

SERMON ON DEMENTIA

The universe “contains, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.” So wrote Richard Dawkins. If Dawkins is right Paul's words in today's epistle, “You are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit”, are meaningless. .

Richard Dawkins is part of a movement sometimes described as Scientism, a narrowed down system of scientific thought that has led some to believe that our lives and actions are regulated by brain cells and genes, and nothing more. If you want an antidote to all this stuff then read “Are you an illusion” the latest book by a well respected philosopher, Mary Midgely. Who writes that “human behaviour can be understood only by reference to people's own thoughts, dreams, hopes, fears and other feelings.” All this the product of the mind, which she distinguishes from the purely material brain.

Mary Midgely is not a Christian, indeed, as far as I understand has no particular belief. But she is convinced that there is something deeper to our existence than the merely material.

I was interested in reading her book in pursuit of thoughts about exactly what makes us what we are – body, mind, spirit. And this in turn comes from my interest in the disease dementia, which Nigel has asked me to talk about today from a spiritual perspective. For on the surface, dementia seems to rob us of one of that trio – the mind, and might even lead some to wonder about the spirit.

Those who think we are only brain cells and genes might believe a person with dementia for all practical purposes no longer exists. “I think, therefore I am”, wrote Descartes – what when I can longer think?

However, I believe Christians can face the challenge this dreadful disease confronts us with and that faith does have something to tell us.

I will start with a story some of you have already heard (sorry about that). It comes from a book called “*Dementia Living in the Memories of God.*”

An elderly lady suffering from dementia paced the corridors of the nursing home restless – repeating over and over again just one word. The staff were disconcerted but no one seemed quite sure how to calm her and put her mind to rest. In fact they were at a loss to understand the reason for her distress. The word she repeated over and over again was “God” - and that was all she said. One day a nurse got alongside her and walked up and down the corridors until eventually in a flash of inspiration she asked the lady, “Are you afraid that you will forget God?” “Yes, Yes!” she replied emphatically.

The nurse was then able to say to her, “You know even if you should forget God, He will never forget you. He has promised you that.” For this lady who was forgetting many things, and was aware of it, that assurance was what she needed to hear. She immediately became more peaceful, and that particular behaviour ceased. She was responding positively to care which extended beyond the needs of body and mind – care of human spirit.

The book's author, John Swinton says, "I think therefore I am" is replaced with, "We are because God sustains us in God's memory. Our hope lies in the fact that we are living in the memories of God. In the book of Isaiah God says, "I will not forget you, See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands,"

On the same theme, I read recently how someone who ministered at a residential home offered a time of meditation. He began by encouraging the participants to notice each breath they took, the breathing in, and the breathing out. Then he invited them, with each breath, to breath in the presence and love of God and breath out their own concerns.

Then, he suggested to them that whenever they felt lonely or lost, simply by becoming aware of each breath they took they would always know that they were never alone and that God was with them constantly, closer than their own breathing. The time of meditation helped them to realise God was with them at a place in their hearts deeper than all loneliness, closer than all their fears of feeling of loss.

It is not only God's loving knowledge of dementia sufferers that affirms them as a person, of course. In a practical way those around them can sustain and maintain their sense of value by continuing to relate to them, to see them and be with them simply for who they are.

Well into the disease it may appear that such love and care is not appreciated by the sufferer. However, it is a fact that although a lot of the brain is affected by dementia as it

progresses, one area that seems not to be affected is the sensory section of the brain that interprets the sense of hearing, taste, smell and touch.

It is also the part that interprets facial expressions and tone of voice. To the very end, a person with dementia will be able to sense that he or she is treated with love and respect, they will be able to hear, see, taste and feel touch.

God's love, the love of family and friends, the care and compassion of folk around all go to give value to people with dementia. Terry Pratchett has become a famous dementia sufferer. During the recent dementia campaign he wrote, "Ultimately, research is the answer. While talented scientists beaver away at finding a cure, this campaign holds a mirror up to us all – forcing us to realise we can do more in our everyday lives to help."

Look past that mirror to the house of your next-door neighbour. Maybe it's an older lady albeit only in her 60s, who you haven't recently seen popping to the shops as usual. You notice that she has forgotten to collect her milk from the doorstep, and that when you stopped to chat she seemed confused and couldn't follow what you were saying. Think of how you might be able to help her – there are little things you could do to support her and let her know you are not alone. There are hundreds of thousands of us out there living with dementia who – to paraphrase the song in the advert – every now and again really could do with a little help from a friend.

And there's another thought that might be worth pondering. Says St. Paul, "If for this life only we hoped in Christ, we are of

all people to be pitied.” By hope a Christian means expectation of a good future.” I am all too aware at my age of beginning to fulfil marks of “the end of this strange eventful history” as Mr. Shakespeare put it. When there is a gradual relinquishing of my physical powers – a second childhood and mere oblivion, sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything. A good future?

But faith assures us that it is not a journey towards oblivion, Says St. Paul, “for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.” Hope encourages us to believe that this relinquishing of all things mortal is an essential journey towards unity with the divine, the love at the heart of all things.

A group of us follow the teachings of John Main and spend a half an hour a day in contemplation. A time in which we deliberately attempt to achieve that relinquishment of our bodies and our minds. We still our bodies and try to empty our minds of all thoughts and images, all distractions, concerns and busy-ness. All to achieve that awareness of the presence of the Spirit that is beyond words – a place of peace, love and joy. An experience that has been called a little death.

All the faculties we value in this life are seen as limitations to achieving that sense of unity with the love at the heart of all things. We all have a long way to go – of course we have, the journey finds fulfilment beyond this life.

John Main has written this, “The mystery surrounding Jesus was perceptible from the beginning of his life. Not until his

death and resurrection, however, could it be fully apprehended, fully known, because not until then was it complete. Our life does not come to full unity until transcends itself and all limitations by passing through death. This is why we do not fully comprehend the mystery of Christ, through which we enter the mystery of God, until our own life is complete.”

Whatever the mystery of “being made alive” in Christ means it is certainly not any less for those who have suffered the loss of their ability to think in this life. It involves for us all a journey that means a relinquishing of all our earthly faculties, the impermanence of this life, and encountering the solid reality that is God. Those with dementia may be thought to be a little ahead of us.

If I were ever to be diagnosed with dementia I hope that I would be able to hang to this thought as I descended into the mists of mindlessness and that there will be someone around to remind me that God will never forget me and that I will be for ever surrounded by his love which will be reflected in the love and care of family, friends, and those who represent Christ upon earth, the people of his Church.

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