SOFiA Newsletter 175, December 2024

Exploring Values, Meaning and Spirituality

Limestone cliffs like those at Dover, scene of the poem “Dover Beach”

Thoughts on Christmas

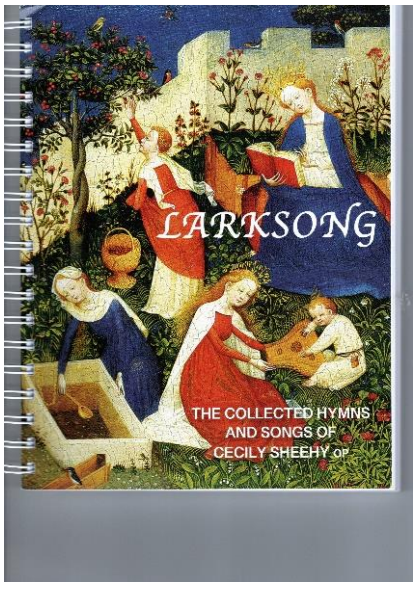
The image below juxtaposes the contemporary pre-Christmas commercial bustle with the original scene of Joseph and Mary on a donkey, heading for Bethlehem. The thought is, “the first Christmas was a simple affair. It’s OK if yours is too.” The shoppers are so pre-occupied with the business of shopping for presents and Christmas trees that they have little left over to consider the message of the original Christmas.

My early thoughts on Christmas were very rational. The prophets didn't foretell the coming of Jesus but rather referenced events of their own time. The virgin birth was due to the (misleading) translation of the Hebrew word for a young woman into the Greek for a technically virginal woman. Santa Claus was a legend, so we didn't tell our children about him. That eventually proved to be unsustainable: "Daddy, who is that man in red in the shop window?" My first experience of Christmas in Germany blew that rationality out the window. On Christmas Eve we headed out to go to the midnight service. That night it snowed for the first time, so we walked on virgin snow towards the Church with its warm, inviting light. It was so overwhelmingly picture-postcard beautiful, that I had to rethink my attitude to Christmas. Moreover, the service was held in darkness apart from a single candle so that the biblical passages could be read. Then, at midnight, everyone's candles were lit from the central candle, powerfully symbolizing the spread of light from a central source.

The Editor

Larksong – Cecily Sheehy's song collection

Published in 2024, *Larksong* contains 100 songs by the Dominican sister Cecily Sheehy. The book is published by the New Zealand Dominican Sisters. Enquiries can be made to the Dunedin office of the Dominican Order: domfinancenz@gmail.com



In her own Introduction, Cecily tells of her attendance at Matthew Fox's Creation-Centred Spirituality programme in California. On her return from California, Cecily embraced a theology that celebrated the blessedness of the earth, that moved away from the centrality of sin and was committed to the care and healing of the planet.

While the home base for most of the songs is the traditional catholic liturgy for Sunday worship, there is music for secular classes with children, many held on church premises and led by members of the local parish.

The collection includes music settings, including guitar chords, and lyrics placed within the music bars. There are also two CDs of 70 songs, performed by Cecily with supporting singers and wind/keyboard instruments.

Cecily's hymns are well-known in many denominations, with the following four recommended: *Greetings little child of Bethlehem*, *One,two,three*, *Alleluia*, *How is Jesus Present?* and *The Kingdom is Within You*.

My favourite hymn, *The Kingdom is Within You*, is retitled *Kingdom Blues* in this collection. This reflects its Rock'n'Roll rhythm. I await a rock band or gospel choir doing a cover of this song and hitting the charts!

I reprint the lyrics, based on proverbial imagery that Jesus chose for his public teaching. Any contemporary songwriter would be proud of how such simple picture language expresses the depth of the faith journey.

Chorus: The kingdom is within you
The kingdom is within you
Why do we go searching for
the answers of the mighty?
The kingdom is within you
The kingdom is within you
Like a little seed
planted in the ground,
let it grow

I will set my face to the wind,
scatter my handful of seed on high
needn't have to worry
where the great wind takes it;
seeds will grow wherever they're planted.
All we need is courage
to keep on facing the wind.

The Kingdom….

I will set my hand to the plough,
Don't look back, it's too late now.
The fullness of the kingdom
is not quite yet,
but the seed of the kingdom
is here and now.
Don't split the seed;
be patient, let it grow.

The Kingdom….

Words and Music © Cecily Sheehy
Alleluia Aotearoa 1993

John Thornley

On Death, Part 3

Autobiographical Reflections

It is interesting to reflect on the emergence of my awareness of death. Julian Barnes talks about 'le reveil mortel', best translated as 'the wake-up call to mortality'. As a university student, I often went on fortnight-long tramps. One such began disastrously and I almost died. Problems began in earnest when my pack rolled down a steep hill practically to the bushline. This was on the way to the Routeburn saddle, and there was nothing else for it but to descend the steep hill, gather together the scattered contents of my pack and ascend back up to the track. That alone tired me out, but I still needed to go up and over the snow-covered saddle. It took until 8.30 pm to reach the bushline, whereupon I collapsed into my sleeping bag, inside a water-resistant cover, right there in the middle of the wet track and went to sleep. Surprisingly, I had not been particularly afraid of dying; the feeling of tiredness was stronger than any fear of death.

The next wake-up call came in a therapy group, when one of the participants admitted to being desperately afraid of dying. Other members of the group made helpful comments, but anything I thought of seemed abstract and theoretical and impersonal. Then it occurred to me: wasn't I, as an ordained minister, supposed to be an expert in such matters, presiding at funerals and providing pastoral care to the dying? Why didn't I have anything helpful or relevant to say?

It's worth noting that my father, in spite of being a lay leader in the Baptist church for many years, did not believe in life after death, something I only became aware of late in his life.

The Art of Dying Well by Ian Kilgour

This is a short guide by a Salvation Army officer and Christian minister from New Zealand. It provides practical suggestions, such as making a contact list of those to be informed when you die or arranging a 'goodbye' event to which you invite family and friends as well as arranging some one-on-one time with

those closest to you. Although there is little systematic reflection on death per se and no skepticism regarding an afterlife, most of the book is taken up with quotations from a wide variety of traditions.

Epicurus

It's not easy to provide a systematic reflection on death, when Freud claims that we can't conceive of our own death (we are always there as the observer even though we don't actually exist any more) and Yalom thinks it's like staring at the sun (impossible for more than a brief moment).

A first step on the way to a good perspective on death is the thought of Epicurus, an ancient Greek philosopher. 'Accustom yourself to believe that death is nothing to us, for good and evil imply sentience, and death is the privation of all sentience… Death, therefore, the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not.' His aim is to liberate us from fear of death, and, in particular, any belief in punishment after death. While his thought is helpful, and logically sound, in reality it doesn't really work as well as you might think. Death is not something that only comes at the end of life; its shadow extends right across our lives.

A second step is the recognition that thinking about death, far from being merely a depressing and morbid business, can lead to deeper understanding. Yalom says, 'Though the physicality of death destroys him, the idea of death can save him.' An awareness of death can give us a greater sense of life's preciousness. This is our one and only life. Death is easier if you have lived a full and rich life and actualized your possibilities. Conversely, to have not really lived makes dying harder. Dai Henwood (in the recent TV programme *Live and Let Dai)* says, 'When the fear of death is gone, the joy of living is all that remains'.

The Courage to Be by Paul Tillich

Next we turn to Paul Tillich, who explores the way faith can counter the anxiety that comes with our finiteness. He follows an existentialist tradition that gives central importance to the concept of anxiety. For him, there are three types of anxiety: moral anxiety (guilt and condemnation), ontic anxiety (fate and death), and spiritual anxiety (emptiness and meaninglessness). Medieval society was dominated by moral anxiety, while contemporary society has mainly spiritual anxiety. Anxiety has no object but tries to convert itself into fear of something particular. The courage to be is whatever counters our

anxiety. It is courage to affirm oneself and one's identity in spite of the anxiety that belongs to being human. We feel anxious about fate; storms and floods and war and disease might cause us to lose our home, our employment, or our health. While these threats are relative, death is an absolute threat. It is the void of nothingness, the absolute abyss. Particular fears can be met, but anxiety has no specific object that can be dealt with. Tillich's work on the courage to be is an attempt to re-define 'faith' a word that he says has almost lost all meaning today (writing in 1952!). Just affirming your existence is a counter to anxiety, in particular anxiety about fate and death.

Neo-Orthodox Theology and Death

Karl Barth is famous, at least in Germany, for his 'completely dead' theory. According to this, the whole person, body and soul, ends with death. He rejects the idea of an immortal soul that continues after the body dies. He notes that death is a source of anxiety but our non-existence before birth doesn't worry us at all. He admits that his proposal is very thin on biblical basis; an amazing admission given that his whole theology is based on the Word of God revealed in the bible.

Eberhard Jüngel follows in this tradition and has written a short volume on Death. In it he sympathetically describes Socrates's calmness in the face of death, which had an enormous influence on Western civilization. But then he tells us that we must reject this tradition, de-Platonizing our thinking in order to be open to the Biblical tradition of resurrection. He operates at a high level of abstraction, which makes getting clear about his actual views rather difficult. But here goes:

1. Life is created by God and emerges into the resurrection of the dead.
2. Resurrection is something other than an egocentric hope for unending continuation. Its aim is that God is 'all in all'.
3. Salvation is not salvation out of this life but salvation of this life. It is participation of our earthly, limited life in God's life.
4. God is our beyond. Our life is hidden in His. We participate in the eternal life of God.
5. Resurrection means the gathering, eternalizing and revealing of our lived life.

He includes the following quote from Karl Barth:

"The human *as such* has no beyond and no need of such, for *God* is his beyond. That God, as the human's creator, covenant partner, judge and saviour, was, is, and will be his faithful counterpart already in his life and finally, exclusively and totally in his death; that is his beyond. He, the human as such, is thisworldly (*diesseitig*) and therefore finite and mortal and will therefore once only have been, as he once was not yet. As this has-been, he is not nothing; that is the promise given him through this partnership with God. It is his hope and assurance. Its content is therefore not liberation from thisworldliness, from ending and dying, but positively: an anticipated glorification of his thisworldly, ending and dying being…He doesn't hope for salvation out of thisworldliness, finiteness and mortality, but positively; for the revealing of the salvation already completed in Jesus Christ."

From Karl Barth *Kirchliche Dogmatik* III/2 p 770f quoted in Jüngel *Tod* p 153 translated by the Editor

Resurrection – a Symbol of Hope

In the wake of the controversy surrounding Lloyd Geering's declaration that "man has no immortal soul" Lloyd wrote first "God in the New World" and then the present volume. It aims to bridge the gap between scholarly theology and the 'man in the pew'. Part 1 looks critically at the traditional understanding, explaining why the traditional Christian view just won't do. Part 2 aims to provide a detailed discussion of the history of the 'idiom of resurrection', which is far from being limited to Christianity. Although Lloyd's hope was that a wide range of people would read this work, I suspect that few of his opponents took the trouble.

Part 2 begins by tracing the origins of a widespread belief in 'resurrection' although that actual word may not be used. There's the sun that appears to die in the evening, but miraculously reappears next day. There's the moon that becomes smaller and smaller before disappearing completely but soon reappears. There are the seeds planted in the ground that seem completely lifeless but that miraculously germinate to produce a new plant.

Then Lloyd traces the history of the people of Israel. Initially there was no concept of resurrection. Then, in Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones, there is the idea that the people of Israel could reawaken to new life after being destroyed in battle by the empires of Babylonia and Assyria. That reflects a thinking in terms of the people you belong to rather than you as an individual. Much later, in the time of the Maccabees, the idea of resurrection

reappeared, particularly for martyrs who died defending the community. Resurrection was not a new concept in the time of Jesus; the Pharisees believed in it. My main difficulty with Lloyd's thinking is understanding what this hope consists of, given that there is no objective or historical content to resurrection, and its meaning is essentially an interpretation of the sadistic, awful, agonizing crucifixion.

I Step Down Into the Barque of the Sun – Meditations on Death and Resurrection

With this work, we enter the thinking of Eugen Drewermann, a rather different realm than that of liberal Protestant theologians. Drewermann's voluminous writings, most of which are unfortunately untranslated, do not focus particularly on death. Observations on death come about in the course of a focus on other themes. His life work was planned out early; his aim was to be a Trojan horse, smuggling subversive but liberating ideas into the fortress of Catholicism. He began with ethics and intended to move on to the interpretation of texts and from there to fundamental theology. Drewermann's writings come in various levels. We begin with his Easter sermons, which are his least academic, least technical writings:

"From the earliest days of humanity, there has been a question sweeping through human history, gently at first, later like a stormy wind. The more human consciousness has developed, the more clearly has death appeared as a problem. The more we humans have grown to the point of discovering our individuality, the more lost we feel in the processes of nature, and for the first time on this earth, our human spirit formulates questions to which the whole world can offer us no answer. From the beginnings of humanity, therefore, we have called on our senses to give testimony against themselves [By this he means our senses see that there is death, but other senses are aware that the sun rises anew after dying the previous evening, etc.]. The walls of the world's prisons have become thinner and thinner under pressure from the growing human spirit.

In the early days of humanity, the miracle of light must have brought astonishment as a testimony to the soul as the light of the moon re-emerged from the three days of its death and the morning sun arose from its nightly dying. What the Church gathers from the store of human memory to celebrate the vigil of Easter is like a collection of experiences and recollections from a time before memory: the miracle of fire, the miracle of renewal. It is possible

to breathe upon and rub dry, dead wood, in such a way that light warmth and beauty spring from it. It is possible to strike hard stones against one another in such a way that sparks of light spring from them…Then is it impossible that the soul should arise from the grave and that eternal life should spring from the dead body?"

His writings also include biblical commentaries on the gospels, a large two-volume set on interpreting texts in the light of depth psychology, as well as a large two-volume set on the brain and the 'soul.'

I Step Down Into the Barque of the Sun is the only work that deals directly, if symbolically and meditatively, with death. The title of this work reflects ancient Egyptian thinking: In death, the Pharaoh, as son of the sun steps down into the sun's barque, with which it crosses the heavens. In death they are together as they descend below the horizon and undergo the perilous journey through the underworld, before re-emerging at dawn, the sun to greet the next day and the Pharoah to join the stars. Ordinary Egyptians symbolically identify with the Pharoah.

We need to understand the following to be able to join in Drewermann's reflections, which I find very demanding:

1. Religion must be understood symbolically or poetically. Dominic Crossan's observation is pertinent: 'My point, once again, is not that those ancient people told literal stories and we are now smart enough to take them symbolically, but that they told them symbolically and we are now dumb enough to take them literally.' This came home to me particularly at an exhibition of Ancient Egypt at Auckland museum, in which the drinking vessels provided to the mummified Pharoah were solid. That is, they were of no physical use for holding liquids; they were symbolic pointers only.

   "It belongs essentially to the concerns of *mythical* thinking to overcome the alien nature of humans compared with nature by means of symbolic images. The great scenarios of nature are called upon as projective transparencies for the interpretation of human existence. This level of mythical imaging and conceiving is in the best situation to show how the deadly contradiction between the laws of nature and the certainties of human longings can be reconciled. Among the mythical forms of religion of humanity there is none which places the question of death and

immortality so much in the centre of all its teachings and rituals as the Ancient Egyptian religion." P 76-7.

2. Just to repeat the obvious: Drewermann does not believe in a life after death in any literal sense. The following quotation makes this clear:

   "It is therefore up to us to understand the old pictures handed down to us as comforting symbols (and not as observable "facts"). All talk of heaven and hell and purgatory and judgement must be examined for their underlying existential content. Is it possible to make statements about a life after death that don't entail denying the finiteness of our earthly existence?" *The Soul*, page 757.

3. Western philosophy believed that humans have a soul while animals don't. Descartes thought that the whimpering of a dog in pain was just like the squeaking of machinery that needed oil. As a result, we have been happy to conduct experiments on something like 300 million animals each year. Darwin's evolution is a real shock to such views and requires that we see a continuity between us and our nearest relatives.

   "Egyptian mythology especially, to which Christian theology owes its central images in the question of resurrection and immortality, regarded animals as belonging to the sphere of the gods and humans. For it, the animals were messengers of the god or embodiments of the divine, always merged with human forms. This belief went so far that along with human bodies they took all sorts of animals – cats, crocodiles etc - into eternity." P 259-60

4. Liberal Protestants make much of the contrast between Resurrection and Immortality of the soul, which they trace back to Plato and Socrates. Drewermann wants to awaken us to the experiential background that gave rise to both. Otherwise it is incomprehensible why Christianity so soon and so easily moved from belief in a resurrection at the end-time with a last judgment, to an eternal soul that is judged at death. Both are found humanity-wide rather than being the exclusive possession of the Christian religion, a view that Drewermann shares with Geering.

   "The ancient Egyptians visualised the transposition under the stars in a (mythical) symbol, which, in Plato's philosophical interpretation, deeply influenced and imprinted the theology of Christianity and the world feeling of Europe…. The ancient Egyptians didn't believe that one, as

happened in Christendom, could derive a philosophical theory out of a religious symbol, out of the evidence of believing experience, and further out of this a dogmatic theory. They found the convincing power, the radiating intensity of the images themselves enough and so they painted these visions of heaven in endless variations, unconcerned about logical coherence, creatively playful rather than rationally restrictive. The essence of the Ba-bird [symbol of the soul] was golden in their eyes, already because in it the rays of the sun were condensed and humans appeared in this perspective literally as 'children of light, as sons and daughters of the sun. Yes, the ancient Egyptians often drew alongside the hieroglyph for the Ba-bird the sign for incense, as if they wanted to say, it is the whole essence, the true nature of our soul, to ascend from earth to heaven like aromatic incense. 'That what makes to God' is the literal Egyptian expression for incense –the Egyptians trusted this divinity so securely in every person that came from heaven to the world. It was the fate of this person to return to heaven like a spark of frozen light that evaporated in death and now, in accordance with its own reality, is liberated into heaven as a star in the night.

5. Drewermann has astonishing learning in many fields, only one of which is ancient Egypt. There is a lot of German scholarship In this field, which English-speaking theology appears to be largely ignorant of. There is, for example, E. Brunner-Traut, who wrote *Pharoah and Jesus as Sons of God* and *Ancient Egyptian and Medieval-Christian Concepts of Heaven and Hell,* as well as J Assmann, R Brier, A Champdor and E Hornung. The following quotation indicates how early interpretations of the death of Jesus in fact took up ancient Egyptian concepts that were occasionally used in relation to the Israelite king in the psalms and that applied especially to the Pharoah:

6. Traditionally in Christianity, the resurrection of Jesus is a unique, one-off miracle with no pre-history. It provides the evidence for a belief in life after death, and this is something unique to Christianity. In fact, resurrection has a long prior history.

   "There is no content around resurrection in the bible that is not already to be found in the religion of Ancient Egypt. Indeed, biblical thought doesn't really make sense without the Egyptian background. The three motifs of *ascension* to heaven, rebirth and resurrection are all there. There are many hints in the New Testament that reflect ancient Egypt.

For example, when St Paul declares Jesus to be 'the firstfruits of them that sleep' he probably wasn't aware that he was using a title of Osiris, the Egyptian god of the dead: 'the first of the westerners'".

"The ancient myth of the death of a person as an ascension to heaven, as a transfiguration into light, as a rebirth under the stars alongside the sun makes the cipher of Jesus' ascension, which has been turned into an historical legend, understandable and credible. It is precisely the mythical in the Christian confession of faith that allows and makes it possible to connect 'ascension day' (Mt18.16f) with the sending of the disciples to all peoples at all times and places and to proclaim as the truth of Christ, what they carry in their heart as their true essence and their actual calling." P 93.

7. We need to enter into the ancient Egyptian world view, which is mythical but also close to nature, in order to begin to understand the Christian message of Easter.

   "The visions and Images that were developed in ancient Egypt in contrast to death imitate the great scenarios of nature: the rising and setting of the sun, the coming and going of the moon, the rise and fall of the Nile, the silent poetry of the beauty of the night and the song of the baboons in the East of Cairo in the grey of morning – all of these were for the Egyptians interpretations of human existence. They were signs and symbols, images and parables, rituals and advisors of a concrete magical mysticism of immortality. Above all, the thought of a rebirth through the life-giving, eternal power of a divine love, that descends down into the grave, in order to triumph over death, finds its manifold representation on the walls of Egyptian graves. It seems impossible to even approximately understand Christianity's message of resurrection, without having walked through these images in their sensual beauty and enticing closeness to poetry and dream. P 18

Takeaway Summary

1. From Epicurus we can learn not to worry about the state of being dead, no matter how much evangelical preachers may warn us of the dangers of hell. In death we no longer exist, so even the wish 'may he rest in peace' cannot apply to the state of the dead person. The most we can say is that it could mean 'may we be in peace and not troubled by the memory of this dead person.'

2. From Irwin Yalom, we can learn about the tension between our biological nature and our reflective, intellectual selves. Animals react instinctively to any threat, but we humans know that a lion could be hiding behind any bush and that eventually we must all die. This makes our mortality much more of an issue for us than for other animals, due to our cognitive abilities.
3. From Paul Tillich, we can learn about the role that anxiety plays. Just to exist, we must affirm a 'courage to be' against the anxiety of fate and death. The courage to be is a broad-based way of understanding what Christians have traditionally understood faith to be.
4. From Lloyd Geering, we can learn that resurrection is not an invention of the Christians, a one-off miracle that just happened. Rather, the 'idiom of resurrection' is something with a long history, going back way before the existence of the people of Israel, and undergoing change and evolution during its history. We don't share that resurrection perspective, which makes understanding Easter particularly difficult for would-be modern Christians.
5. From Eugen Drewermann, we can learn to regard resurrection as something humanity-wide rather than as specifically Judeochristian. Ancient cultures looked to nature for evidence that countered the obvious reality of death and found it for example in the moon that reappears after three days. Ancient Egypt in particular had a rich and varied symbolism that was close to nature; many of their gods had animal faces and a human body. We can counter the widespread abstraction in most modern theology for example by meditatively identifying with the sun as it sets in the West and makes an underground journey before emerging anew at the beginning of the next day.

   From him we can also learn that we don't have to choose between resurrection and immortality, as long as we don't try to turn them into philosophical theories or dogmatic beliefs. Both are there in Egyptian symbolism; the rising of the sun after 'dying' in the evening and the ascension of the golden Ba-soul.

The Editor

About SOFiA

SOFiA (The Sea of Faith in Aotearoa) is a network of people interested in the non-dogmatic discussion of values, meaning and spirituality. We want to explore for ourselves what we can believe and how we can find meaning in our lives. SOFiA is not a church: it is a forum for discussing ideas, experiences and perspectives. SOFiA itself has no creed; its members come from many faiths and from those with no attachment to any religious institution. If you are in sympathy with our aims, you are most welcome to join us; receive our Newsletter, and/or attend a local group. We follow similar organisations in the UK and Australia in taking our name from "Sea of Faith", the 1984 BBC TV series and book by the British religious academic, Don Cupitt.

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Copy deadline for the next Newsletter is 1 February.