‘Prayer for the Souls of All the Faithful Departed’ and the Old Cosmographers

A Sermon

Preached
in the Chapel

of

ALL SOULS COLLEGE

by

The Chaplain

on

Sunday, 13 June 2010

All Souls was founded as a college for study and a chantry for prayers for the souls of all the faithful departed. Chantries were abolished by Edward VI, but our name remains and, as you heard, the Chaplain prays for the dead, included in the rest of humanity, at our services. The Charity Commissioners, on their recent visitation, were surprisingly pleased to hear of this and called it 'a *public* benefit'. This was justifiably considered anachronistic of them, if lucky for us and for me, when the main purpose of the college has so long been study and praying for the dead is so vestigial a part of our life. In this sermon I want to take stock of this anomalous situation. The interest of doing so is in what it has to tell us about the interaction of imagination, particularly the religious imagination as it concerns the dead, with scepticism and knowledge. They can be seen at work on one another in a notable seventeenth-century sermon.

On 8 June 1627 Magdalen, Lady Danvers, was buried in Chelsea Church. John Donne, poet and Dean of St Paul's, was asked by the family to preach at her funeral. He was the right man to do it, a superb preacher who had known her since they met in Oxford twenty-eight years before. He loved and admired her, two of his greatest poems, 'The Relic' and 'The Funeral' making play with the biblical associations of her name Magdalen. But engagements in the city prevented him from attending the burial, so instead he preached *A Sermon of Commemoration* on her in Chelsea Church on 1 July. This was unusual, funeral sermons being the norm. So it is a rare early example of our present-day Memorial Services. It was printed in the same year 'together with other Commemorations of Her; by her Sonne G. Herbert' – Latin poems by her devoted son, the poet and friend of Donne, George Herbert. These, incidentally, are the beautiful product of a more temperate imagination than Donne's and include an enchanting picture of son and mother reunited in a fragrant cottage garden.

Donne began with a prayer, beseeching God to hasten the day of resurrection 'for our sakes' and '*for her sake, whom we have lately laid downe in this thy* holy ground' – a prayer for the dead as part and parcel of the living, all one in Christ. He then announced his text, 2 Peter 3.13: 'We look for new Heavens and new Earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.'

Such speculation was, he well knew, a target for popular scepticism. 'There was', as Keith Thomas has written of early modern England,

> nothing new about this tendency to doubt the basic tenets of the Christian faith … and a wide range of scepticism was uncovered in the fifteenth century church courts.[1]

Donne was on to it right away.

> To shake the constancy of a Christian, there will always be *Scorners*, *Jesters*, *Scoffers*, and *Mockers* at *Religion* … the *Judgement day,* the *second coming of Christ*, will always be subject to *scornes.* And many times a *scorne* cuts deeper than a *sword.*

He himself in his younger days, eager to advertise his conversion from Roman Catholicism, had written an anti-Jesuit book called *Ignatius his Conclave* in which he

1 *Religion and the Decline of Magic* 1971, p. 199.

had made fun of the Catholic doctrine, turned into topography, of the afterlife: heaven, hell, limbo and purgatory. He alleged that he had fallen into an ecstasy and with the help of a pair of miraculous spectacles, 'the same by which Gregory the Great and Bede did discern so distinctly the soules of their friends', was able to see 'all the rooms in Hell open to my sight' along with limbo and purgatory, 'the Suburbs of Hell'. Such superstition was fair game. But even now, Anglican and Dean, he gives his scepticism a run on the neighbouring territory announced in his text, the new heavens and new earth. He lived in an age of maps and discoveries and they interested him deeply.

> As it is said of old *Cosmographers*, that when they had said all that they knew of a *Countrey*, and yet much more was to be said, they said that the rest of those countries were possest with *Giants*, or *Witches*, or *Spirits*, or *Wilde beasts*, so that they could pierce no farther into that Countrey, so when wee have travell'd as farre as wee can, with safetie, that is, as farre as *Ancient*, or *Moderne Expositors* lead us, in the *discoverie* of these *new Heavens*, and *new Earth*, yet we must say at last, that it is a *Countrey* inhabited with *Angels*, and *Archangels*, with *Cherubins*, and *Seraphins*, and that wee can looke no farther into it, with these eyes.

So the population of the Christian heaven is put on a par with the guesswork of the 'old *Cosmographers*'. The listening family must have been worried by this – until Donne quickly got back on the orthodox rails with the various angels. Donne's imagination was no more easily deterred than his scepticism. He was soon off on his own description of the new heaven and the new earth, now Magdalen's home, with recklessly mounting hyperbole:

> where all their *waters* are *milke*, all their *milke*, *honey*, where all their *grasse* is *corne*; where all their *glebe*, all their *clods* of earth are *gold*, and all their *gold* of innumerable *carats*.

But (again 'but'), after some more of this kind of thing, he concludes that 'Of these *new heavens*, & this *new earth* we must say at last that we can say nothing'. Donne was caught in the shift from old doctrine and imagery to new discoveries and scepticism, and then back again. His bewildered audience must have been relieved when he presently turned to commemoration and made the sort of memorial service address which we get nowadays, free of eschatological speculation and its critique. He recalled Magdalen's 'conversation, naturally cheerful and merry, and loving facetiousnesse, and sharpnesse of wit', her occasional liability to 'an overflowing of Melancholie', her hospitality and care for her family and household, not forgetting the poor, her piety and so on. We know the kind of thing. Before the sermon Donne had prayed for the dead. At its end he did so again:

> that wee may all meet, and meet quickly in that *kingdome*, which *hers*, and *our Saviour*, hath purchac't for us all.

So both times prayer for Magdalen was included in prayer for the big society of humanity.

That inclusiveness was a survival from the pre-Reformation church. In the heyday of Purgatory, and on the eve of the Reformation which did away with it, John Fisher encouraged prayer for the souls being purified there because

> they be of the same faith, hope and charyte, that we be of … every one of us hath sum of his frendes and kinsfolk there

so we must 'do lyke frendes … let us be loving unto them as we pretentyd louve before unto them'.[2] As we often read in the inscriptions on medieval memorials 'of your charity, pray for the soul of…', charity, 'the very bond of peace and of all virtues', was key. Apart from the efficacy or otherwise of such prayer, charity demanded that we honour the desire of the dead to be remembered and not, as the psalmist feared, be 'forgotten as a dead man out of mind'.[3] The word 'mind' for the annual commemoration of the dead (their 'year's mind') can be heard on Sundays in St Barnabas's Church. 'Remember me' are the last words of Hamlet's father's ghost, as of Purcell's Dido. And we do remember: and do so, at least in public, charitably. *De mortuis nil nisi bonum*[4] – nothing but good when we speak of the dead. It can even go a bit far in our eulogies and inscriptions, for the dead like us were annoying, lacking and needy. The Hebrew Prayer Book corrects this tendency with its more realistic funeral prayer,

> Have mercy upon him; pardon all his transgressions, for there is none righteous upon the earth, who doeth only good, and sinneth not.

This at least can be said for purgatory: that it grasped 'the crooked timber of humanity' – albeit with an over-heated imagination. The poetic construct of purgatory solidified, like so many leaps of Christian imagination, into doctrine.

The exercise of charity, even to a fault, in the face of death, helps to heal the social rupture death always inflicts. More shaded assessments should be left for later. Meanwhile, it ties up again the bonds which hold together the survivors with the dead and the still-living with one another.

There was an instance of this when a revised Prayer Book for the Church of England was put before Parliament by the bishops in 1928. It included among its innovations a provision for the Commemoration of All Souls with an appropriate prayer and readings. The recent holocaust of the First World War had stimulated chaplains at the front and the bereaved at home to cry out for such. But the Home Secretary, Joynson Hicks (an enthusiastic Protestant and advocate of the indiscriminate bombing of cities abroad and the closing down of night-clubs at home) got it thrown out. The church went on and used it anyhow.

Consistency, then, is hard to achieve in these matters of prayer, memory and charity. Few of us are as consistent as Richard Dawkins, so it was a surprise when his first choice for *Desert Island Discs* in 1997 was from Fauré's *Requiem*

2 E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 1992, p. 349.

3 Psalm 31.12.

4 Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers: Chilon of Sparta.*

In Paradisum ducant te Angeli.
In tuo adventu suscipiant te Martyres,
Et perducant te in civitatem sanctam Jerusalem.

May the Angels lead thee into Paradise.
At thy coming may the Martyrs take thee up,
And bring thee into the holy city, Jerusalem.

The question of truth remains, and with it the question of whether the prayers said in this chapel are in good faith.

In his last book Bernard Williams said usefully that the marks of truth are sincerity and accuracy. Without doubt, prayer can be sincere. We are never more sincere than in that open and heartfelt seeking for what we lack.

Accuracy is another matter, and here the Christian religion has made it difficult for us by the habit of its regulators of mistaking the imaginative for the dogmatic, putting poetry on a par with the truths of science. This category error is understandable enough. Religion is conservative and hangs on to outworn ideas. The old biblical cosmographer in the Book of Genesis recorded that the cosmos consists of a flat earth, threatened by watery chaos but protected by the inverted bowl of the heavens, beyond which its divine creator sits with his heavenly court. Later Hebrew writers believed that those heavens – still later become a heavenly city – were the destination of just souls. These speculators were sincere, in good faith, using their imaginations to describe how their world looked and felt to them. They have all, in the course of the history of science, been proved wrong. Since this hardly troubles us, indeed moves us, when we hear the remnants of their imaginings sung to us in Fauré's *Requiem* or Verdi's, we can conclude that their speculations, dead as science, survive as poetry. They have come back home to their origin.

So can poetry have accuracy? That is the question. It concerned the great American poet Wallace Stevens all his life. He wrote of the poetic imagination that 'the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us to live our lives'.[5] Elaborating on it, the critic Helen Vendler wrote about the way poetry shows us how 'the experiences of life can be reconstituted and made available as beauty and solace, to help us live our lives'.[6] Nowhere is that help more needed than in the shock (it is always a shock) of death. The accuracy of poetry is in the precise relation of its images, an accuracy worked out in the right words and metre, to our experience – often unacknowledged and previously unclear experience – and to our condition, of which the most certain and will-puzzling[7] thing is our mortality.

5 *The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words*.

6 'The Ocean, the Bird and the Scholar: How the Arts Help us to Live', *The New Republic*, 19 July 2004.

7 See Shakespeare, *Hamlet* III.i.44.