

Sunday Message from Fr William for the Second Sunday of Advent 2023

The 'Other World' continued from 03.12.23

Yes, in this world we all have the experience of freedom, to a greater or lesser extent. Throughout the day, faced with a continuous sequence of situations, we are constantly making choices. At this very moment, barring any external factors like a power failure or Tesco delivery, you can choose to keep reading... or you can decide you've had enough. You can choose, almost without noticing, to shift in your seat. We make thousands of choices every day, possibly every hour. Sometimes they are big choices, sometimes they are little choices. In each case, barring overwhelming external factors, we are free to choose one way, or the other. This is the experience of freedom.

Who is making all these choices? You are of course. The choice each time is being made by you, by your own self, you with your own unique personal identity. Faced with any given choice to be made, different people will choose different ways, depending on internal factors like natural interest, levels of self-discipline, motivation, and connection or association with previous information and experiences.

It seems self-evident, doesn't it, that these choices are not in any sense determined. In your choices you can even deliberately change your mind at the last moment, just to prove to yourself that you really are free to choose as you wish. It seems self-evident that we are more than a bunch of neurons, firing in an entirely deterministic way, determining each of our choices, as described in last Sunday's reflections. It seems self-evident that there is a self, somewhere inside, that is in charge, a self that is distinct from our physical bodies, a self that we call the 'soul'.

So what are we? Are we (a) purely physical bodies, working in a way that is deterministic, or (b) physical bodies with a non-material component, a soul? Well, we don't know. These are two distinct views, two distinct philosophies, held by different people, including among Christians. Some are inclined to (a); others to (b), and there's room for both views, both philosophies. In the Bible there is plenty of evidence of both philosophies, and Christian tradition continues to hedge its bets, sometimes expressing its teaching in a very corporeal and incarnational way (eg the Resurrection of the Body, Christ's in particular), and sometimes invoking the existence of a soul.

It'll be useful to look in greater depth at these two philosophies. After all, it is a detail in what we are as human beings, and how we will be in the 'other world'. Each philosophy has its share of merits and snags. I also want to take a look with you at a third way that brings these two philosophies together into a coherent synthesis.

But in the context of these reflections it is a detail of secondary importance. Whether or not we invoke the idea of a soul that is distinct from the body, what is infinitely more important is the Spirit, the Third Person of the Trinity, 'breathed' into the human body as per Genesis 2:7, incrementally in this world, and in a new and final way in the 'other world'. It is the Spirit, and the Spirit alone, that makes Man a 'spiritual body', σῶμα πνευματικόν. (1 Corinthians 15:44).

to be continued...



10 December 2023