Sermon

Sunday 1st May, 2011

Lessons


Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

O God, who speaks to our hearts by the Spirit in Holy Scriptures, and faithfully counsels us to think on those things that belong to our peace; confirm our faith in You, and in the record of those great things which You did for our salvation; that we may neither fall into error, nor trifle away the time You have given us; but day by day in our toils and temptations, may cleave to the truth of Your gospel; through Jesus Christ our Lord.  Amen.

In his book, *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins raids his thesaurus for adjectives to describe the God of the Old Testament.  Of God, Dawkins writes:

Arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction; jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic-cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.

Dawkins’ description is entertaining, if nothing else, and his eloquence is surpassed only by his intellectual dishonesty.  If the question of God and the mystery of life and death were as black and white as Professor Dawkins would have us believe, it makes one wonder why every civilisation in the history of humanity has sought the Deity in one form or another and why in our time the materialist argument is, intellectually at least, losing ground.  Dawkins provides us with a grotesque caricature of God and too often gives the impression that if only people were as intelligent and clear-sighted as him no one would have need of the God hypothesis.
Dawkins, like others such as Hitchens and Grayling, is a materialist; in other words, he argues that there is only the material, physical universe. For materialists, there is nothing beyond the physical universe, which we measure through the natural sciences. For them, our sciences measure and describe reality in its totality. In contrast to Dawkins and others, the theologian, Keith Ward, says:

We know things as they appear to us. But those appearances depend upon the specific nature of our sense organs, the wavelengths that we are able to perceive, the cones of our eyes that are sensitive to specific wavelengths, the electrochemical impulses that convey information to our brains, and the visual areas of our brains that turn those wavelengths into the colours that we observe. The world of solid coloured three-dimensional objects that we perceive is in fact a construct of our perceptual equipment and of our minds. Physicists tell us that the objects we see are in fact mostly empty space, that they may not be three-dimensional at all.... and that they have no colour, since they are only electromagnetic waves..... Matter, at least as it appears to us, is a construct of consciousness.

In other words, based on our limited ability to measure the universe, we impose our theories of reality on to the universe, but those theories and our perception of reality exist in the mind, not in the physical universe itself. One quantum physicist, John von Neumann, has said, ‘All real things are contents of consciousness.’ Richard Dawkins, then, is not only a bad biblical scholar, philosopher and theologian, he is also a dishonest scientist in the sense that he makes claims about the nature of reality which his science cannot substantiate.
The quantum physicist said, ‘All real things are contents of consciousness.’
There is a sense in which we live, not in the physical world, but in the mind, in our consciousness: that is the seat of the most real, whether it be theories of the universe, the place in which we encounter others or the place, if place is the right word, in which we encounter the mystery we call God. The mystic, St John of the Cross, describes the soul, consciousness or the mind as ‘that place where no one ever is’ yet that place in which he met the One he knew so well, upon whom he lent his face.

Today we meditatively reflect on the encounter of the Risen Christ with His disciples and, in particular, the disciple Thomas. The resurrection accounts in the Bible are faith narratives; they are not history, a blow by blow account of what happened. The resurrection accounts are a blend of historical incidence together with theology, liturgy, mythology and spirituality. In some instances, the Risen Christ is a physical presence: He may be touched or He walks along a road and discusses the Scriptures with followers; He talks to Mary in the garden or invites Thomas to touch His wounds. Yet, the Risen Christ is not recognised for who He is, He is able to enter rooms which are secure and He can disappear into thin air. In interpreting these accounts, we have three choices: we can read them literally, in which case they are irrational and inconsistent; we can
discount them, rationally, because they are apparently irrational and inconsistent; or, we can read them as the spiritual texts which they are.

The resurrection accounts convey the most profound belief of the early Church that God is the most real, that as with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and Elijah, God raised Jesus from the dead and that in faith, prayer and meditation, they felt Jesus to be alive. In fact, in the mind’s eye, they saw Him. The resurrection faith narratives articulate the profound belief of the early Church in life beyond life and not because they could not face death but because they believed in God’s love for them and, most importantly, God’s faithfulness towards them. He would not let them go. Jesus says to Thomas, ‘Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.’ Perhaps many of us crave the visions of the mystics and the spiritual intimacy they enjoy with Christ, but blessed are those who have not seen yet have believed.

It is in the consciousness, the soul, the mind, in which we meet with God and our sensory perception is a wholly inadequate means of measuring the totality of reality. We need to trust our discerning hearts. In 2006, the lives of Phil and Heather Stoddart were turned upside down when their two teenage daughters were killed by a driver who was on the wrong side of the road and travelling fast after a night out. Claire was eighteen and Jenny was fifteen.
Phil and Heather were told about the crash and rushed to the hospital, passing
the wreckage of their daughters’ car on their way. Phil writes:

They had Jenny breathing but only artificially. They’d let us
know more shortly and left us with a cup of tea. We knew in our
hearts that Claire was dead and I sensed that Jenny was gone too. I
found it hard to sit down...so I wandered out for a few moments in
the fresh daylight air. Lord I so need you. I went back in quickly
and sat with Heather who could barely move and we prayed. This was it,
this was the moment God met with us in that little room. We prayed and
spoke to him and for my part I knew then for sure that they were both
gone to be with him and I think Heather knew as well. How did we feel?
Well, calm and peace came to us. We were assured they were with him
and a strong conviction of this was upon us. A strength came into me
and focus and purpose. The nurse returned with the verdict [from a brain
scan] from Addenbrookes: they said she was brain dead and took us to
see her. When we got to the bed there was a curtain around it. We
asked to be alone because I wanted to pray over her with no interference.
Finally we stood either side of the bed and looked at her face.....I prayed
because I knew God could bring her back if he wanted. We prayed, I
heard his calm, reassuring voice again: ‘No, she’s home with me.’ We
said goodbye and looked at the bed again. She was no longer there.
The body is a tent and she had left it. We knew that. We left the
bedside and asked the nurse not to keep the life support on for our sake.

What is this power which gave a mother and father such immense strength to
bear an unimaginable loss and strength even to forgive the man who killed their
daughters? What is this power which freed them of anger and bitterness but
which Dawkins calls a delusion? I do not share some of Phil Stoddart’s
theology but in that hospital ward and behind closed curtains, the Stoddarts felt
the presence of God with them, felt it, in the place where no one ever is, in the
soul; the One who knew them so well, spoke to them, deep called to deep, and
they rested in Him, finding calm and a peace nothing could shake. Had a nurse
been standing on the other side of the curtain she would have heard nothing. Had she been standing with the Stoddart’s at the bedside, she would have seen only a father and mother standing with their unconscious daughter. Yet, in the silence of the souls, the Stoddart’s felt the presence of the Holy.

Blessed are those who have seen the Risen Christ or heard the voice of God and believe! Jesus said, ‘Blessed are those who have neither seen nor heard, yet believe!’

Amen.