

THE GHOST IN THE MACHINE

PREACHER : The Very Revd Adrian Newman, Dean

Sunday, August 30th 2009

Trinity 12

Mark 7: 1-23, James 1: 17- end

10.30am

Rochester Cathedral

Every so often someone coins a phrase that captures the public imagination, whose original meaning is then hijacked by a hundred alternative uses. I have a particular favourite.

In 1949 the philosopher Gilbert Ryle wrote a book called "The Concept of the Mind", in which he ridiculed the 17th Century French philosopher René Descartes for proposing a dualism of mind and body without having the faintest notion of how the mind and the body interacted. He parodied Descartes' understanding of this mind/body duality by calling it **The Ghost In The Machine**.

It's a wonderful phrase, and it has gone on to spawn titles for books, songs, albums, films and a host of episodes from TV series ranging from Inspector Morse to the X-Files.

The contemporary resonance of a Ghost in the Machine is in part a reaction to the dominance of science over the past few hundred years, with its mechanistic and materialistic approach to reality. For all its undoubted and extraordinary contribution to human understanding, there is a lingering feeling that science has somehow short-changed us, that there is an ethereal but nonetheless real dimension to our existence that defies scientific observation and analysis. Call it soul, call it spirit, call it what you will, it is the ghost in the machine.

This relationship between Body and Soul has, unsurprisingly, been a hot topic for religion long before Ryle coined his phrase, or Descartes proposed his theories. Every religion since the dawn of time has been trying to make sense of the relationship between the empirical reality of our material world, and the intuitive reality of our inner world.

Most of the fault-lines that have beset Christianity down the years run along this fissure of the relationship between Body and Soul, and relate either to different understandings of this relationship or different emphases within it. The same is true, I believe, of our current difficulties in the CofE and the Anglican Communion.

It is a form of dualism that has plagued Christianity down the ages - a tendency to see Body and Spirit as separate entities, the body as essentially mortal, soiled, fallible and sin-ridden, the spirit as pure, undefiled and eternal.

Mark 7: 1-23 is an expression of this from a pre-Christian context. If the body is essentially sinful then we have to train it to resist its natural tendencies. Keep it in check. The ritual washings and purifications of the pharisees can be seen in this light. Exercise control over the dominance of the flesh in directing human behaviour. There is some value in this (Richard Foster's classic Celebration of Discipline is a case in point) but the danger is that it descends into folly, and the law becomes a prison rather than a liberation.

Jesus' denunciation of the pharisees is along these lines - in a person's obsession with rules and regulations and ritual, they can lose the plot about true religion.

If Jesus' encounter with the pharisees in Mark 7 is an example of a religious tendency to over-emphasise Body over Spirit, then the letter of James is an insight into a church with the opposite tendency.

Throughout this letter James stresses the importance of a physical expression of discipleship - be doers of the word ... pure religion is to visit orphans and widows ... love your neighbour ... faith without works is dead.

It's a letter written to a church that has become, to use a well-worn phrase, "too heavenly minded to be any earthly use". It's got the balance wrong between body and spirit.

So which is it, body or spirit? Does Christianity encourage us to concentrate on spiritual realities and sit light to our physical existence? Or is that too dangerous, if it disconnects us from our responsibility to creation and the world we live in?

The answer, obviously enough, is not either/or but both/and. The separation of body and soul is what we need to avoid, as we increasingly recognise that there is an integrity to our existence which somehow holds both of these sides of life together. This is indeed a mystery, and Gilbert Ryle may want to pillory me as he did René Descartes, but while there is life in me the ghost is not in the machine, it is somehow part of it.

Tomorrow the common lectionary celebrates St Aidan, the bishop of Lindisfarne, who was largely responsible for bringing Christianity to the North of England in the first half of the 7th century. I have been lucky enough this year to be part of a wonderful training course for senior leaders in the Church of England. We had a week in March in Canterbury, looking at the leadership of St Augustine in evangelising Southern England from 597 onwards, followed by a week in July in Durham and the Holy Island, looking at Aidan's leadership in doing the same for the North of the country a few years later.

These two remarkable men were largely responsible for establishing Christian faith in England, and all those of us in the cathedral today are part of their legacy. Augustine brought a Roman brand of Christianity, based on law, and order. Aidan was a Celt, and his tradition of the faith was more spontaneous, unpredictable and unstructured. The Romans brought organisation, the Celts brought miracles. Body and Spirit. Together they captured the minds and hearts of the English nation.

1400 years later, as we strive to live out our faith in obedience to Christ, maybe we need to find that same integration of Spirit and Body, Faith and Works, inner life and acts of service, interior renewal and external commitment to the world, which speaks to the deepest yearnings of the human heart in our generation, the Ghost and the Machine.