

THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

Sermon preached at 10.00am Sung Eucharist
St. Edmundsbury Cathedral
5 November 2017

There was once a frog that had lived all his life in a well. One day he was surprised to see another frog there. "Where have you come from?" he asked. "From the sea. That's where I live," the visitor replied. "The sea," said the frog, "what's that like? Is it as big as my well?" The sea frog laughed. "There is no comparison," he said. The well frog had never heard of the sea. He had lived all his life in his well and was sceptical about this visitor. The well frog pretended to be interested in what his visitor had to say about the sea. But he thought to himself, "Of all the deluded frogs I have known in my lifetime, this one is undoubtedly the greatest."¹

It's a peculiar feature of our society that we are at best agnostic about life after death. In fact much of the prevailing narrative says "this life is it and there is nothing beyond". The scientific, materialist view that dominates our society leaves us sceptical about other dimensions of existence. We thank God for the success of science and the benefits that have transformed our lives. But those material benefits keep our attention fixed, in large part, on the physical world. Like the frog in the well, we struggle to imagine reality beyond what we can see and touch.

Truth is our society is peculiar in this way – it is the exception in the history of humanity. This is shown by a wonderful series that started this week on Radio 4 "Living with the gods". "Living with the gods" is also an exhibition at the British Museum. "Beliefs in spiritual beings and worlds beyond nature are characteristic of all human societies."² Throughout human history we have been aware of the spiritual in life and in ways wonderfully diverse, we have tried to express this awareness, in religious language, religious objects and spiritual beliefs.

The saints remind us that there is another dimension. The saints remind us there is more than this physical, material world. The saints remind us that this physical, material world is infused with the spiritual, with the divine. The saints teach us that we are spiritual beings with an eternal destiny in God's good and unshakeable kingdom.

If we find this difficult to grasp, it's worth remembering that there are dimensions around us that we hardly know are there and are beyond our senses. The hidden life of trees is one example. *The Hidden Life of Trees* is the title of a book by Peter Wohlleben. The book reveals a forest unimagined by most walkers. Underground, tree roots are connected by a network of fungi threads. In an undisturbed forest these fungal networks connect all the trees. Just a teaspoon of soil contains many miles of filaments. When a tree is cut down, neighbouring trees send sugar through their roots, through the fungi connections, to keep the stump alive.

What's true for trees is true for animals too. The hidden life of animals is revealed in programmes like Blue Planet II, narrated by (almost saint) David Attenborough. You'll have heard of Killer Whales. I'd never heard of False Killer Whales – another large marine animal. It appears they "talk" to bottle nose dolphins – communicating with clicks and squeaks. Intimate communication between individuals of different species – as if old friends. And all in the hidden world away from our experience under the waves

¹ Anthony de Mello *Taking Flight*

² The British Museum "Living with the gods" exhibition webpage

The hidden life of trees and animals remind us that there is much we don't perceive, great dimensions of life that are beyond immediate experience.

At the end of half term last week, my family and I went to Edinburgh. We took the wonderful train journey that passes through York and Durham and Newcastle and along the Northumbrian coast. Northumbria is a holy land. From the train you get a great view of Lindisfarne, the holy island where St Cuthbert lived. Cuthbert is still there. Fans of Durham Cathedral will tell you Cuthbert is buried in the Cathedral. Yes, but the spirit of Lindisfarne is Cuthbert's spirit and that's what attracts so many pilgrims and visitors.

It's true in other places as well. Including here in Bury St Edmunds where St Edmund's spirit lives on. You may have seen the articles in the local papers last week about the Heritage Partnership the Cathedral is leading. With Historic England funding we have commissioned a heritage survey. Why is this of interest to the wider world? Why are TV companies keen to make programmes about Edmund? The spiritual dimension of the Abbey is what draws people here, as well as the history and archaeology. We all would love to know where Edmund is. He is still here. His spirit infuses the place.

We are part of the Communion of Saints. We live among saints and souls we cannot see. The saints are with us, alive in God, continuing to grow in God in the greater reality beyond death. This is expressed in the stained glass around us. The saints are in the upper windows down the south side of the Cathedral. Edmund is with us. Augustine is with us. Alban is with us. And further along the apostles too.

And we feel the presence of the people we love who have died – this afternoon in our All Souls Service we will focus on that. We feel the presence of the people in our community who have died – in recent weeks Annabel, Fr Geoffrey, Anne, David. Their existence hasn't stopped. We feel their physical absence acutely. But they live on and they are with us.

Or perhaps I should say we are with them – we are with the Saints. This life, the brief life we have in these bodies, is a short chapter in the eternal life of God.

You may have heard the imagined conversation between twins in the womb. One is very much a child of our time and believes the womb is the extent of the world. The other twin is more spirituality inclined. She says "I wonder what's out there. I wonder what's beyond this small space we live in." Her brother replies "no, there's nothing else, just this world of warm, cosy amniotic fluid". His sister is not convinced. "I've felt the occasional knock and noise from outside." "No, this is all there is." The sister keeps going "There must be something that sustains this womb we're in." And so the conversation goes on. Neither twin has any idea of the wide world that awaits, the extent of experiences that await them, the growth and learning that will enrich their existence.

The great reality that awaits us in the communion of saints and the company of heaven we can barely imagine, but is what awaits us.

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