*De Anima*

October 29th, 2017

21st Sunday after Pentecost

Aristotle's book on the human soul is called *De Anima.* It has some wonderful insights into what it means to have a soul, even for today, and of course it was a great inspiration for St. Thomas Aquinas, who also discussed the meaning of having a soul in his book *Summa Theologiae.* The New Testament, of which the apostle Paul wrote a considerable amount, is also largely about the soul—who made it, who redeemed it, and what it means to live in that redemption story. Writing to the Thessalonians, the apostle Paul says, "Our coming to you was not in vain, but though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition" (1 Thessalonians 2:1). The gospel requires courage in the face of great opposition. This was the case in the 1st Century, and it is the case today. The word courage comes from the French and ultimately the Latin word for *heart.* When we speak of the heart, we are immediately in a different world from what we are used to today. Today, we largely dwell in the world of the mind, in the world of machinery, ideas, and analytics. You do not need heart to listen to an automated voice recording, to tap on an icon, to click through a series of images, to swipe through text messages on a device. A robot can build an automobile; artificial intelligence can run programs across various platforms. Our trains and traffic lights run on algorithms and electrical pulses. The increase in convenience has come at a price—we are becoming less sensitive, less aware, less able to relate to one another as persons. Perhaps we are becoming something closer and closer to *philosophical zombies*. A philosophical zombie is a "hypothetical being that from the outside is indistinguishable from a normal human being but lacks conscious experience, qualia, or sentience. For example, if a philosophical zombie was poked with a sharp object it would not feel any pain sensation, yet could behave exactly as if it does feel pain (it may say 'ouch', recoil from the stimulus, and say that it is feeling pain)" (*Wikipedia*). Naturally, we still feel pain, we have conscious experience, qualia, sentience—but so much of it has been hijacked, anesthetized, or rendered irrelevant and dormant by the world we create and live in today. We are worried about fake news and frankenfood, but we do not seem to worry too much about our own frankenthoughts and our own fake feelings. Convenience is wonderful, but a civilization built on the path of least resistance and eliminating opposition is a civilization that will eventually stop feeling and learning, or it will feel and learn in ways that are probably not sound. Our most important lessons come from opposition, from suffering, from inconvenience.

The world is losing its soul, largely because the world has forgotten that people have souls. And this is incredibly sad, both religiously and culturally. It's no wonder we live in fear. I recently watched the new *Blade Runner 2049,* directed by Denis Villeneuve and produced by Ridley Scott who directed the original *Blade Runner* film of 1982, which was loosely based on the Philip K. Dick novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* One of the main themes of these movies is how does one judge the difference between AI, androids, robots and humans? What are the boundaries? What is the emotional texture of this dilemma? What are the ethics involved in distinguishing? Is our human world disappearing? This may sound rather technical and irrelevant, but it has become a human obsession since the dawn of the industrial revolution, but some of the details date back to even long before that. In the same century that Paul was writing to the Thessalonians, Hero of Alexandria was building steam-powered automata. In the 15th Century, Leonardo Da Vinci made sketches for a humanoid robot. In the 18th century, very complicated clockwork automata were designed and built in Japan and France. In 1895, H.G. Wells published the *Time Machine,* a novel that hypothesizes a future world in which the machinist Morlocks cannibalize the non-technological Eloi. Our word *robot* comes from Karel Capek's play *R.U.R.* (1920)*, or* "Rossum's Universal Robots"—*robot* being derived from the Slavic root for "forced labourer." In 1950, Alan Turing first proposed the Turing Test: "a test of a machine's ability to exhibit intelligent behavior equivalent to, or indistinguishable from, that of a human" (*Wikipedia*). Behind all of this is the perennial question: what does it mean to be created, what does it mean to create, and what is a human being? More important, it is the question: What is a soul, and do I have a soul? We are constantly testing, through technology and culture, our own creations. What does the apostle say, though? Paul says: "Our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts" (1 Thessalonians 2:3-4). While we are busy testing the world, testing ourselves and testing God, we forget that God tests our hearts: "The Lord looks on the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). For we have souls that are much more than machinery, much more than philosophical tests, much more than data, much more than business plans, much more than intellectual arguments. We are persons, persons with hearts, persons capable of relating to each other and to God on a level that no machine ever will. Why? Because a machine cannot pray. It might recite a prayer the way a player-piano can play Chopin—but it will never *pray.* It is also telling that Paul insists that he and the other apostles and missionaries spoke "not to please mortals, but to please God." When we want to think of the Gospel, we need to stop thinking in mortal terms, in finite terms, in technical terms. We need to start thinking of what is immortal, unlimited, far, far beyond the reaches of nature and technology. That world is only accessible to the praying heart. The world, nature, and even our technology may give us signposts to the greater reality, but they will never supercede nor even remotely approach that reality.

The Lord tests our hearts because the Lord wants our hearts. How do we reconnect with our hearts and our souls? How do we discover God in the midst of all this frankentech? I am not sure I have the answer to that, but perhaps there is a hint in what Paul says to the Thessalonians: "We were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us" (1 Thessalonians 2:7-8). Paul uses very maternal imagery. I had to go to prenatal classes when Christina was pregnant with Rainier. In theory, I was very much in favour of such classes, but in reality, I was shocked at how impractical the lessons were. They were low in science, low in advice, and high in rather trivial discussions involving such questions as at which trimester one should stop skiing or how hiring an expensive *doula* was the only way to give birth properly. I think what I disliked the most about the classes, which should have been geared to helping pregnant women and their partners learn about safety and proper caring, was the overwhelming condescension of the establishment. I had gone to the classes wanting real answers. The only consolation I had at the end of the day was that women are heroines, have been giving birth for thousands and thousands of years without help—most of those millennia without access to special classes and special technology, and my wife is my heroine, so at least we had that going for us—things would probably work out, as the human race was still thriving, and in addition to that, we did have access to good hospitals and an amazing, amazing obstetrician who delivered all three of my boys. She's another heroine—an amazing woman. The last time I thanked our obstetrician for all that she had done for us, she humbly said that she was just a bystander—God did all the hard work. Anyway, throughout this process, I watched my wife become a mother, and I am haltingly, slowly, clumsily learning how to be a father. That is a great and profound mystery that is beautiful, challenging, and utterly spiritual. To think that Paul considered his mission as similar to a mother caring for her children, nursing them, looking after them, loving them. Immediately, we are in the realm of flesh and blood, of trial and error, of hope, tenderness, courage, late nights, early mornings, mornings blurring into evenings, evenings blurring into mornings, pain, ecstasy, exhilaration, and pure poetry. It is the farthest thing from mechanics or philosophy or business one can imagine. Nothing so thoroughly changed me and my relationship to God as becoming a parent and entering into the mystical relationship of sacrifice. What Jesus did on the cross is what a parent does for children, and what good children do for parents. It is the brutal and beautiful testimony of self-giving, of sacrifice, of unconditional love to save and preserve others. It is the true relationship of true hearts.

The apostle said, "We are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves" (1 Thessalonians 2:8). In this, Paul is being very Biblical. When we think of the word of God, or the Scripture, we can loosely divide it into three stages. The law, the prophets, and then the New Testament. Through the Law, God reveals that He is holy, but there is a lot that is quite mysterious and frightening. Nevertheless, the bulk of his commandments relate to ordaining peace between individuals and societies and establishing justice. The Ten Commandments are, after all, keys to being a good person, even if they cannot redeem the person. Through the prophets, God reveals himself through a community of prophets—ordinary people—who speak to individuals, communities and even nations in very poetic, human language displaying a wide variety of emotions and argumentation. He is no longer speaking through burning bushes and lightning on the mountain top; he is speaking through men and women like you or I, promising salvation and pleading for our hearts. Lastly, in the New Testament, in the gospels, God shares his very own self in Emmanuel, our Jesus who is God in the flesh. The story has always been personal, but it is only completely personal because God gave his very own self to us—through the Incarnation and through the gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. The bulk of the New Testament is written in personal letters or books addressed to individuals: Luke, Acts, the letters of Paul, the letters of Peter and John, the letter of James, the letter of Jude, the letter to the Hebrews. The only three writings in the New Testament that are not personally addressed in some way are the gospels of Matthew, Mark, John and the Book of Revelation. Instead of laws, epics, wisdom literature, we have personal letters, even if they are written for communities, they are personal because they all express living relationships with the Son of God, who is in eternal, perfect relationship with God the Father and the Holy Spirit.

This was how the gospel first spread. In the Gospels, Jesus physically touched the untouchable—the widow's dead son (Luke 7:11-17), the ten lepers (Luke 17:11-19), the woman who was bleeding (Mark 5:25-34), demoniacs, Samaritans, sinners of every sort, people like you and me. He ate and drank with them, laughed with them, wept with them, visited their tombs, visited their potential executions (John 8); he spoke to them in synagogues, temples, alleys, in fields and on lake shores, in boats and on mountain tops. In the Book of Acts, we learn that Tabitha served others by making clothing with her own hands (Acts 9:36-43). Philip got into the chariot with the Ethiopian eunuch, and they read the Scripture together, side by side (Acts 8:26-40). Paul had to do a great many things to share himself, but I love the way he entered the local economy of Corinth, working at his trade as a tent-maker with Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:1-3). Or how he rented a school building to teach in Ephesus (Acts 19:9-10). The gospel was not about entertaining people, magnetizing them to a cause, or trying to implement a program that would generate more believers and more revenues. The gospel was the power to face opposition, to break down the walls of hostility (Ephesians 2:14), to touch people and give to them something that the world and all of its wonders and all of its technology can never give to them. The gospel was a lived and shared reality of the heart, the reality of life in the Holy Spirit, a reality of persons sharing themselves in the name of Christ, to become the very personal body of Christ. They did not invite people to church—there were no churches, or certainly not what we could call churches. And if the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit ceased around the turn of the 2nd Century, as some ancient writers have attested, they literally only had themselves and their God to share in the face of executions, hiding in catacombs, and wandering from city to city in the face of persecution. And despite all of that, the good news spread like wildfire across the Roman Empire. And it spread because the followers of Christ were happy to share Christ and themselves, just as Christ had shared himself, just as God had shared himself through Christ.

A robot or a philosophical zombie cannot share itself because it cannot really be itself on its own terms in the Thomistic sense of contemplating God (*Summa Theologiae)* or the Kierkegaardian sense of being oneself before God (cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*). They cannot because they have no need of redemption and thus no need for relationship or prayer. If we are not robots or philosophical zombies, then let us stop acting as though we were. And let us stop imagining the world and all of its possibilites were designed merely for them and can only be healed or solved through their terms. The world is a gift. And God made himself a gift. Will we likewise become gifts to God? Jesus said to his followers: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.” (Matthew 16:24-28).