A SERMON FOR MAUNDY THURSDAY 2020

by Fr Bernard

I remember once reading a newspaper article about a young man in a coma, whose doctors were greatly puzzled by his recovery, which seemed to be inexplicably cyclical. He would improve over several days, and then relapse, for no reason they could discern. Eventually, they discovered that his relapses always coincided with the visits of his grandmother. She was a very devout woman, and every time she came to see him, she would bring holy water from her church, which she would sprinkle on him. And this water was feeding his infection. Once they stopped her using holy water, the grandson's progress was unimpeded and gathered pace.

This article continues to challenge me. It disturbs me because it is one absolute example of how material reality is not changed by spiritual reality. Holy water is still water. Whatever water does, or doesn't do, holy water will do or will not do the same. If water infects, so will holy water, even if it is holy. The spiritual reality of a change, doesn't affect the material reality that stays the same. Of course, it also follows that holy water is still holy, just as much as it is water. The fact that the material physical reality doesn't change, doesn't mean that the spiritual reality is not itself also real. But on some level I feel, and have always felt, that the holiness of the water *ought* to count for something on this material plane, even if it doesn't. The idea that holy water, even though holy, can still be harmful in specific circumstances, troubles me.

And it troubles me for various reasons: one of them being, I think, that the material world – material realities – already seem so much more obviously real than the spiritual. More real, and thus more important. This is perhaps a funny thing for a vicar to say, or write, but it is at least a reflection of the world we live in; of my world, the one I have grown up in. There are many many millions of people who deny even the existence of a spiritual reality. The cultural assumptions of western industrialised societies do not appear to need spirituality, and generally claim to make no use of it. It becomes tempting to think that spiritual realities are not 'really' 'real', as physical material ones undeniably are.

Now, on the level of the culture, there are a number of inaccuracies in the preceding statements, as it happens. Our reality is not 'just' physical or material. The materialist culture we live in in the West, actually makes any number of what we might loosely call spiritual assumptions; the way things *are* is not at all the way they *must* inevitably *be* – our assumptions are the product of inheritance and, to a degree, personal choice. Mechanist assumptions about society and human nature, what they are like and how they work, the assumptions of consumerism and individuality, these are all at root spiritual, of a sort, or perhaps anti-spiritual, but they are not a set of inevitable 'givens' springing inexorably from the physical world. Every act of understanding is an act of interpretation, and thus in some sense a spiritual act, or an act with spiritual implications. And at this moment, perhaps, we see this more clearly than we have done for a while.

But still, even accepting the existence of spiritual reality; what is the link between the spiritual and the material, if any?

One obvious link that follows from the foregoing is through us, through people and their acts of understanding. Spiritual truths affect the things we do in the physical world: a spiritual reality makes us wash the feet of another, or do their shopping for them, or leave retirement to return to the NHS. All sorts of actions and changes in the material physical world occur for spiritual reasons.

I saw a film just before The Lockdown, called *A Hidden Life*, based on the story of a Roman Catholic Austrian farmer called Franz Jagerstatter, who decided that he could not in conscience swear an oath to Hitler or the NAZIs. In the end, that refusal cost him his life. His family suffered, and he died, entirely because of a view of spiritual realities that seemed to be held only by Franz himself. His priest, and his bishop both suggested he should simply take the oath, and no-one's life was saved by his continuing refusal to do so. He achieved nothing positive by his stand, on the material level: his family were ostracised, and he died. But he took a stand based on his own spiritual vision, and was eventually canonised – declared to be a saint – in 2007. (Yet another example of the Church coming late to the party!)

But the spiritual and physical (material) inescapably overlap through the human person: for Franz, and those few others who refused to collaborate, and also for all those who did not refuse, who took the sensible way out, and perhaps in so doing added another thin layer of tarnish to their spirits, though heaven knows I am sure I would done as they did in their place. But what we 'see' as the reality around us, is determined to a varying and often unpredictable extent by our spiritual assumptions: by what matters to us, and what we are prepared to do or forsake, for our values.

I wonder whether this human overlap is the only way spiritual and material collide: whether a part of what it is to be human is to be the bridge between physical and spiritual in our world? Perhaps this is a part of what it means for us as humans to be priests for the whole created world, to share in the One Priesthood of Christ?

In a related if oppositional kind of a way, I have personally tended always to prioritise the spiritual over the physical. This is partly because I have always been a Christian but also because I have always been a thoughtful, studious, imaginative boy, at home more in my own head than out of it; and that in turn is partly because I am clumsy, and poorly co-ordinated, and useless at sports, and thus someone who has found spirituality to be a home and a refuge, and the physical world to be a threat and a burden. While I believe, intellectually, in the resurrection of the body, I have difficulty in really appreciating or understanding this crucial tenet of our faith.

I think that more widely Christianity has tended to take a similar view, which has doubtless partly formed my own personal one: there is a strong foundational trend towards asceticism in Christianity, that rather marks her out from her Jewish parent. Judaism hasn't generally tended to produce monks and nuns, or a tradition of celibacy and austerity (though

doubtless there are exceptions). Christianity however has often regarded the world as of one kind with "the flesh and the devil" – indeed, what precisely is "the flesh" if not a material world that is, in the end, our enemy? As St Paul puts it, "For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me."[1] Our own bodies seem in rebellion against us – which means that 'we' are not our bodies, for one thing, and reinforces a material-spiritual divide from the 'other end', as it were.

Our bodies are unreliable, fragile and unruly. "Earthen vessels"[2] – and never more so than as we age, taken over by dementia or merely by weakness. But even in youth, raging hormones 'beset' us: an endless procession of theologians has written about the dangers of the passions. Which is odd, in one sense, given that The Passion is at the centre of our whole faith!

Personally, I can see the temptation of that ancient and perennially recurring Christian heresy Manichaeism, which among other things, denied that 'the flesh' – the material world – was really part of God's creation. Only the spiritual was 'proper'. But that is a heresy: we believe in the Incarnation: that the Word became flesh. God created everything and "saw that it was good"[3], He took our flesh to redeem the whole of creation (not just humanity), and we look for the resurrection of the body: for a new world, a new Kingdom, that will be physical, not just ethereal or spiritual.

Indeed, there is a case for saying that there is no spiritual without the physical. I have long struggled with the idea of the soul, a largely Greek philosophical notion. It gives us a dualist, binary notion of human selfhood that is not scriptural, and tends dangerously to reinforce that ideological separation that is already too strong, between spiritual and physical. But we are undeniably spiritual, even when (especially when) we deny that, or ignore it. What are depression and anxiety but diseases of the spirit, at least in part? Our search for meaning, for truth, for peace: these are all spiritual quests. Love is a spiritual reality.

Very few people actually seriously think that we are 'just' bodies. The reason for this is illustrated by Charles Dickens: he satirises absolute materialism in *Hard Times*, where a child is 'trained' to describe a horse as a "Quadruped. Omnivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth..."[4]. That entirely factual list of properties misses all the essence of what a horse is, as compared with the impressionistic, dashing white horse carved into the chalk downs at Uffington. This probably iron-age artwork seems to me to capture something of the essence of a horse, while not being 'accurate' in a strict sense. But it tells us far more about what a horse is, than the 'factual' definition does, because a horse has a

[1] Romans 7:18-20
[2] 2 Corinthians 4:7
[3] Chapter 1 of Genesis, of course.
[4] In chapter 2 "Murdering the Innocents", set in a schoolroom.

spiritual quality, and a spiritual definition is therefore required. In case you don't know what I'm talking about, I have copied a photograph of it below:

The same applies to defining humans. We could define ourselves in a similar manner: a human is a carbon-based, bipedal skin-bag mostly containing water, that can be broken down into a certain percentage of carbon, and of calcium and hydrogen and the rest. But that is not who we *are*: we define ourselves by our relationships – citizen of *x*, child of *y*, lover of *a* or *b*. Those are spiritual categories: that is what makes us human. And when elephants or whales grieve, we see a humanity in them: they seem to have entered into our world of meaning and of spirituality, like the Uffington horse.

Indeed, the use of language is a spiritual activity: not just in the association between language and religion and philosophy (it was the Word that became flesh, after all), but in the sense that words are a cultural artefact: a creation of human society that while insubstantial, have physical effects: they are another intersection of spiritual and material, and the way (*a* way?) in which our spiritual understanding of the physical is changed. Political oratory changes our view of the world (for good or ill): an order shouted to soldiers takes or saves life.

What then is the relationship, or what should it be, between physical and spiritual?

In part, I turn to Fairy stories for the answer, or at least to C S Lewis and J R R Tolkien (and George MacDonald). Lewis wrote a fascinating article[5] in which he argued that our tendency to 'personalise' nature by filling it with nymphs and the like, is a kind of yearning that is a glimpse of the promised future, when we will be so united with nature that we can inhabit it fully in that sense: so the gap between spiritual and material (animate and inanimate) will be abolished. In several of his books he tries to describe this state of affairs. Perhaps this, too, is what Jesus illustrates when He eats fish for breakfast and walks through walls after the Resurrection? Tolkien's vision of *Laurelindorenan* and of the high elves is something similar – a vision of perfection and beauty untarnished by death and evil.

The poet and Anglican clergyman Thomas Traherne saw that kind of promised beauty around him in this world, and believed it was a gift from God, the giver of all good things. The poet and Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins felt much the same: "The world is charged with the grandeur of God. It will flame out, like shining from shook foil"[6]. St Irenaeus said[7] that the glory of God is man fully alive: Jesus in John's Gospel says "I came that My sheep may have life, and have it abundantly"[8].

[5] The Weight of Glory
[6] God's Grandeur
[7] In his *Against Heresies*
[8] John 10:10

I have half-deliberately ignored until this point that which is perhaps for a Christian the most obvious intersection between material and spiritual, at least after Jesus: the sacraments, of which Holy water is a kind of instance.

In classical Anglican thought, the bread and wine of the altar, of communion, become the Body and Blood of Jesus while also remaining bread and wine. (Incidentally, the phrase "Body and Blood" is a metaphorical way of describing the truth that the bread and wine become one identical thing, despite the poetic doubling and their material differences; one thing which is in each case His life force and nature, with which we can commune). If one were to do a chemical analysis of the sacramental elements, they would appear to be normal bread and wine; that which was consecrated indistinguishable from that which was not. There is in that sense no discernible change: the material and the spiritual do not interact.

And thus, even Holy Communion can be a carrier of viruses. The consecrated bread and wine can still trigger allergies; the alcohol is still dangerous for alcoholics; those material realities are unchanged. And this, too, is a hard and difficult reality to face, that challenges us, or at least, that challenges me. I don't want to face the unchanged physical reality of something that has such spiritual importance for me. And I worry that too much stress on the physical, will make us forget the spiritual reality that is ultimately – I believe – more important: in the sacraments, we encounter something greater than life and death; something that transcends us and all that we know or perceive. The importance of the physical 'risk' posed by bread or wine, is surely dwarfed by the spiritual gift of communion with the Divine?

If the physical reality is unchanged, this does not mean that the spiritual reality is not real. The bread and the wine *have* changed, even while remaining the same: they have become for us the Body and Blood of the Lord, and this change, this intersection of the physical and spiritual, occurs in us: in our attitude to the elements. In what we perceive.

And also – we believe – this change occurs in what God sees. He tells us that this change has occurred, will occur: His Spirit makes this transformation: this is the promise He gave. We believe that He 'sees' a change in bread and wine, just as He sees a change when a sinner repents, or a baby is baptised, or a prayer is uttered. He sees a change that we cannot see.

Ultimately, everything hangs on God – as one would expect. Truth is 'what God sees'. The meaning we discern in our lives is the purpose God has for us, dimly discerned. Our material physical digestion of the elements of bread and wine should be – can be – accompanied by a spiritual communion with God. Our spirits are renewed, changed; which means that we are changed: "our spirit" is not 'our' spirit, an aspect of each individual human, like 'our' watch or 'our' toenail – rather, it is as much the breath we breathe that joins us all together, as though we were knit together by strings we cannot see (which of course we are, because we share in the One Spirit).

There is a glory in our bodies now, which we cannot see because we do not have the vision, the confidence, the newness. We cannot see except by faith the transformation of the

Eucharistic elements. Nor can we see, except by faith, what the Spirit is doing in us. And when we see 'in faith', we see as Jesus sees, as God sees: we share in His vision.

When Jesus washes the feet of His disciples, He sees in them – even in Judas – a beauty and a glory that is the truth, the inner reality, of what looked like the smelly, dirty, horny-calloused feet of poor Galilean Jews. Jesus looks at us and sees the glory, because He sees in love: which means also that He sees the future in each of us.

In the mediaeval poem *Pearl*, the man who fails to recognise his dead daughter when she visits him from heaven, is amazed by her regal bearing: she explains that in heaven, all are royal. The continual insistence, in mediaeval legend, on the beauty of the saints and martyrs, is partly convenient fiction, and partly painterly salesmanship. But it also points to the same truth at its heart: this is what we are *all* like, when we can see properly: all of us are filled with that radiant light and beauty that is possessed by Tolkien's elves, or visions of the Virgin Mary.

The novelist Kurt Vonnegut imagined that aliens who saw the past, present and future at the same time, would see a white cat as a kind of white carrot, changing from tiny kitten to dying cat, a temporal sequence visible all at the same moment[9]. Jesus sees the end of time in each of us, because love is the end of time: love is beyond time, love is what is left, when time and change and rot and creation have been transformed and consummated. Jesus sees a physical, material beauty that we cannot see, in ourselves or in each other. It is the same vision that sees in that most hideous and humiliating of common-place items of torture and execution the triumph of the Cross, or that sees in bread and wine the bread of angels, the manna of heaven.

And it is both utterly specific and particular, and also universal. Universal in that it is the destiny of all creation, as willed by her Creator, and a destiny in which all are united in one integrated whole, in which each is essential to the whole, and unique, but united and necessary for the fulfilment of the whole.

Particular in that it is each creature's unique identity that is what is beloved. Just as a true lover comes to love their beloved's features and characteristics, because they speak of their unique essence – that particular way he wrinkles his nose, or hums, or that odd way she always views the world – so also for God, it is precisely who we are as embodied individuals that is what is valued and precious. A parent loves a child for who they are, not what they could earn, or the trophies they might win.

(Of course, this is not always true, but it should be; if it is not true of actual human parenting, it is always true of God, and is a truth we often forget, even if we pay lip-service to it. God does not love us because we are holy or pious or good: He loves us because we are His ridiculous negligent undeserving children, sinful; and wilful and far-too-often wicked, but utterly beloved none the less).

[9] In *Slaughterhouse 5* I think.

On Maundy Thursday, those gathered in the Upper Room do not change, as far as we can see. The bread and wine that Jesus takes and over which He gives thanks, are no different thereafter, as far as anyone then knows, except Him. The disciples are not different, once their feet have been washed. All the physical and material realities remain the same. But they are not the same: their truth has changed. God sees them differently.

This world, as firm and secure as it looks and feels to us, is only contingent, though with so much that is 'real' within it like nuggets or seeds. Or yeast. And those seeds are planted tonight, watered by an intimate, personal washing of love; as Jesus' own feet were washed by Mary of Bethany, bathed in her tears and hair. Watered, by the blood that will be shed, by the sweat and anguish of Gethsemane and Golgotha.

Sacraments are a twitching back of the curtain: for a moment, we see a glimpse of what God is doing, of Who He is and what He is about. And then the curtain falls back into place, 'reality' resumes with all its substantial ordinariness. But do not be fooled. These desks and chairs and jobs and pews and bodies are only beginning to be real. They are only at the very start of a long journey towards 'true reality'. Every time they are loved, every time they are kissed or treasured or touched in self-giving love, in a communion that is a communion whether it is recognised as being such or not; every time something like that happens, it is a step into truth, into reality, into that Fairy Land that is to come, when spiritual and physical are united, and the trees will clap their hands and the mountains sing for joy.

Consummation
Is also communion
We are given
To those whom we are not
Stars open
Flowers shine
Pollen becomes manna
The heart an ocean
Glistens on holy skin.