

Sermon Easter Day 2004... If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead...

Rejoice! The Lord has risen from the tomb to bring you forgiveness of all your sins, reconciliation with God and everlasting life with him in heaven. This is the gospel of Christ. This is the proclamation of the church. It is why we are here this morning. Dammit, it is why we are here at all. If we were not every minute sustained by God, we would have no more life expectancy than a snowflake in a fiery furnace. But millions reject this truth and so fulfil the prophecy made by Our Lord: ... *If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead...*

There is a widespread rejection of God – not worldwide, but certainly in northern Europe. I say *rejection* and not *disbelief* – because belief or unbelief suggests that arguments have been considered, that the issue has been thought about seriously. The truth is that in a so called civilisation which produces *Footballers' Wives* and *Sex in the City* – a society which derives its philosophy from the Sunday supplements – obsessed with lifestyle and image, the body beautiful and psychological well-being – the supposition that there could be such things as thoughts is ridiculous. Psychological well-being? Mental health? Well, in order to have mental health there has actually to be some mind there in the first place. But where does mind go in the face of the mob? And, as Chesterton said, *Even a well-dressed, well-fed and well-housed mob is still a mob*

So all around us there is this unconsidered unbelief among people who think they have outgrown God. But atheism is not what it was. Back in the days of the likeable Scottish philosopher David Hume, atheism could at least fight its corner. He was a lovely man Hume – and courageous. When he was asked on his deathbed to turn to God and renounce the devil, he replied cheerfully: *Renounce the devil? This is no time to be making enemies*. Hume's atheism was thoroughly repudiated by Immanuel Kant, in any case. Bertrand Russell had the honesty to say, *I believe that when I die I shall rot*. There are those who would say that with him the rot set in a long time before that.

All Christians – you and I – have a commandment in the last words of Our Lord according to St Matthew: *Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost*. Now teaching, if it means anything, is teaching of the truth. And teaching the truth involves repudiating and refuting error. It means taking on the unbelievers and slaughtering them – not after the manner of Osama bin Laden but slaughtering them intellectually; winning the argument. The traditional church had a good record in this. Take St Thomas Aquinas, for example. He liked to dine in monasteries as he roamed around Europe refuting the heretics. There is a story of him at the table. He went into silent thought for about twenty minutes, then lifted his beer mug, banged it down on the table and shouted, *That should settle the Manichaeans!*

When it comes to putting down heretics, the modern church doesn't know where to start; and not least because our leaders who ought to know better have swallowed the claptrap which accepts the truth of the slogan *Everyone has a right to his own opinion* and then foolishly takes this to mean *Every opinion is equally true* – which is nonsense on stilts.

Let us then try to follow Our Lord's command and do a bit of teaching. Let us copy St Thomas Aquinas and settle some opponents of the faith. Who are our opponents? Let us start – you might say at the very bottom of the garden path – with the militant atheist Richard Dawkins. Dawkins believes that reality is composed out of material things. This means not only that he hasn't been listening to the philosophers, but he also hasn't been paying attention to his brother scientists doing sub-atomic physics and quantum mechanics these last hundred years who insist that matter itself does not seem very material after all.

But let that particular lacuna in Dawkins' epistemology be overlooked for the moment. Dawkins the materialist has to find some way of accounting for all those things which are definitely not material: the recollection of a musical tune; the love that a man feels for his wife; the sense of sin that anyone who calls himself a human being is bound to feel; and the sense of religious joy which a man feels when he understands that his sins are forgiven. How can a materialist account for these? Dawkins does so by saying that all these, our deepest thoughts and imaginings, all the things that mean most to us, all the things that go deepest, all the things that make us human, are merely accidental by-products of genetic configuration and evolution.

If I were back in the university philosophy department and had before me a class of first year undergraduates, I would put before them Dawkins' argument and ask them *What's wrong with that, then?* And I'd sack anyone who couldn't tell me. For this is the point: if *all* our thoughts are merely accidental by-products of matter and genetic formation and therefore of no serious consequence, then it follows undeniably that Dawkins' thoughts also are of no consequence – crucially his thought that thoughts are of no consequence. His argument – if anything so stupid and self-defeating can be called an argument – is this: *All thoughts are mere by-products and of no consequence - except this thought of mine that all thoughts are of no consequence.* The dog returns to its vomit.

But let me turn to something far more destructive than Richard Dawkins' Mad Hatter materialism. Back in the 5th century the philosopher Sidonius was court adviser to the Emperor Majorian. Majorian called him one day and said, *I shall defend Rome against the barbarians by shutting the gates.* To which Sidonius replied, *Too late, Sir, the barbarians are already inside the City.* And this is how it is with us today. Forget the empty-headed self-publicist Dawkins, the biggest enemies of Christian truth hold high positions in the Christian church. It is two whole generations of bishops and theologians who have told us that the miracles didn't happen, that the Resurrection is only a picturesque way of talking about new life, that the sacred elements in the Holy Communion are only "symbolic" – but symbolic of *what* you might ask: for the truth is that these radical bishops and theologians have already admitted to us that they don't believe in the reality behind the symbol. They operate in a twilight world where everything is merely symbolic. But in this world of smoke and mirrors where everything is only a symbol, there can be no reality and thus nothing for the symbol to symbolise.

It is time these ecclesiastical subversives were denounced in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. It is a scandal that many of those who are ordained, appointed and promoted to uphold the Christian faith are in the front rank of

those who undermine it. I could easily delay your lunch by reeling off the names of thirty or forty such culprits off the top of my head. But now the Archbishop of Canterbury – who, I stress is not an atheist but who does not always distinguish between profundity and obscurantism - writes as follows:

A number of intellectual and spiritual policies involve or at least accompany the denial of certain versions of the divine, especially the divine as an active and intelligent subject; but in each case the denial is not intelligible apart from a specific context of thought and image, representation and misrepresentation of specific religious doctrines; and the overall system of which the denial is a part is not necessarily shaped by it.

It is passages like this which make you think that the Archbishop belongs to the Stanley Unwin department of metaphysical theology. He goes on to say that Christians should be “purified by encountering the atheists’ protests and denials”. It is rather like saying we should be cleansed by plunging into the cesspit. What further creative experiences might follow from this wonderful example? We might try celebrating out teetotalism with a large tumbler of whisky or promote the virtue of virginity by visiting a brothel.

The antidote to post-modern flirtations with atheism, to the brainless self-repudiation of Richard Dawkins and the sheer faithlessness of so much contemporary theology is to return to the truth of the Easter message and take comfort from it: *For now is Christ risen and become the first fruits of them that slept: for as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. Amen*