

Trinity College Chapel, Cambridge, February 15th 2009#

The Revd Professor David Martin

## FALSE IMAGES AND A TRUE LIKENESS

This sermon is part of a series about what we do not know about God and about the One who is 'I am that I am'.

I have two texts, the first of which does not direct our attention to what we do not know about God, but rather to what we falsely assert about him. That will be my particular focus. The text is taken from Jeremiah's dismissal of idolatry in chapter 10, verses 3 and 5.

'For the carved images of the nations are a sham...They are as dumb as a scarecrow among the cucumbers'.

My second text concerns what Christians affirm about God:

'When in time past God spoke to our forefathers.... He spoke through the prophets...but in these last days he has spoken to us in his Son.' Hebrews chapter 1 verses 1-3

In this evening's exploration I look first at four dumb idols, then I look at contrasts between the patterns of natural science, social science and faith, and finally I look at how Christian faith discerns God's participation in time through his Son.

There are four gods - idols if you prefer - as dumb as Jeremiah's scarecrows. Two of them I merely name. There is the god of what we don't yet know, and semi-retired; and there is the god who retrieves awkward situations, and semi-dependent on how awkward the situation is.

My other two speechless gods are a god of pure power, and god treated as an hypothesis. I want to comment on both. What then might one say about a god of power who in some of his manifestations plays with his creatures like a cosmic sadist? The problem with power is that it does not signify. It is literally speechless, as Elijah the prophet discovered. Elijah found that God was not in the earthquake and not in the fire but in the still small voice. God's speaking voice is the Vox Humana, heard first in our

inner space. Likewise the prophet Isaiah: he discovered God, not in a demonstration of power, but in a vision of holiness. First he was disabled by an overwhelming sense of being a man of unclean lips and then the Spirit empowered him to speak words of comfort and rebuke. Inner space picks up signals of transcendence, receives calls and transmits responses. It resounds with consciousness and conscience, and pours itself out in words and gestures that recall and anticipate, comfort and rebuke, demand and release, brace and relax.

We are impressed with power, immensity and mass, and the multiple nougths of outer space make us feel insignificant. But outer space does not harbour reflections about what is and is not significant. Only inner space has a scale of signification. There is nothing more complex than the human brain and somewhere along this scale of complexity there emerges this other scale of signification and significance. The material matters, of course, but only Man reflects on himself, becomes reflexive and therefore a child of time. Human horizons expand to include different projects for the open future, alternative visions and revisions of self and world, shame over past disfigurement and hope of future transfiguration. Man *finds* himself in dialogue with the other, including a dialogue with the Keeper of Being, the I AM THAT I AM.

My last scarecrow is god understood as an explanatory hypothesis. The Bible does not put forward an explanatory hypothesis or postulate a god variable. It testifies to the One before whom is none else, the I AM, the living Word and the Bread of life. Faith's mode of address is testimony. When Aretha Franklin, the Queen of Soul, was asked what her message would be for Barack Obama she said 'Keep God in the plan.' Invited to explain she added 'I don't want to articulate it or dissect it because living is better than all that...man does not live by bread alone.' That is testimony. 'Over again I feel thy finger and find thee' wrote Gerard Manley Hopkins. He testified to a presence but also to an absence. Peace, he said, is 'a wild wood dove' and never pure. It comes 'piecemeal'.

I come now to the central part of this exploration into God: contrasts between the kinds of intention and attention we deploy in natural science, in the human sciences and in affirmations of faith. Natural and biological scientists do not *need* god as an hypothesis because the question 'So what?' does not admit of an answer. It leads nowhere. How far natural and biological scientists still think God's thoughts after him I do not know. Newton thought that way, and so did Darwin, at least when he was teasing out how variations arise among beetles and barnacles. What I do notice, however, is how often scientists testify to the beauty of intricate order and the miracle

of intelligibility. Beauty and miracle after this kind are like any number of givens which are beyond measure and resist being broken down into their elements, like love and goodness, or presence and absence, or brokenness and wholeness. They are givens we discern, not data we dissect.

What then of the human sciences? Social scientists are not even expected to think god's thoughts after him. They do not speak of god as the originator of society or identify Intelligent Design in our mutual exchanges one with another or deploy god as an off-stage extra in the drama of cultural evolution and human history. God is *encountered* in our mutual exchanges, in the graceful and the graced, in what is poured out, held out, held up and offered.

Social scientists observe subject matter not object matter, and probe the mystery of motive not the mystery of mathematics. Perhaps it is not immediately obvious that the human sciences share the same subject matter and even vocabulary as faith, though the patterns they elucidate are quite distinct. The Ages of modern history and the Stages of social science are not the beginnings and endings dramatised in the Bible. Social scientists cast an inquisitive eye on what people identify as a redemptive moment, as in January on Capitol Hill, but they do not engage *themselves* in word and gesture to re-enact redemption's story. At the same time faith and the human sciences share an horizon of understanding. Social scientists use words with roots tangled in time. They survey alternatives and costs and the disjunction between intention and consequence, and they acknowledge that all human subject matter is morally saturated. Faith and human science share a vocabulary of alienation and violation, vocation and mission, corruption and hypocrisy, sacrifice and cost, trust and treachery, gift and mutuality, justice and justification.

Nothing in human affairs and politics is more potent than the search for justification and nothing in the language of faith more central than how you stand and before whom you stand. Consider calls for justice and demands for sacrifice. The human sciences enquire into the social sources of corruption, reflect on the uses and misuses of sacrifice, and sift the nature of the gift or the forms of justice and injustice. What the Bible does is to tell a story with a beginning, a crux and an ending. It presents a drama of commendation and acceptance, callings and responses, denunciation and judgement, command and forgiveness, annunciation and anticipation. Faith laments our losses, grieves over our exile and anticipates a plenitude that lies in wait. It finds a well in the desert and looks forward to a city whose gates are open day and night.

What now of the divine Son who is 'the express image of the Father'? God is not only the Keeper of all Being but makes his presence known by entering into the world of becoming. Faith testifies to 'He who is', and to the one who becomes and is to come. The Word made flesh is subjected to time and exposed to 'war, dearth, age, agues, tyrannies, Despair, law, chance'. The divine emerges through the narrow entrance of our humanity into a world vulnerable to loss and inviting restoration. The life that issues from the human body is in every way at risk and therefore redeemable. Meaning, striving and redemption are entangled in the depredations of time. All the extravagance of love depends on the likelihood of loss and desolation. W.B Yeats put it this way:

'Love has pitched his mansion in  
The place of excrement:  
For nothing can be sole or whole  
That has not been rent.'

Faith discerns 'the express image of the Father' in the innocent Victim trapped in the thicket and converting entrapment into the site of our redemption. Faith is a drama enacted and a story told. In the Christian story the fountain of life is poured out and rises again in the wilderness of our angers and griefs. The body of Christ taken down from his cross is given into our hands, made present and presented to us and for us.

Humans find patterns. One set of patterns relates to our human origins and a process of speciation that constitutes the tree of life: our common descent from remote ancestors and our ascent by conflict and co-operation through biological and cultural evolution. But there is another set of patterns. There is another tree of life, which grows and spreads according to a pattern of fracture and healing, brokenness and wholeness, descent and ascent. The Keeper of Being descends to come alongside us that we may rise and ascend in union with him. The tree the Son of God climbs at Golgotha is the dangerous tree at the beginning of the story and the miraculous tree at the end which puts forth leaves for the healing of the nations. God not only is, but becomes at one with our humanity, to heal the fracture and make the broken whole.

Amen