

*Sermon Septuagesima 2004 Psalm 14, verse 1 The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God...*

At a livery reception last week, a man with a shiny face, white hair and an extravagant suit asked me about St Michael's and what we do here. I suppose I might have answered all sorts of things, but I decided to mention the most important. I said, "We say our prayers." A look of enormous sheepishness – I won't say lost sheepishness – spread across his face. He said, "Well, yes, I know. But that's just the form, isn't it? I mean you're really here to make friends among the livery, keep the roof on, keep the choir going."

I told him that we try to do all those things and a lot more besides, but the most important thing we do is to say our prayers. Over what turned out to be a long dinner, he asked me what I meant by prayer. I said, "Thinking about God. Talking to God. Listening to God."

He gave me a beneficent – I won't say patronising – smile and said, with great sympathy in his voice, "Oh come on, you don't really believe all that old gubbins."

I said, "Yes I do. And I wouldn't go to church if I didn't. If I wanted fellowship, I'd go to the pub or the club. If I wanted music, I'd go to the Albert Hall."

"Well," he said "I'm a scientist – a chemist actually – and I can see what's plain and obvious: that people believed in God in the old days only because they didn't have a proper scientific explanations for things."

It was like a red rag to a bull. I managed, I think, to preserve my manners – but it was a struggle, I can tell you, in the face of such crassness; such shallowness of mind. I sometimes think God must feel poorly when he recollects that he has given us a mind and we stubbornly refuse to use it. I left God out of the conversation for a bit. I thought the best thing to do with this scientist was to talk about science.

He explained to me, in his science by numbers – which was about as pathetic as painting by numbers – how in what he called "the real world" rational thought is governed by cause and effect. "We observe that when one thing happens another thing routinely follows." And then, like Miss Ogilvy back in my primary school, he furnished me with an example: "You drop the apple and it falls to the ground." He delivered this species of intellectual enlightenment with the most benign if superior smile.

"Yes," I said, "we think we observe causes and effects. I agree with you. And this leads me to believe that the world was caused by God."

From the look on his face, you would have thought I'd insulted his wife or, at the very least, spilt gravy down his Rupert the bear trousers. "Oh no, he said. Scientists know that the universe began with the Big Bang – and that was a cosmic accident."

Accident? So what this enlightened chemist was arguing was that the entire thread of history is sustained by cause and effect, but the whole thing began with an accident. Why believe that? Is that the sort of logic which a scientist ought to employ? There is

not a shred of reason in it and certainly no evidence for it. I repeat, why believe that – unless of course you have made up your mind to harbour such a prejudice beforehand. Besides, an accident can happen only within a system where order is the rule.

The lamb chops arrived and the conversation moved from astrophysics to genetics: from, as you might say, Hawking to Dawkins. My friendly militant atheist and master of the undistributed middle next told me that freewill is a delusion – everything we do is caused by our genes. I asked him why, then, do some people do one thing and others other things. He looked upon me with extravagant pity: “Because different people have different genes.” He didn’t actually add the word, “stupid!” – but it was there in his intonation.

This is when the conversation became truly fascinating. We talked of mice and men. My dinner companion imparted the information that, actually, men and mice shared 98% of the same genetic pattern – or, as he called it, “blueprint”, as if humankind were a set of mechanical drawings. I said, “I’m afraid this doesn’t convince me of the importance of genetic makeup. I’m quite partial to a bit of Stilton, myself. And I’m renowned for my timidity. But if I’m 98% mouse, why haven’t I got bigger ears?” In short there is so much difference between mice and men that to talk about a mere 2% difference in their genetic patterns shows not how important genetic information is, but how irrelevant it is. He started to bang on about evolution and how our physical and mental faculties developed in order to cope with the demands of our environment. It was my turn to ask a question. I asked why, if this is the case, do we have such big brains while we use only a tenth, or less, of the brain’s resources. What physical demands, according to the gospel of evolution, have produced such a complex instrument only to leave nine tenths of it idle?

There is this ridiculous and mindless notion going about to the effect that belief in God was some sort of “primitive” notion dispelled now by the godless miracle of modern science. Let’s look at this assertion rationally. Science in the modern sense has only been on the go for 400 years. Are we really to believe that this new occupation for the human mind can tell us about the origin of life, the universe and everything? I venture to ask at this point, who shows the most arrogance and prejudice then: the scientist with his theoretical prejudices or the Christian believer who, along with Shakespeare, knows that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in the scientific philosophy?

And when it comes to identifying “primitives”, was Plato primitive – Aristotle? Were the Old Testament prophets primitive? Was the Psalmist primitive when he said, “For I will consider thy heavens, even the works of thy fingers: the moon and the stars which thou hast made.” When he sang those sublime words was he only filling in the gap as it were and waiting for the Big Bang salesman to come along and tell him the universe is an accident? Augustine primitive? Aquinas and Anselm primitive? The great Immanuel Kant primitive? Kant who spoke of the certainty of the “Starry heavens above and the moral law within” – and both these things the creation of the eternal God.

Never mind the philosophers and the theologians – they’re all talk. What about the painters? You look at a Giotto and you see a picture; but what’s truly revealing about the experience is that through the picture you see the reality to which it points, and

that reality is indubitable. Was Bach in *The St Matthew Passion* primitive? When he declared that he wrote all his music “to the glory of God” are we to imagine that this greatest of all composers was merely an unbeliever using a figure of speech and that, when he wrote the C-minor last chorus to that sublime work – as the Saviour is laid in the tomb – he was looking forward to a time when some *aficionado* of the laboratory would come along with a test tube and stinks and tell him the truth?

Well, my friends, it is important that these things are said. As the devil must not be allowed all the best tunes, so the unbelievers should not be thought to possess the best reasons. When we look over the whole stretch of human thought, the greatest philosophers have been religious philosophers. But philosophy is not that important in the end. As Wittgenstein said, “Philosophy is a ladder, and when you get to the top of the ladder you can throw it away.” What is truly important, what goes deepest, is the joining of thought with our deepest feelings – the whole man incarnate, after the pattern of Christ.

Coleridge was once asked to provide evidences for the Christian religion. He refused saying, “I am weary of evidences. Only make a man *feel* the truth of his religion.” He didn’t mean feel in the modern, sentimental touchy-feely sense as if the whole world of emotion was a teddy-bear throwing Diana-fest. He meant that intimate closeness and affection for God which is true faith. Beyond all arguments for belief in God is the miraculous truth that God believes in you. Deeper than all controversy, we come back to St Augustine and his wonderful summary of what we and our lives are really *for*:

“O God, thou hast made us for thyself and our hearts are restless till they rest in thee.”