether or not prayers are made to control events. Secularism, it is thought, holds the intellectual high ground. *'Young man! Get up, I tell you!'* *The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.* Where do we start with such a story? How many dead men have sat up and talked in the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary recently having had prayers said over them? Where do we start?

Last month, the Pope at eighty years of age travelled to Brazil. Watched by more than a million worshippers, Pope Benedict XVI canonised Brazil's first saint. In the

year 2007, the Church canonised Friar Antonio, who died in 1822. Friar Antonio dispensed ‘cure-all’ pills from a modest monastery in Sao Paulo. The pills, which are still being handed out, are now small scraps of paper inscribed with prayers to the Virgin Mary. The pills are distributed at the rate of ten thousand a day. Friar Antonio’s first miracle occurred at the beginning of the nineteenth century when a patient was cured of kidney stones. Recently, the pills healed a four-year-old girl of incurable hepatitis. One archbishop said that he would ban the pills because they foster superstition, but the eighty year old Pope made the trip to Brazil to canonise the miracle worker. When I read that story I thought to myself, ‘This Scottish-born Edinburgh minister is with David Hume and James Frazer!’ The problems facing the Church in the twenty-first century are enormous and some of them originate from within.

Ultimately, Hume and Frazer are wrong. They conclude that religion is nonsense because some theology is nonsense. They conclude that religion is for the ignorant because some theology is intellectually bankrupt. Crucially, what they miss is that all religion is a response, albeit a flawed one, to the human experience of the Transcendent in a temporal life. From the days *homo sapiens* first appeared on the evolutionary horizon, men and women have felt the presence of the Transcendent, the Infinite, flowing through their veins. They believe that they have seen glimpses of God in this world. Religions are humanity’s attempt to bring integrity and systematic thinking to what has been felt in the heart, mind and soul. Sometimes what has been taught as religion and theology is no more than superstition. George Herbert in his poem, Love, begins, ‘Love bade me welcome.’ The final line is, “‘You must sit

down,' says Love, 'and taste my meat.' So I did sit and eat." Alister McGrath wrote of Herbert's poem:

As I read the poem over and over again, I found myself being deeply moved by its vivid and gentle depiction of a gracious Saviour welcoming to his side those who knew that they were totally unworthy of his company.

Herbert and McGrath, to name but two, felt within themselves the presence, love and invitation of the Transcendent, the Infinite, the Holy One. Love bade me welcome. All religion is a response to the spiritual in life, but whether all religion is worthy of our intellectual attention is another matter. Hume and Frazer missed that fundamental difference.

The Bible itself shows a progression of theology through its pages. Early on, Yahweh is regarded as one among many gods, the god of Abraham and his descendents. It was the great prophets of Israel centuries later who firmly established Yahweh as the one and only creator of all things, the One God, before whom all other gods are unreal. In the Bible we can trace the development from polygamy to monogamy, from punitive punishments of whole groups to the idea of proportional retributive punishment and from rules for ritual purity and elaborate animal sacrifices to the idea that the true worship of God is found in the pursuit of justice and mercy. Religion at its best represents our highest thoughts about the Transcendent, the Infinite, the Holy One we call God.

The story of Jesus raising to life the widow's son is, like many Bible stories, one which incorporates the historical with the interpretative and the symbolic. It is often impossible to separate them. A dead man was raised to life. The story is very

similar to that found in *First Kings*. Elijah raises from the dead a widow's son. In both cases, these events testify to the power of God. God is able to raise men and women from the dead. Is the story told in Luke intended as a foretaste of the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead? Is the story intended to portray Jesus as the new Elijah? Whatever the answer is to these questions, the story of Jesus' restoring the dead man to life reflects the belief of the first Christians that God, the Transcendent, Infinite, Holy One, whom no religion or theology can truly depict, loves us with an eternal love, a 'love that wilt not let (us) go', a love that will raise us to life after we die. St Theresa of Avila wrote:

So death will come to fetch you? No, not death, but God himself. Death is not the horrible spectre we see represented in pictures. The catechism teaches us that death is the separation of the soul from the body; that is all. I am not afraid of a separation that will unite me for ever with God.

Of course, death can be ghastly and, indeed as the release from suffering, welcome, but the saint wants us to see beyond the materialism of this life. The two stories of raising the dead to life are about the power of God. They tell us of God's unconditional love. In both stories, the one who was raised to life was already dead, no ambiguity. No mention is made of the beliefs of the dead person. *There* is the compassion of God. In both stories, neither one of the families involved is Jewish. And, in both cases, the sons who died are the sons of widows. Of all people in Jewish society, the widow more than any other person represents powerlessness, vulnerability and one without value. *There* is the compassion of God.

George Herbert's poem began, 'Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back, Guilty of dust and sin.' It ends with Love insisting, 'You must sit down and taste my meat. So I did sit and eat.' This Table is for everyone, for everyone and anyone

who has ever felt the tug of the Transcendent in their life. This meal is hosted by the gracious Saviour who promises that this meal is a foretaste of what is to come in the Father's House. The story of Jesus raising the dead man to life tells me that God's love for me and you is for all eternity and He will hold on to us forever. As Donne put it, *Death itself is dead*. As for David Hume and James Frazer, we attend this meal not because we wish to flatter or cajole a superior power, not because we think this will win us freedom from suffering or life after death, but because we have felt that Superior Power's presence in our life, albeit fleetingly, and we are accepting His invitation to sit with Him.

Amen.