All Saints and All Souls Islip 3 November 24

Today we call to mind those who have died – especially friends and family. And by doing so somehow make them present. We do well also to remember those who are not friends and family, particularly in these times of natural disaster, and horrorific of war.

We would want to be remembered, would we not, and hopefully with affection.

Our memorialising helps us to reflect on what they meant and mean to us; and what we learnt from them.

Many religions have this strong notion of a community of beings (and family) that spans time and links the living and the dead, not in a spooky way at all, but a wholesome, natural, and healing way. The word *heal* derives from the same root as *whole* – to make whole is to heal – and what people are striving for here is a holistic view of reality and experience. A relational, inter-connected, network of relationship both between people and matter itself. It is not weird or daft when people in Asia leave out food at night for their ancestors; it is similar to putting flowers on a grave; or a bereaved person kissing a photograph of their spouse before going to bed at night.

We live by memory, and we are made by memory. When a person loses their memory they are diminished, because their reference points are disappearing. At the other end of life, you watch a child accumulating experience, and language, and developing personality. That is all about building up the memory bank, and developing their sense of self through experience, particularly of others.

John Donne famously wrote that ‘no man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friends’ or of thine own were. Any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.’

I wonder whether the immense fascination with Halloween, which in most of our childhoods was not celebrated at all, has something to do with an instinctive search for a connectedness that transcends the limits of our mortal lives. I mean, our culture generally takes a reductionist view of life – that you live and you die and that’s that. But we still want to see ourselves in a broader context; to see ourselves in relation to the vastness of space and the enormity of time. Our lifespan, which can seem both long and short, is but an imperceptible blip of the screen of time. The rituals of Halloween are at one level absurd, but another – the ghoulish – an instinctive reaching out to the spiritual. Partly in fear, but also partly in hope.

A year ago, I gave a sermon in Wootton by Woodstock, which on re-reading was immensely demanding for the listeners. Yet it was popular and provoked a very great deal of discussion afterwards, two people actually buying an expensive book I had alluded to.

I have mentioned it here as well. Iain McGilchrist’s polymathic tome, *The Matter with Things*. McGilchrist is a psychotherapist and philosopher; he says this: ‘A long roll call of the most distinguished physicists would support the view that the originary ‘stuff’ of the universe is consciousness.’

Max Planck: ‘I regard consciousness as fundamental. I regard matter as derivative from consciousness…’

Planck suggests everyone will recognise he of all people is not a starry-eyed dreamer and says, ‘All matter arises and exists only by virtue of a force which sets the atomic particles oscillating…in that tiniest of solar systems, the atom…we must suppose, behind this force, a conscious, intelligent spirit. This spirit is the ultimate source of matter.’

Sir Roger Penrose (an Oxford Nobel Prize winner): ‘I think matter itself is now much more of a mental substance.’

Sir Julian Huxley: ‘mind or something of the nature of mind must exist throughout the universe.’

I get from this that the fundamental nature of existence is mental/consciousness. If so it adds, does it not, to the idea that conscious beings are interconnected both in life and in death. In life we don’t actually meet most of the people we are connected to. Besides, there are 8.2 billion of us. We have family and social bonds in villages, neighbourhoods, schools, workplaces, clubs etc, but, if Donne is right, and I think he is, we are connected to the people of Valencia, Ukraine, Russia, Israel, Gaza etc. We are also connected to departed parents, brothers, sisters, children. We are connected to victims of torture, those who have died in infancy, those who have taken their own lives etc.

I keep saying: God is mind – in the beginning was the word (logos)…I am that I am…in whom we live and move and have our being.

Remembering. Nov is the month of remembering. All souls, all saints, remembrance Sunday. It is a time to take a less parochial view, to try to see, at least in part, as God sees. To see big and wide and beyond.