

June 8th, 2008
Trinity College Chapel

3rd after Trinity

My text is from Luke's Gospel, chapter 23, verse 52: 'And Joseph of Arimathea went to Pilate and begged the body of Christ.' And my question is 'why'? Why did Joseph of Arimathea 'beg the body of Christ'? And behind that, there is another question: why do we bury people, and does it matter?

But first - you will think I am changing the subject quite sharply, but bear with me - I want to tell you about a spat between two Fellows of this College. Before anyone starts to twitch, let me reassure you that these two Fellows belong not to our present number, but rather to that great multitude on another shore, holding Fellowships not in classes a, b, c, d, e, or f, but in class (g) if we had such a thing, the g standing for 'gone'. One of these two has been mentioned already this term in a sermon at Evensong, and he is the great Ludwig Wittgenstein; the other has not been mentioned, and he is Sir James Frazer (OM), Fellow here between 1879 until his death 1941, much celebrated in his day, the father, or possibly grandfather, of anthropology, whose remarkably widely read book, The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion, Wittgenstein had himself begun to read in 1930, shortly after his return to Cambridge and his election to a Fellowship at Trinity. He didn't like the book one bit.

Frazer's tone towards those whose religious and magical rites and practices he describes, might be said to be understanding and avuncular. If there were to be a film version of the story I am telling, I rather imagine Frazer played by Edward Fox, since he seems to be reliably cast when a certain ponderous gravity is needed, whether in a monarch or a butler: 'In reviewing the opinions and practices of ruder ages and races', Frazer says, 'we shall do well to look with leniency upon their errors as inevitable slips made in the search for truth, and to give them the benefit of that indulgence which we ourselves may one day stand in need of'.¹

From the notes that he made as he read Frazer's Golden Bough, it is clear that Wittgenstein found Frazer's ideas wanting, and his tone not so much avuncular as pompous and patronizing; he was provoked to utter disdain: 'Frazer is much more savage than most of his savages, for these savages will not be so far from any understanding of spiritual matters as an Englishman of the twentieth century.'² Very soon Wittgenstein is incandescent: 'What narrowness of spiritual life we find in Frazer! How impossible for him to understand a different way of life from the English one of his time! Frazer cannot imagine a priest who is not basically an English parson of our times with all his

¹ The Golden Bough, 264; editorial footnote in Wittgenstein's Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough (Retford, Notts, 1979), 2.

² RFGB, 8.

stupidity and feebleness.’³ Let’s hope that the then Dean of Chapel didn’t take that personally.

Well, what was Frazer’s offence according to Wittgenstein? Frazer thinks of all magic and religion as some sort of error - but says Wittgenstein, this is itself plain silly, as well as being quite straightforwardly implausible as an explanation of what Frazer observes.

Take the implausibility of this ‘religion and magic as error’ as an explanation first of all. Frazer himself tell us of ‘a rain-king in Africa to whom the people appeal for rain, *when the rainy season comes.*’ However dry it is the rest of the year, they don’t bother the rain-king one little bit. Their crops might be wilting. Their cattle might be parched. Their gardens may be dead. No one calls the rain-king. And similarly, as Wittgenstein again notes from Frazer’s book: ‘towards morning, when the sun is about to rise, people celebrate rites of the coming day, but not at night, for then they simply burn lamps.’⁴

Frazer’s explanation of what these people are doing is that they are supposing, erroneously, that rain-kings make rain, and that festivities of the dawn cause the sun to rise - but it is just not plausible to think that this is what they believe, given their behaviour. At night they burn lamps. In the dry season they don’t bother the rain-king. But more to the point, Frazer’s explanation, which attributes mistaken

³ RFGB, 5.

⁴ RFGB, 12.

beliefs to these people, is wholly superfluous in the sense that their behaviour makes perfect sense without it. It just doesn't need an explanation of this sort - as the great Frazer would very well have realised had he not been so desperately spiritually flat-footed. There are, after all, all sorts of rites and ceremonies which we engage in, which don't rest on any theory, and therefore can't possibly be mistaken. Think of ceremonial or symbolic actions of a familiar kind, such as kissing the picture of someone we love (to use Wittgenstein's example), or coming nearer to my subject, putting flowers on someone's grave. (Such an action may have the added poignancy that someone putting flowers on a grave goes to particular and especial trouble to chose flowers that they know were liked by the person who has died.) This is a perfectly common action and perfectly well understood as it stands. And no one, but no one, would suppose that the person who does such a thing is mistaken, or possibly mistaken, in the sense that they must hold to the view that the dead can see or smell the flowers. Martians might think that but no one else. For without any such belief, the action of putting flowers on a grave makes perfect sense to us. And if we discover that in another culture, people put food on graves, or leave written messages, or any such thing, these too make sense to us, without our imputing any odd beliefs about the dead getting hungry, or being able to read - or any such thing. Frazer was simply tone deaf when it came to ceremonies and magic and religion - they must have a point, he thinks, and the only point he can think of, is that they should aim to manipulate or

effect the world in some way, to bend it to our purposes, or somehow alter it by means of some transaction. But when I kiss the picture of a loved one, I am not trying to accomplish anything - or at least not the sort of thing I try to accomplish by phoning someone, writing them a letter, or sending them a text. And I am certainly not making a mistake.

‘Sic transit gloria mundi’ as they say - how transient is the glory of the world. Wittgenstein’s influence has waned somewhat, though his is still a crucial figure. But Frazer - regarded as one of the outstanding intellectual figures of his day, read by everyone in the twenties and thirties having a claim or pretence to intellectual seriousness - he is not so much out of fashion, as beyond the pale. He enjoys the distinction, if it can be so called, of being quoted never as an authority, but only as an example of error (but let’s hope he is treated with the leniency he recommended for people of ‘runder ages and races’). Nowadays we just don’t approach other cultures as he did, with the assumption that their ceremonies, rites and practices are a mass of primitive superstitions and rampant folly.

Or do we? For let me tell you the story of a recent occurrence among the indigenous people of the remote region of Looprevil. It so happened amongst these people that when their children died, their medicine men performed the traditional examination of the dead, by which they sought to establish the cause of death, dismembering the bodies in the process (sorry to mention that before dinner, but there we have it.) And it so happened too, that when they returned the

bodies to the parents for burial, these medicine men omitted to return various body parts with the bodies - hearts, brains, livers and so on - preserving and keeping them for their own purposes. Now the incomplete bodies were returned, according to the funerary customs of the people of Looprevil, in sealed caskets, so that the parents did not know what had occurred until much later, when, at a site known in the local language as Yah Redla, these body parts were discovered, preserved and stored as they had been by the medicine men. And the parents, when they learnt of what had happened, were variously outraged and grief stricken, mourning again the deaths of their children and demanding that the body parts be returned, even down to the smallest particles of skin and bone, typically so that they could be reunited with the bodies, buried, and laid to rest with them.

Now some of you will have realized already, that I am not actually reporting anthropological findings from some remote region - or rather not the remote region of Looprevil but from Liverpool (which is remote, I suppose, in the sense that you can't reach it by Oyster card), and the medicine men did not store the body parts in Yah Relda, in the local language, but at Alder Hay. But I turned the names round to show up the more starkly that the spirit of Frazer is not dead, but alive and well - for what was said by some about the parents I referred to, and is still said by some, is that when the parents wanted the body parts back, sometimes hearts and brains, and sometimes just small amounts of tissue, these parents were making a mistake, that they were confused, that they were superstitious,

emotional, sentimental. (I am afraid to tell you that I could refer you to articles in the BMJ which take exactly this line.) What is striking about all this is that though we have learnt to be embarrassed about approaching other cultures with the blundering assumption that the natives are prone to making foolish mistakes of one sort or another, we are it seems, not embarrassed to approach certain people in our own culture on that same assumption. And this was certainly one element in the reaction to the events in Liverpool, at Alder Hay - those scientists, medics, and very worst of all ethicists, who thought of themselves as rational, scientific, enlightened, and the like, were ready enough to dismiss the funerary customs and wishes of parents, who they looked down on as superstitious, confused and emotional. Unlike Frazer, we don't speak of savages and lower races and primitives - yet we are ready enough to approach the world with the same implicit assumptions as Frazer, assumptions which blind us to the meaning of actions which are not necessarily confused, or in error, or mistaken.

What were the Alder Hay parents doing when they asked for the body parts back? More fundamentally, what is any of us doing when we wish to bury a body? What was Joseph of Arimathea thinking when he 'begged the body of Christ'? It seems so natural to us perhaps, we find it hard to articulate - but then, just because we don't articulate it, we are in danger of forgetting the deep sense of the practice, overlooking its logic and implications, and thus losing confidence in the very practice, or coming to treat it too lightly, and

being ready on the basis of our own forgetfulness to accuse others of mistakes, confusion or error.

If one seeks guidance on almost any subject, there is a fairly simple rule - consult (I am not going to say Wikipedia), but Augustine. In his great work The City of God, Augustine declares that the lack of decent burial should not matter to Christians; however, he says, that ‘does not mean that the bodies of the departed are to be scorned and cast away . . . For if such things as a father’s clothes, and his ring, are dear to his children in proportion to their affection for their parent, then the actual bodies [of the dead] are certainly not to be treated with contempt, since we wear them in a much closer and more intimate way than any clothing. A man’s body is no mere adornment, or external convenience; it belongs to his very nature as a man.’⁵ And as he says elsewhere, there is, just because of this closeness, ‘a natural love which every man has for his own flesh’.

The message that the body is not to be treated with ‘contempt’ is one which, as Augustine knew, deserves careful thought and articulation. We moderns are inclined to take the view that we are the first people to have adopted a liberated and healthy attitude to the body, which was previously subject to the reserve and restrictions and coyness which allegedly caused our Victorian forebears to cover the legs of a piano just in case delicate sensibilities were offended or improper thoughts aroused. But this story of a repressive past and an

⁵ City of God, I, xiii.

enlightened present takes some believing - I haven't opportunity here and now to comment at length, but since this is the exam season, let me set a question for you to do in your own time (I am very happy, by the way, to mark any answers which are submitted): compare and contrast the medieval nuns who would wash lepers and then drink the water, with what you would observe in many a gym. (Hint towards an answer: where is there contempt? Where is there love? Who is seeking to subdue, discipline, shape and even punish the body? Who is showing it respect, regard and acceptance? I don't suggest that you should necessarily search Cambridge for lepers to be washed, but I do suggest that it is not immediately obvious that the past is the scene of the repudiation of the body, the present of its acceptance. Further hint - a good answer may make reference to eating disorders of various kinds.)

Joseph of Arimathea appears in the Gospel, a good man we are told, begging for the body of Christ. He didn't beg for the body of Christ because he had some high view about Christ, views of a kind which could indeed be mistaken. He didn't beg for the body of Christ because he thought that Christ was the Messiah. He didn't beg for the body of Christ because he thought he was the Son of God. Nor because he thought that Christ would rise from the dead. Or at least - we have no reason to attribute any of those thoughts to him. He begged for the body of the Christ, and is honoured in the Gospel, because he was a good man, who, loving Christ, did not wish to see his body 'scorned and cast away', to use Augustine's phrase.

Augustine knew that concern for funerary rites for the dead could indeed rest on various mistakes - we could suppose, falsely, that we can benefit the dead by those rites, or, on account of our appeasing them by these rites, that they might benefit us. In either case, we would be wrong, he insists. But, and this is the point of his previous remarks, such rites need not, and typically do not, rest on any such notions. It is enough that we should wish to show honour and respect to the bodies of those we have known in the only way that we know any other human being, in and through their bodies. And the resurrection of Christ will itself rather underline the point that there is no other in which we know one another, except through the body.

The Alder Hay parents, like Joseph of Arimathea - did a simple human thing. Far from being irrational, superstitious and emotional, their actions made the same sense as does kissing the picture of a loved one, putting flowers on a grave - and these simple human practices and actions are ones whose meaning we should seek to fathom, and to apply, not to ridicule or dismiss. And indeed, to honour. For sometimes we need to be reminded to be human. And sometimes this is what religion and religious rites do. As Wittgenstein knew, and Frazer didn't. And may they, and all my colleagues Fellowships in class (g), rest in peace.

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