

Today we commemorate All Saints and All Souls. When we pray in a few minutes time for the repose of the souls of our relatives and friends who have died, I wonder if we are entirely convinced about what we're actually doing? For some perhaps it's just a nice thing to do, to remember by name those whom we love but see no longer? Is it just sentimental? I know we say *I believe in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come* but do we really believe it? It does seem a tall story. The old word for *resurrection* is ἀναστασις – standing up again after you're dead. It's a good trick if you can do it. But what is the truth?

*O dark, dark, dark. They all go into the dark,
The vacant interstellar spaces, the vacant into the vacant,
The captains, merchant bankers, eminent men of letters,
The generous patrons of art, the statesmen and the rulers,
Distinguished civil servants, chairmen of many committees,
Industrial lords and petty contractors, all go into the dark,
And dark the sun and moon, and the Alamanch de Gotha
And the Stock Exchange Gazette, the Directory of Directors
And cold the sense and lost the motive of action.*

There is a powerful and fashionable materialist movement going on at the moment. Dawkins, Matthew Parris, Philip Pullman, Polly Toynbee. Every newspaper seems to employ its resident atheist to pour vigorous scorn on the church and the hope of eternal life. It is about time we turned the argument back on these people. For apart from this noisy atheist-materialist lobby, there are very few philosophers these days – even secular philosophers – who believe in materialism. It seemed natural to be a materialist when people thought that matter was composed of hard little lumps called atoms, but modern physics – modern? – but I'm talking about the physics which has been orthodoxy for as long as a hundred years tells a different story.

If you consider an actual atom you soon understand that it is not a solid little ball of stuff at all. The facts are stunning. Imagine a single atom blown up to be the size of the interior of St Paul's cathedral. The nucleus of that atom would be only a speck of dust at the centre of that great space and the electrons surrounding it microscopic. Most of the interior of the atom is in fact empty space. Matter in the new physics looks very immaterial.

Or consider the counter-intuitive discoveries of quantum mechanics. For instance, that a sub-atomic particle can be in two places at once, or that it radically changes its character if you look at it. Even that there are particles which have no mass. It makes you want to ask, *When is a particle not a particle?* And to go on to ask just how much modern physicists truly understand about the nature of the universe. For they tell us that their calculations are accurate and their equations are true representations of what we glibly call *reality*. But they go on to say that, for these equations to be the true picture, they need to postulate something unobservable called *dark matter* – which means that 90% of the stuff of the

universe doesn't seem to be there at all. The universe seems more and more as if it's made up not of material stuff but of mind stuff.

So what is this thing which we call our *mind* or our *soul*? First of all, we must understand that the mind or soul is not something *inside* the body. For the body is matter. And, as Collingwood said, *Nothing can inhabit a house made of matter except something else made of matter. Man's body and man's mind are not two different things. They are one and the same thing – man himself – as known in two different ways.* And those biologists who think that the mind is a vague and tenuous something produced by the brain are committing a logical fallacy. For, as St Augustine pointed out 1600 years ago, *If the mind were really the brain, then for the mind to think of itself, it would have to think of the brain. But actually, the mind is present to itself immediately and does not need to represent itself as the brain.* It is not the case that the brain is the hardware and the mind epiphenomenal software. Rather the mind uses the brain as it uses other parts of the body – such as the leg.

When we think of our mind, we don't think first of the brain, a piece of meat inside our head. We have self-consciousness. We are immediately aware of ourselves as mental or spiritual creatures. St Augustine follows this up with something highly revealing and very beautiful. He says, *I am aware of myself. The part of me that is aware IS myself. And what I am aware of IS myself. Moreover, the awareness also IS myself. Thus every individual is a little model of the Blessed Trinity.* This is the full and glorious extent of the truth that man is made in the image of God: yes, and it is the Trinitarian God.

But here's something else. Our modern atheists seem to imagine that disbelieving the resurrection is something new - as if those primitive people in the Bible could believe it because they *were* primitive, but enlightened modern atheists actually know the truth: that Christianity is, as Larkin said, *only a vast moth-eaten musical brocade created to pretend we never die.* But the modern atheists are wrong when they think that their scepticism about the resurrection is their own novelty. I've got news for them: the people in the Bible didn't believe in the resurrection either.

Those Bible people were not primitive and soft in the head. They were just as sceptical as Mr Parris and Ms Toynbee. Remember when Jesus walked to Emmaus with some of his disciples on the first Easter Day. Did they, like so many airheads from Holy Trinity Brompton say, *Oh Jesus, it's great to have you back from the dead!* Far from it. They said, *Women made us astonished...saying he was alive.* And St Paul knew plenty of sceptical people: *Some man will say, How are the dead raised up and with what body do they come?* Even the apostle St Thomas didn't believe Jesus had returned from the dead. When Mary Magdalene and the other women told the disciples that Jesus was risen, *Their words seemed to them as idle tales, and they believed them not.* On his missionary journeys, St Paul met lots of sophisticates, *Guardian*-reading Athenians, who laughed at his preaching the resurrection to eternal life. Scepticism then is nothing new.

I've been banging on about physics and philosophy. But there is a correction to be made, a false perception which needs to be removed. It is true that we are spiritual beings, but we do not inherit eternal life *because* our nature is spiritual. Our resurrection to eternal life is the gift and promise of God. We shall live with him because that is what he wills and intends for us. And this eternal life with God

does not begin with our death. It begins the moment we turn to him in faith – now – do it now - and continues when we depart this world, as our brothers and sisters have done who have gone before.

In God there is no here and a hereafter. There is simply eternal life in God. This is the communion of saints. We are at one with those who have gone before. And this oneness, this communion, is expressed in and by love. We pray for them today because we love them. Not because we *used to love them* and it's nice to recall the fact sentimentally. But because we *love* them – present tense. Our Requiem prayers today are a living, continuous solidarity with those we love. And in praying for them we are affirming our belief in the resurrection to eternal life.

And in the communion of saints there is reciprocity. We pray for those who have gone before and, in God, we and they are part of the same prayer: for prayer is the language of God:

*You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
Or carry report. You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid. And prayer is more
Than an order of words, the conscious occupation
Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying.
And what the dead had no speech for when living,
They can tell you, being dead: the communication
Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living*