

## **Anniversary Sermon**

**"You are old, Father William," the young man said,  
"And your hair has become very white;  
And yet you incessantly stand on your head—  
Do you think, at your age, it is right?"**

**Well, I am certainly old and my hair has become very white. Further, during this sermon I shall metaphorically stand on my head several times. I am going to use this opportunity to share with you my theological, Christian and personal religious beliefs. It will be what was known by the early Church Fathers as an apologia, but I stand on my head already for I am certainly not an early Church Father even with my white hair. It is considered rightly bad form to preach a sermon about oneself, but this will be entirely about me, so here is my second head stand....later on my head stands may**

**become nearer heresy. I am preaching  
this sermon partly because it may help some of you  
to look more deeply at your religious beliefs and also  
since I never thought that when I was ordained a  
priest in 1990 that I would live to celebrate the  
ordination twenty-five years later.**

**Let me start by recalling my childhood. I was  
brought up by my mother after my parents  
separated. However my paternal grandmother was  
determined that I would be a properly baptised  
Church of England boy so I was somewhat  
reluctantly baptised at the age of eight years old. I  
can in fact remember it and it was fortunate that  
when I had to produce my baptism certificate as a  
candidate for ordination the Diocese of Canterbury  
was able to produce the certificate.. When I visited  
Grandma I was taken to church on Sunday and I  
recall that a few elderly people stayed behind at the**

**end of Morning Prayer for this strange thing called Holy Communion. Otherwise I had no connection with religion or Church until I went up to Cambridge when I was seventeen.**

**At Cambridge I had a great friend who was a Roman Catholic. He persuaded me to ask the Catholic Chaplain to give me instruction. I went once to the Chaplain and arranged another session but when I arrived at his house he never turned up so that was the end of that. God certainly moves in a mysterious way; I might have become a Roman Catholic. But nothing further happened. I drifted on in theological ignorance for many years until I was aged 28 when I had religious experience, a conversion you might call it. But it was bargain with God who won and I kept my side of the bargain and became a church-going Christian. They say don't bargain with God but the early patriarchs did and so**

**did I. Another head stand?**

**And so I became a practising Christian and a regular church-goer. I'm not going to say much more about the details of my life but I will turn to my own theological beliefs in the hope that they may help some of you.. As an academic and a mathematician I was always reluctant to take things on trust or blindly follow what I was told. I will take as my test the Nicene Creed which I have slowly and sometimes reluctantly come to believe almost in its entirety. 'I believe in one God the maker of heaven and earth and all things seen and unseen'. How can this be when we are all now familiar with the Big Bang , black holes, evolution and so many strange things about the basis of matter - yes, seen and unseen. Well, glorious as they are I can't accept the Genesis accounts of creation. I believe that God created the laws of Nature and the processes by which they developed. Cosmologists and Physicists**

**tell us that these interlocking processes are so finely balanced that one minute change would completely destroy the whole universe. I find it difficult to believe that this is just a remarkable coincidence but it is surely a God-given design. I believe Job said it all when, after God had explained the complexity and interrelationship of everything in the universe, he wrote ‘I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.’ This was the first use, two and a half thousand years ago, of what is the basis of modern Chaos Theory that a butterfly stirring the air in Beijing today can produce storm in New York next month. It is, in fact, surprising how close the authors of Genesis came to the way in which the world did develop.**

**So eventually through the God-given process of**

**evolution God created humans and saw that it was good. But God did more than that; God gave these new beings the gift of free will. That was the apple that eventually was to be our downfall. Now for another head stand, perhaps even an heretical head stand. I do not believe in the fall of mankind. My God is a good God and would not deliberately damage this marvellous creation of humanity. But sadly we slowly started to use that free will to our own advantage with increasingly disastrous consequences.**

**Which brings me to the problem of evil. Why is the world so wicked? Well, a lot of the problem is purely because of us and how we use that gift of free will. We can't blame God for terrorists, famine, poverty and so on The cure is in our own hands. But what about earthquakes or cyclones? My answer is one that always infuriates atheists; like Job we do not**

**understand. But I believe that is not entirely answer. The world is so complicated and interrelated that we have little idea what might happen if there were no earthquakes or cyclones - the butterfly effect.**

**We have a patient and loving God who desperately wanted to put us back on the right path but without taking that free will away from us. What was God to do? A dramatic sign in lights in the sky? ‘Repent and change your ways’ No, that was not the way of a loving God. Instead he sent his only Son to provide the means to change our ways if we so wished. In technical terms the means of redemption. If you have ever been to a pawnbroker you will know that you have to pay off your debt to redeem your pledge - your jewel or heirloom. God gave us through his Son this chance to redeem our debt of messing up his creation of humanity and to be able to start again with a clean book. Again I**

**think I've done a small head stand here for this is not perhaps the official view of redemption.**

**So God sends his Son to give us this chance of redemption but still we are to have the choice. Hence no flashing lights or thunder but the birth of an apparently ordinary baby to a young girl in a stable. I leave it to you to believe or not believe that she was a virgin and that the Holy Spirit was the agent for that conception. I do so believe but I don't think it is a major event of standing on your head if you don't.**

**As they say, the rest is history. This birth in a stable wasn't going to make the headlines. There had to be something else. That something else was the crucifixion and the resurrection, events that shook the world and still two thousand years later bring people to share in that redemption that Jesus provided. Eventually they affected one John Scott**

**amongst the many other millions of people.**

**So far this has been an unusual sermon for me. I have not referred to the readings nor mentioned that we are in Advent. Let me briefly remedy that.**

**Advent is the season of looking forward not only to Christmas and the birth of Jesus but also looking even further forward to the second coming of Jesus. I strongly believe in that second coming. He will come in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end. I also firmly believe in the life hereafter. I have no idea what it will be like but all that wonderful world that God created including we frail creatures is not going to end in a whimper but in a glorious meeting with our Creator.**

**This then is my apologia. But I want to add one more thing which I only learnt recently. We are the children of God created in his image. We pray to our**

**Father. But Jesus is the Son of God. So we have the same father. We are brothers and sisters with Jesus. To me that brings Jesus much closer to me than ever before. When we pray the Lord's Prayer there is its author beside us as a brother or sister..**

**I've preached this sermon because not only did it seem appropriate on this occasion but also to encourage you all sometimes to think more deeply about your faith even if like me it might involve a certain amount of standing on your head. As his son said to Father William**

**Do you think, at your age, it is right?"**

**"In my youth," Father William replied to his son,  
"I feared it might injure the brain;  
But now that I'm perfectly sure I have none,  
Why, I do it again and again."**