

Sermon: Epiphany II

All things were made by him and without him was not anything made that was made. I want us to examine the consequences of this tremendous opening statement in St John's Gospel. There is an argument in philosophy which has been going on for more than 2500 years: this is about the relationship between *appearance* and *reality*. And of course there is a religious dimension to this dispute. There has always been a sort of religious enthusiast who claims that spiritual reality has nothing to do with appearances. This sort says that spiritual reality is far above and beyond the mere world of appearances.

They insist that the world around us which we can touch and see is less worthy than the sublime spiritual reality which lies beyond. Some of these have even gone so far as to say that the world around us is evil or a sham, the creation of a lesser god called the Demiurge. These spiritual enthusiasts have gone under many names: Gnostics, Albigensians, Cathars and in our own time Theosophists, Hampstead Buddhists and devotees of Madame Blavatsky. It has been said of them that they are so heavenly minded as to be of no earthly use.

Then there is the opposite sect: those who claim that appearances are the only reality. They insist there is nothing beyond material phenomena. Not only is what you see what you get: what you see is what there is. And there is nothing else. These people have gone under certain names too: materialists, phenomenologists, devotees of the scientific method.

The problem with the very spiritually-minded is that they drive a wedge between the spiritual realm and the world of everyday experience. This has led many of them to conclude that what you do in this world is of little importance – so they have said you can do as you like. You can see the consequences this would have for public morality. The materialists make a mistake which has different but equally destructive consequences. By claiming there is nothing beyond the physical world, they rule out all those non-physical aspects of life without which life is not worth living: beauty, devotion, affection, loyalty, love – or else they say all these things are mere by-products – their favourite word is *epiphenomena* – of the physical world. So, they say, the mind is only the brain, and love is only a chemical response; the devotion to truth is only personal opinion.

The teaching of the Bible consistently steers a middle course between these two opposed points of view. *All things were made by him and without him was not anything made that was made.* In other words, the material and the spiritual are bound up together. This is the meaning of the doctrine that God created the world. And this teaching is emphasised and confirmed in the Incarnation: Jesus Christ is God and man, the material and the spiritual in one being.

When God made the world, he left his imprint in it. This means that even when we look at what superficially might be regarded as the merely material world, we see that it is haunted and possessed by spiritual meaning and presence. We recognise this quality of character, of inner meaning, especially and perhaps surprisingly chiefly in the world of fiction. Thus the Dickensian world of City financiers, lawyers, bigwigs and low life, all inhabiting a foggy *London peculiar* is very different from the ravaged Romantic moorland world of Emily and Charlotte Bronte. And that Heathcliff-Rochester world is as different again

from the fastidious social comedies of Jane Austen which, we might say, are acted out in the world of polite society: where the teaspoons wouldn't dare to tinkle without asking Mrs Bennet's permission.

Since the creation and the Incarnation, all spiritual truth is located in a landscape. So Jacob in the desert wrestling all night under the stars is wrestling with God. And the physical wrestling match is inseparable from the sense of spiritual awe and terror. No wonder Jacob says when he wakes up: *How dreadful is this place!* Again think of Moses at the burning bush and how there is not just the physical bush but the spiritual presence haunting both him and the bush: the presence which says: *Take off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the ground whereon thou standest is holy ground.*

Or Isaiah's vision: *In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord high and lifted up and his train filled the temple...Then said I, Woe is me! For I am undone: because I am a man of unclean lips...for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts.* Again, and as ever, the physical scene is inseparable from the spiritual and moral sense. We know this and it is why we find places and landscapes so intensely appealing. We don't go to Vienna just to look at the fine buildings. As we walk about the place, we feel for a surety that it is haunted by the spirits of Mozart and Haydn, Schubert and Mahler, Strauss, Schoenberg, Berg and Webern.

God expresses himself through *places*. But there's something else: God also expresses himself through *time*. Just as different landscapes evoke varied aspects of what is spiritual, so different times and seasons have their own spiritual character. Spring and Autumn, Winter and Summer. Day and night. But even the days of the week seem to have their individual characters, and this is why pagan societies named each day after its particular god. Even the hours of the day possess different qualities and to a sensitive and attuned person there is the world of difference between eleven o'clock in the morning and three o'clock in the afternoon. This sense Eliot brings out wonderfully when he says:

Come in under the shadow of this red rock, and I will show you something different from either your shadow at morning striding behind you or your shadow at evening rising to meet you. I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

Because even the lowly dust when stirred by the spirit of God is a fearful thing. When God entered time and space, first at the creation and then at the Incarnation, he thereby set up the perpetual unity of the material with the spiritual. God's presence haunts and possesses the landscape and the timescape. There is a sublime and yet practical way you can make use of this truth in your prayers. It is called the Christian Year and it has the power to change your life.

How rich, deep, and shining in the dead of winter is Christmas. And yet a few days later, Epiphany has an altogether different atmosphere. The sense of stillness – *How still we see thee lie* – is replaced by a vivid sense of movement and progression. We are emerging rapidly from the dead of winter, the divine stillness of the very moment of Incarnation: and now the boy Jesus *increases in wisdom and in stature*. The light changes and the pace quickens. And on time's horizon we begin to feel the approaching Lent: another tone, a different rhythm, the landscape of trial and testing. A rocky, barren landscape: *Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil*. You feel it all in the hymn: *Forty days and forty nights, thou wast fasting in the wild...*

The Christian Year is here and in England, and here our daffodils are out as Christ comes to Gethsemane. In the often cruel April, in the burgeoning English springtime. We sing *There is a green hill*. Then within those mere three days we are in the dazzling Easter dawn, *Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more*. And a few hours later, another change in the light and we are *All in the April evening*, the walk to Emmaus, English new lambs and we think on the Lamb of God.

This is how to pray. This will intensify your prayers and bring you closer to God. Sit quietly for ten minutes and enter the landscape and the timescape of the Christian Year. *Taking any route, starting from anywhere, at any time or season*. The imagined scene will deepen your sense of God's presence. And God's presence will haunt and possess the scene you imaginatively inhabit. And you will find yourself in that landscape with God as your companion, lover and friend. For *all things were made by him and without him was not anything made that was made*.