

Sermon, Trinity III On the Soul

I was six when my great grandmother died and I can remember asking my mother what happens when you die. This was in the days before our present squeamishness when children were taken to burials. I stood there in the rain in Armley cemetery in Leeds and watched as Dickinson's Undertakers lowered great grandma's coffin into the earth. I wanted to know if that was all there was to it: you die and you go into the ground. My mother said, *Your body goes into the ground but your soul goes to be with God in heaven.*

This seemed reasonable enough and I didn't doubt it. I suppose, whether they believe it or not, this is most people's idea of Christian teaching about the nature of human beings – that we are made up of a perishable body and an immortal soul. But this is not what the Christian faith teaches. Our faith is partly derived from the Old Testament which speaks of God's creation of Adam as *a living soul*. But the Hebrew word for soul *nephesh* refers to the whole person, and so rather than soul it is better to say *a living being*.

As you would expect, it's not quite as simple as that. Christian theology was also powerfully influenced by Greek philosophy and particularly the ideas of Plato. And Plato most certainly did believe in the immortal soul. He taught that at birth the beautiful immortal soul becomes imprisoned in the body – like a bird in a cage – and only finds its proper home again when the body dies.

So for 2000 years Christian theologians and many European philosophers have tried to say what is meant by *the soul* and if it exists where it might be located. Many, including Descartes, believed that the soul resides in the pineal gland near the centre of the brain. But this is a conceptual confusion, actually what is called a category mistake – like saying, *She arrived in a bath chair and a flood of tears...* conjuring the picture of an old lady being borne along by a torrent of water.

The soul, if it is a spiritual thing, *cannot* be inside the body. For the very good reason that the only thing which can be *inside* a physical thing is another physical thing. So where do we go from here? What is my soul, this thing which I call *myself*? It was there when I went to sleep last night, and behold it was there again when I woke up this morning. It seems to persist consistently. I am recognisably my inward self. If *soul* is a confusing word, then how about *mind* or *self-consciousness*? Artur Schopenhauer used to call it *the thematic unity of apperception* – but then the German language should not be used for talking about philosophy. Like taking a sledgehammer to mend a crystal set.

I want us to explore this further, for our soul, mind, self-consciousness, self-awareness – call it what you like – is crucial for how we understand ourselves psychologically and spiritually.

We live in a materialistic age where the fashion is for reducing what we find we can't understand to something which we think we can understand. So many of today's people say that the mind is the brain. These thinkers belong to the factory called the *Nothing Buttery* and they say that the mind is *nothing but* the brain. But this can't be true. You can cut my head open and examine my brain. It's just lobes of grey matter.

But you can't cut my head open and examine the cricket match, the day out at Lord's, the ice cream and the beer which is what I'm thinking about.

As Alice through the looking glass said, this is all getting mysteriuser and mysteriuser. For along with the false idea that the mind is the brain, or that the mind is *in* the brain, we have this other sweet delusion that there is such a thing as my permanent self – a sort of privileged inwardness which persists throughout my lifetime: me. It's the same with you.

But, shocking as this might sound, there is no permanent self, no persisting, privileged inwardness. There is a saying about the physical world, *You are what you eat*. We know that this is true in the sense that the body is made out of what it consumes and what it makes out of what it consumes. This is true also for the mind, consciousness, soul, call it what you like.

There is no persistent privileged me *in here*, like a ghost in a machine. There are fleeting, ever-changing, ideas and perceptions. What is going on *in here* now while I am preaching this sermon is a completely different set of ideas and perceptions from what is *in here* when I'm at the Test Match or from thirty years ago when I was bathing the kids. The notion of the permanent unchanging self is a false notion, a convenient fiction. It is vanity. Narcissism. There are simply these alterations in ideas and perceptions. This gels profoundly with Christian teaching, with what Our Lord said about how we should be.

Let me give an example by introducing another person. Suppose you ask me, *Do you like Beethoven?* And suppose I reply, *I don't know – I've never met him!* You'd say, *Ha! Ha! Not very funny.* But suppose you were a very patient sort of person – which I know you are – and you corrected me only very gently and said: *No, I mean do you like the Third Symphony, the String Quartets, Fidelio? Those things are Beethoven.* Beethoven is what Beethoven does.

This is very revealing about the Christian doctrine of the person. If we might stretch our language far enough to claim we have souls, then our souls are of our own making. You become what you do – exactly that thing and not another thing. This rather frightening consequence brings home to us the religious truth that *what we do* is of the utmost importance. To take a non-Christian but powerful example, remember *The Picture of Dorian Grey*. It is as if that picture in the attic is your soul. What you do with your life is the only determinant of the sort of soul you are making. Like this in Sisson's poem:

*My errors have been written in my senses; The body is a record of the mind;
My touch is crusted with my past defences; Because my wit was dull, my eye grows
blind.*

*There is no credit in a long defection; and defect and defection are the same;
I have no person fit for resurrection; Destroy then rather my half-eaten frame.
But that you will not do for that were pardon; The bodies that you pardon, you
replace;*

*And that you keep for those whom you will harden to suffer in the hard rule of your
Grace*

So this ever-shifting, bewildering sequence of perceptions and ideas which you sort of call *yourself* has to have some place which is fixed. This is what is meant by *Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart with all thy soul with all thy mind and with all thy strength*. That's why God commanded it. For your benefit, so you can have Him as your fixed place to be. It's easy. Say The Lord's Prayer every night and every morning. Self-consciousness is a fleeting illusion. Develop God-consciousness which is the unchanging reality.

This is followed by something else, something so wonderful, so miraculous, so tender and yet so terrifying: *Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself*. God has given us a beautiful and terrible task. We are not only responsible for our own soul-making; we are to help our neighbour make his soul too. And we do it. There is no escape, for good or for bad, we do make our neighbour's soul, by virtue or default. Because how we deal with him shapes what he will become.

The best example of this – though there are many sorts of friendships - best because it is a Sacramental example – is marriage. *The two shall become one flesh*. It doesn't mean *this* flesh and blood. How could it? It means that the two shall share one purpose, one ambition, one life together: a reflection of the life of the Blessed and Glorious Trinity.

And so let me return to when I was six and by my great grandmother's graveside. What happens to us when we die? Here is the Christian faith's answer : not the immortality of the soul, but the resurrection of the body. Not *this* body, but the body of goodness and love – or, dreadfully, of wickedness and indifference – which we have created by how we have lived. This is the body which will stand before the judgement: *And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal*

The everlasting punishment is simply the empty narcissism which is all that is left to you when you have preferred illusory self-consciousness before God-consciousness, and when you have not followed his commandment to help make your neighbour's soul. This is to say that your soul, your consciousness, your whole life at the last will only mean anything at all insofar as it connects in love to God and your neighbour.