

**Sermon on the Holy Shroud of Turin preached at Evensong at Abergavenny
Priory on Sunday, September 29th., 2019.**

Canon Andrew Willie

Texts to bear in mind. *What is man that thou art mindful of him or the son of man that thou carest for him? Thou didst make him, for a little while, lower than the angels, putting everything in subjection under his feet. [Hebrews 2,vs 6b to 8a, quoting Psalm 8,vs 4-6.] So God created man in his own image [Gen 2 vs 27] God is Spirit and those who worship him must worship him in Spirit and in truth. [John 4vs 24]*

The opportunity to preach at the National Touring Exhibition of the Turin Shroud is both great privilege and enormous responsibility. While preparing, I was constantly praying that I would do the Shroud, the Exhibition and their theological implications justice. Having written on the Shroud myself, I know from the response that we Shroudies are often regarded as eccentrics, concerned to prove the Shroud authentic in a battle some regard as already lost. Some friends have said that their eyes have been opened by my writing: others, that I am wasting my time. Why am I thought time-wasting; why does the battle seem lost? I know of two main reasons: the first is that a stained, unwashed grave cloth is an object of disgust, whoever was buried in it, even if the image on the cloth is important; the second is the flippant tone of the soundbite used when it was dismissed by one involved in the 1988 carbon-dating process, Professor Hall of Oxford University. This was, “some-one just got a bit of linen, faked it up and flogged it.” With regard to the first reason, one’s reaction, I too firstly felt disgust until I then felt a process turning this to a fascination bordering on an obsession, heightened by visiting Turin for the exposition in 2010. Concerning the second, Hall’s flippant tone was matched by the cavalier attitude of those in charge of carbon-dating the Shroud to originally agreed scientific protocols and to normal principles of statistical analysis: they just ignored them.

Thus, the idea that the Shroud was at least a medieval artefact, if not a forgery, had prevailed. On May 8th, 2015, the Church Times published an article by the historian, Charles Freeman. He saw the Shroud not as a forgery as such, but an artefact for the medieval *Quem Quaeritis [whom seek ye]* rites on Holy Saturday. That the shroud linen was not otherwise found in the first century was one argument against a date then. He also believed that the shroud image was a painted one. Indeed there are paint fragments on the Shroud, but, although needing explanation, they are no more evident than other bits of detritus naturally collected over the centuries. The paint fragments on the Shroud came from a time when copies were painted and then placed by the original for authentication by a process akin to osmosis, as if the virtues of the original would be passed on to the copy. Professor Michael Tite, who overall supervised the carbon dating, insists that the Shroud image was definitely not painted. Though he stands by the medieval date for the Shroud, between 1260 and 1390, he admits he has no idea of how the image came about.

One problem for the medieval date is that a detailed look at the Shroud image shows that it fails exactly to coincide with Medieval views of the Crucifixion. Take the nails for example: medieval pictures show them in the middle of the victim's hands and feet, with the result that the body would have torn away from the Cross. The shroud shows them as actually nailed into Our Lord's wrists and through his ankles, places where they would have held far more securely. As Jesus carried the cross bar of the Cross to Calvary, wood fragments splintered especially on his shoulders. You would have expected a medieval faker to have used pine, the wood which made up the relics of the True Cross found in western Europe. In fact only holm oak, common in the middle east is present. There is one detail slightly different from that in the Bible, even though it is reproduced in Medieval paintings. It is this: although the paintings have a nicely plaited crown of thorns [Matt 27, vs 29, Mark 15, vs 17, John 19, vs 2] , the Shroud has wounds caused by a thorn-bush, roughly placed on the head.

In a critical though not exhaustive response to Freeman' original article, I sent the Church Times a letter which **was** published and answered a week later by Freeman, himself. I replied with a letter the following week, hoping to start a debate which others would join. But neither this nor any other Shroud letter was published and so discussion ceased: inevitably the last word every-one actually recalls remains Professor Hall's memorable and excoriating soundbite.

To me, Hall's soundbite was a sign of how many scientists [though certainly not all] had turned their back on religion. I remember from fifty years ago my shock at hearing an eighteen year old say this, "*I don't believe in God, I believe in evolution.*" Yet in the ancient middle east, scientists were drawn from the ranks of the religious. They were responsible for the Chaldean view of Creation found in Genesis and centuries later, from their number, wise men came from the east with their gifts for Jesus. Read Genesis 1 as a religious poem and you will see how in terms of the order of creation, the writer got close to what actually happened. In the fourteenth century, humanists were Christian, Now atheists claim the label, some using their scientific learning to attempt to dethrone and ignore God. In doing so they reduce our human destiny to "dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return." [Genesis 3vs. 19] rather than possibilities opened up by the Shroud and by Jesus.

One point that has to be made about science, is that its conclusions are always provisional. Even Newton's Law of Gravity has been modified over the years. Thus scientific conclusions concerning the Shroud also have a certain provisionality about them. However, this is not always recognised by those involved with the Shroud and it not only applies to the carbon dating, but to other matters.

I let myself be convinced by assertions concerning "coins" on the eyelids of Jesus in the Shroud image, that they were Roman leptons dating to the year of Jesus' death. The shroud expert, Hugh Farey, with enhanced photography, has shown that there were no coins at all, only creases in the linen. I admit that I should have known better; the shroud

of an orthodox Jew would have had Temple coins, if coins at all, rather than those of the occupying power. I am aware too that because of its identification with Jesus, the Shroud, as an object of practical research, needs to be handled with special respect and care.

The Shroud itself and the humanity it purports to have contained both show elements of the strange and miraculous which seem to be the work of the Spirit. The human brain actually has an additional spiritual inspirational dimension which includes the imagination and is found in that of no other creature. This is the source of great scientific discoveries, of Eureka moments, of healings and other God-inspired activities: but it can be open to the demonic; thus it has been linked with the possession of those demons which Jesus healed, in the modern west defined as symptoms of schizophrenia. In the New Testament it sees Jesus challenged by the temptations of Satan in the wilderness, but it also gives Our Lord the power and inspiration to resist them. [Matt 4, vs. 1-11].

Professor Geoffrey Lampe would have been interested in such research. His Bampton lectures on *God as Spirit* appeared in 1976 and their title is singularly apt. The central focus of what is a discussion of the Trinity, is God the Holy Spirit who is described as incarnated [realised] in a number of ways, in the whole cosmos, in our planet Earth, in all that lives here; and especially in humanity, in the human life of prayer and even more especially in Jesus and his praying. Lampe's Jesus is fully human, while made fully divine by the indwelling of God's Spirit.

Concerning the presence of the Spirit in the cosmos, scientists have worked out with a mathematical precision, itself a thing of beauty, the basic connection between the originating big bang and the expansion of the universe which followed. Photos from space show the beauty of the universe but even more the wonderful loveliness of the Earth. Secularists objected when on December 24th, 1968, three American astronauts in space, Frank Borman, Bill Anders and Jim Lovell broadcast Genesis 1, first as a recitation, then as a reading. The astronauts' response was deeply spiritual and Christian: the Earth may no longer be thought to be the centre of the Universe, but it is still a beautiful place, inhabited by humankind who are special in the sight of God. Though fifty years ago, there was much talk of finding life on other planets and there was much space fiction on this theme, this has not happened. Our planet and Humankind seemingly remain unique. So does Jesus and the Shroud.

But how did the image, essentially "photographic" in nature, clearer in negative than positive form, come to be on the Shroud? A cave underneath the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem purports to be the burial place of Jesus. In that cave there are exceptionally high radiation levels, consistent with a burst of infra-red light or similar [It could not have been of ultra-violet energy since this would have destroyed the Shroud.]. Lampe is sceptical of the resurrection appearances as outlined in the Gospels, not because he does not believe that Jesus rose again from the dead, but because he sees

the accounts to be of a late and secondary nature and because he believes, in line with the Epistle to the Hebrews especially, that at the Resurrection, Jesus was exalted straight to Heaven. This would seem consistent with the image left on the Shroud.

The Resurrection appearances were the last part of the Gospels to be written. This was for a very good reason. There were enough people still alive to give personal testimony, rightly much more valued than writing on a manuscript. However, unlike Lampe, I cannot dismiss Resurrection appearances in the Gospels. In fact, such appearances still are reported in modern times and lives have been changed as a result. I am thinking especially of the Parisian teenager who became Metropolitan Anthony, head of Russian Orthodoxy in Britain and of the Jewish lad who became Anglican Bishop of Birmingham, Hugh Montefiore. Both were great Church leaders. To deny that appearances of Our Lord to them happened simply limits the possibilities of God: Jesus tells us with God all things are possible. [Matt. 19, v.26: Mk 9, v. 23: Mk 10, v.27.] The proof of a call activated by an appearance of Jesus is in the fruits which resulted. Indeed the Resurrection of Our Lord turned Christianity from a fringe sect to being the main religion of the Roman Empire.

Jesus is unique, but a feature of humanity is consistent with the promise in the fourth gospel that he will prepare a place for us in heaven [John14, vs 1-4]. It is described by Lyall Watson in *The Romeo Error* and concerns weight loss when we die: whatever size we are, we all lose the same amount, 69 grams [the French made a film about it, entitled *Seventy Grams*]. The weight loss is said to emerge from the forehead where the sign of the cross is made in Baptism or the mark of a superior caste in Hinduism.

To-day we celebrate the Feast of St Michael and All Angels and the Lessons for Evensong were chosen accordingly. Many nowadays claim to be “spiritual” rather than “religious.” This often means they use a do-it-yourself kit of their own devising, in which almost Pagan ideas on angels play a part, rather than looking to God for guidance. The result is moral anarchy. All of us fall short of what God requires and need the standards of love, of discipline and of forgiveness of the Man on the Shroud and the hope that He brings of everlasting life.

Canon Andrew Willie is a retired Anglican parish priest in the Monmouth Diocese where he still has permission to officiate. Before retirement, he was also concerned with ministerial education in the Diocese.
