

Today is the first Sunday in Advent, the beginning of the church's year. It is usual for Advent sermons to discuss The Four Last Things: Death, Judgement, Hell and Heaven. This morning we start with Death and I want to approach it, so to speak, from a slightly different perspective. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is the greatest play in the English language and its leading character is the representative embodiment of the intellectual, moral and spiritual life of an age in crisis. The strange thing about the character of Hamlet is that he spends half his time talking to himself. So let us look at some of the things he says:

*To be, or not **to be**, that is the **question**:  
Whether 'tis nobler **in the mind** to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
And by opposing end them. To die, to sleep—  
No more—and by a sleep to say we end  
The heartache, and the thousand natural shocks  
That flesh is heir to. 'tis a consummation  
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep—  
To sleep—perchance to dream. Ay, **there's** the rub!  
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,  
When we have shuffled **off** this mortal coil,  
Must give us pause—there's the respect  
That makes calamity of so long life.  
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,  
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,  
The pangs of disprized love, the law's delay,  
The insolence of office, and the spurns  
That patient merit of the unworthy takes,  
When he himself might his quietus make  
With a **bare** bodkin? Who would fardels bear,  
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,  
But that the dread of something after death  
The **undiscover'd** country, from whose bourn  
No traveller returns, puzzles the will,  
And makes us rather bear those ills we have  
Than fly to others that we know not of?  
Thus conscience does make **cowards** of us all,*

*And thus the native hue of resolution  
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of **thought**.*

Oh for God's sake, what's up with the man? After all he has a mission in life – to avenge the death of his father. And the fair Ophelia loves him. He has friends. He is a prince and all that goes with it. Precisely what's up with him soon becomes clear: he makes his own consciousness the centre of the universe. He takes on a responsibility which is beyond him – and that is to settle the question of being. *To be or not to be...* This is new. Hamlet is the man of the Renaissance who puts himself at the centre, the measure of all things – even being. For the Middle Ages, being wasn't a question: it was the answer, because being originated in God.

In Hamlet being is replaced by thought. He admits it:

*And thus the native hue of resolution  
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of **thought**.*

Hamlet cannot even discuss what is noble but only *whether it is nobler **in the mind***

Why does this matter? It's only philosophy, isn't it? It matters because when you replace the centrality of God with the thoughts of man, the wheels fall off. Everything falls apart. Don't take my word for it: let Hamlet tell you. The first thing to go is morality, the necessity of distinguishing between good and evil. Hamlet spells this out:

*There's nothing either good or bad but **thinking** makes it so.*

And after you've lost your morality, and the real difference between good and bad, what's next? Next you lose all sense of beauty and the conviction that the world is worthwhile. Here again, let Hamlet do the talking:

*How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable  
Seem to me all the uses of this world.*

*I have of late - but wherefore I know not - lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame the earth seems to me a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy, the air, look you; this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why it appears no other thing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours.*

First he loses his morality, then he loses his aesthetics. Can things get any worse? Oh yes, a lot worse! The next thing to go is his personal relationships. He says:

*Man delights not me; no, nor woman neither.*

No wonder his girlfriend Ophelia kills herself! Sweets to the sweet. Poor Ophelia – her name comes from the Greek for *help*. But she can neither help herself nor help Hamlet.

Hamlet talks to himself too much. Now we should notice that talking to yourself too much is not a *sign* of madness: talking to *yourself* too much is what *causes* you to go mad. And so Hamlet, having lost God, then his morality, then his sense of beauty and all that is worthwhile, then his personal relationships – finally loses himself and goes mad.

Everything falls apart and the play ends: *The rest is silence*

Hamlet's tragedy is the tragedy of western civilisation, of which Hamlet is the archetype. And over time this tragedy led to even worse things. The Middle Ages said that we need God, the church, the priesthood and the Sacraments. The Renaissance said none of these things is required. All that is needed is reason, the mind, thinking. But unfortunately, thinking has to be based on something. You can't just start thinking out of thin air and expect to discover reality in your thoughts. That is what the other Renaissance man, Descartes did: *I think, therefore I am*. It is a tautology. It is vacuous. A dead end.

It gets worse than that. Modernity for us, following Hamlet and Descartes, has degenerated into a form of extreme relativism. Everyone has a right to his own thoughts, his own opinion – you hear it said every day – and everyone's thoughts and opinions are deemed to be as valid as everyone else's. The most recent scholars of language and literary critics, such as Jacques Derrida, have even said *Texts do not have meanings*. This is the final nothingness and insanity. For of course, when Derrida said, *Texts do not have meanings*, he said it in a text. Thus shooting himself in the foot. An intellectual suicide – recalling that of Ophelia.

What's all this got to do with death? Well, as we have seen, the rejection of God leads to the death of thought, feeling and morality. It leads to the death of all meaning and all hope. It leads to Samuel Beckett and his obsession with death and his portrait of life as evil. It leads to the climax of Jean Paul Sartre's trilogy *The Roads to Freedom* in which freedom consists of nothing except shooting people at random, just for the sake of it.

And the loss of God, of morality, of the sense of the beauty and goodness of creation, of the meaning of love and friendship – all of which are lost in Hamlet – leads inevitably to the fear of death, to anxiety, depression, neurosis, meaninglessness. There is an antidote to this misery and it is ready to hand:

*Why art thou so full of heaviness, O my soul: and why art thou so disquieted within me? O put thy trust in God: for I will yet thank him, which is the help of my countenance and my God.*

