

A Sermon

Preached
in the Chapel

of

ALL SOULS COLLEGE

by

Sir Jeremy Lever, KCMG, QC

on

Sunday, 4 November 2012

This is in the nature of my final progress report to my dear colleagues here at All Souls after 55 years in Fellowship. Part of what I want to say is embedded in St Paul's conclusion that charity is more important than faith; part in the statement in the *Jubilate Deo* that it is our creator who made us and not we ourselves; and part in the sanctity of knowledge which the wise preacher seeks to disseminate.

It is not surprising that, like St Paul, I rate charity before faith: it is perhaps surprising that St Paul did so, having given up everything for his faith. Unlike St Paul, I lack faith. If faith were a perception like the ability to differentiate colours, then I am like the colour blind man, who lacks the ability. And I do not totally dismiss the idea that faith is akin to such an ability: a good friend – who is a most distinguished Judge – once told me that he had experienced finding himself in the presence of God and that that experience had profoundly influenced him in his life.

However, faith differs from the ability to differentiate colours in crucial respects. We can be reasonably sure that people who are not colour blind experience the same sensation when they say that they are seeing the colour blue or red or yellow. But people who experience faith may experience very different mental states – states that are so inimical to the mental states of others that they have been willing to clamour for the crucifixion of one whose faith differed from theirs, more recently to burn such others alive or to strangle them and then burn their body, as was done, despite Thomas Cromwell's commendable efforts, to that wonderful scholar, Tyndale, and nowadays to murder entirely innocent people because of perceived affronts to their faith by unrelated people thousands of miles away.

So, the possession of faith is a mixed blessing.

I appreciated some 67 years ago that, although not then entirely without faith, I lacked the faith of those around me. Along with our Chaplain, I was educated at an Anglican boarding school. We attended Chapel every morning on weekdays, and morning and evening on Sundays. I saw that I could not keep stopping and restarting throughout the service so I resolved to make my position clear – to all concerned, including the Almighty – by not saying the Creed, and not turning to the East and bowing my head when it was said. And for a Jew who grew up under the shadow of the Holocaust, apostasy, in the absence of a Pauline conversion such as I never experienced, was unthinkable.

Despite my lack of faith, I believe that the Universe is a creation of a superior intelligence to whom I shall refer as God. I am so doing for convenience since I do not attribute gender or number to the Creator. My basis for belief in God used to be the fact of free will in humans – that there is something more than the movement of atoms determined in a wholly materialist way – and that our free will made us part of a cosmic non-material force that we could think of as God. I still find that persuasive; but it has been the discovery, which has hugely accelerated during my lifetime, of the sophistication and complexity of 'natural' laws and processes that has added to my belief that the Universe is the result of an act of intelligent creation.

The laws and processes which, starting from nothing – though there probably is no such state as really nothing – or starting with something that I cannot comprehend, the so-called naked singularity, produce some thirteen billion years later our amazing Universe are, to my mind, miraculous – miraculous, in the sense of God-given miracles. At even the trivial level, it turns out that the number of petals and the arrangement of seeds of at least some flowers conform to a structure based on so-called Fibonacci numbers – a numerical series first uncovered by Leonardo Fibonacci, an Italian mathematician, in the thirteenth century. I find it extraordinary and rather sad that some religionists treat as antithetical intelligent design, on the one hand, and evolution and natural selection, on the other hand. To my mind the inclusion of evolution and natural selection in natural laws and processes shows infinitely greater intelligence than does seeing the Creator as a kind of artificer who has fashioned us and the creatures around us rather as the craftsman who made the College's Warden's Salt fashioned the little creatures that stand at the

feet of the giant. Moreover, the Old Testament contains many passages that praise knowledge and the getting of knowledge – the price of wisdom is above rubies – and we belittle the marvel of the creation of the Universe if we deny the value of the gaining of knowledge – that is gaining knowledge of what was not known before.

So, we now have a much better understanding of the creation and development of the Universe and of the natural laws and processes that have produced and sustain life. Are we simply to shrug our shoulders and say that that is just the way that it is and that there is nothing more to be said about it? A more sophisticated version of that answer is to say that if things were not as they are, we would not be here so that the natural laws and processes are merely a corollary of our presence. I think that answer is really a version of the statement that an infinite number of monkeys typing on an infinite number of word- processors for an infinite length of time would result in one of the monkeys typing the full works of Shakespeare in chronological order. But it begs the question of who would have set the monkeys to work in the first place.

When I was an undergraduate, Bertrand Russell delivered a talk to the Plotinus Society. When it came to questions, one went as follows: ‘Lord Russell, what will you say on the Last Day of Judgement when asked to justify your atheism?’ Bertrand Russell replied: ‘I shall say “God, you’re a very shabby fellow God, you didn’t give us enough evidence”.’ By contrast, I think that God has given us enough evidence.

However, and this is very important and discomfoting, I think that the creator is a non-interventionist God. Of course, if capable of creation, God must also be capable of intervention. But I think that divine intervention is not in the general scheme of things, though both Judaism and Christianity have their bedrock in intervention by God – in the case of Judaism, the giving of the Ten Commandments to Moses (a very extraordinary event if the account given in the Book of Exodus is to be believed) and in the case of Christianity in the coming to our planet of the Son of God who shared the substance of God with God the Father. If you have faith, you will believe in those interventions. But a number of the other interventions attributed by the Bible to God must be more problematic even for those with faith. Jehovah’s intervention in Joshua’s military campaign to seize the Land of Canaan would be characterised by the International Criminal Court as complicity in war crimes; and the owner of the Gadarene swine and his neighbours were evidently upset with good reason at the destruction of his innocent pigs.

However, if God is not interventionist, in what sense is he a moral force and what is the point of prayer?

Jehovah differed from the pagan gods of Greece and Rome in that he was not a being with human features – and foibles – though at times the jealousy attributed to him may seem a little less than divine. However, it is most important that he was just and not capricious. I would find it difficult to live with a belief in an unjust and capricious God. But, if he is non-interventionist, does it make sense to attribute to him positive moral characteristics? The best answer that I can give is that, as objects of his creation, he has imbued us with a sense of right and wrong and free will to decide between them.

But what about prayer? Someone remarked that it was foolish to pray to God, to restore to one one’s lost cat since to do so presupposed that He must have been asleep during the Holocaust. Prayer, therefore, must I think be viewed as communing with God and its relevance is what it does to the person who prays and perhaps to observers of the person who prays. Moreover, non-intervention does not exclude divine observation and surveillance: our former Chaplain, Jack McManners, once remarked to me that modern theologians believed that the life everlasting to which the Apostles’ Creed refers may be living on in the memory banks of God. That implies that the Creator observes everything in the Universe, which would not be surprising since the design leaves wide scope for evolution and development and the Creator might be expected to have an interest in how things are working out. If indeed God observes everything in

the Universe, it would perhaps provide an answer to the puzzling phenomenon of Schrodinger's cat whose animate or inanimate state is indeterminate in the absence of its observation: the cat is hypothetically placed in a sealed box along with a sealed phial of poison; release of the poison depends upon the state of certain subatomic particles and their state is indeterminate until they are observed and measured. In the meanwhile the cat is both alive and dead. Physicists may find a convincing answer to this paradox but until they do so we must hope that determinacy is restored by eternal observation by a Creator.

It may be thought that this does not leave much room for religion. And this is where, perhaps surprisingly, I come back to St Paul. Judge religions by the charity that they engender rather than by the faith that they require. Interestingly, a recent survey suggests that that is effectively how many followers of religions in today's largely rationalist Britain do judge their and others' religion.

Do we then derive help from the Creator in the living of our lives? I have to come back to the fact that, the Universe having been designed as it has been, we have evolved as moral creatures who can recognise the difference between right and wrong. At the end of it all, we have to get on with living our lives as best we can until we depart this earth. Perhaps one can do worse than heed the words of the Preacher, to use the subsidiary title of the Book of Ecclesiastes, without worrying too much about faith, and heed the conscience with which we have been endowed: 'Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man'.