

One of the most popular films of the nineteen-nineties was *The Matrix*. Although it used science-fiction terms, it was actually a deeply philosophical – even a spiritual – film. If you didn't see it, the basic plotline was this: that the everyday reality of the world perceived by humans is actually simulated; it isn't the real thing, it's a matrix – an artificially-created illusion intended to keep them occupied while living machines consume their energy.

One of the most fundamental assumptions of all the world's major religions – including Christianity – is exactly the same: the world we live in and experience every day is actually only a partial reality – it is not the ultimate truth.

Think of this world as a mirror. St Paul does exactly that in his 1st Letter to the Corinthians (13:12). The reflection in the mirror exists, it is an observable thing with a cause – which is me. I cause the reflection when I look at my face in the mirror; and yet the reflection is not actually me. The reflection cannot exist without me

– but I can exist without the reflection. Likewise, this world exists, it is something observable, something we experience in an infinite variety of ways every day of our lives – but it is ultimately not the real thing. The world casts a reflection of God, however darkly, but it is not God; the world cannot exist without him, but God exists without the world. He is.

We also remember that a reflection in a mirror casts an inverted image: when we look at our face, what appears to be our right eye is actually our left; what looks like our left ear is really our right; our smile, too, is the other way round. Just so, when the spirit of the Beatitudes regards itself in the mirror of the world it sees but a darkened, inverted image, in which all its values are reversed: In the world wealth and power are to be desired, the poor to be pitied or – worse – blamed, the pure in heart to be mocked, the merciful accounted weak. The Beatitudes are one of the most sublime poetic statements in all religious texts. Only the Son of God could have spoken them.

Christ's teaching in the Beatitudes – and, actually, throughout the whole of the gospels – is completely and totally at odds with the world we know and live in; but, just as in *The Matrix*, the world we know and live in is an artificial construct. It wasn't created by machines who feed off our energy – which would be merely science fiction – but by the self-centred, self-seeking and self-serving ambitions of the human ego: the little 'I' that knows nothing higher than its own will. This 'I', the unredeemed human ego, has constructed what one of the great Jewish mystics called "the kingdom of lies." All the teachings of the world's great religions are designed to displace the centrality of the ego and show us a way out of the partial reality; the Beatitudes in today's gospel are intended to open the prison doors of the kingdom of lies, of corrupt politics, the ruthless pursuits of international finance, consumerism, unrestrained technology and the exploitation of the earth. The world of nature remains, thankfully, what it is.

True Christianity, authentic spirituality – even (perhaps especially) mysticism – does not turn away from life in this world: it seeks to heal and transform it *from within*. If Our Lord had turned away from life and the world, he would never have been born into it. This is what we are celebrating on the Feast of All Saints: those endless ranks of men and women who sought to heal and transform the world, who brought a little of the light into the darkness, who were children of Holy Wisdom and lovers of humanity for the sake of that Love which brought humanity into being. They spent their lives in this labour and that's why they are accounted saints – not because they were shining white or perfectly pure or without any faults, failings and foibles. They all had those, sometimes in abundance.

St Paul was a very conflicted man who hated being confined to what he felt was the 'prison' of the body...

St Jerome had a very quick and often uncontrollable temper, firing off letters left, right and

centre to anyone he took offence at – including (and especially) St Augustine...

St Francis of Assisi was obsessively convinced that he would not be saved...

St Ignatius of Loyola had what we would now call a 'germ phobia' – to the point where he could not drink out of a cup that someone else had used, no matter how many times it had been washed...

As did St Philip Neri, the founder of the Oratorians, who was also possessed of a purposeful but quite startling sense of humour; he once attended Vespers in the *Chiesa Nuova* in Rome (in the presence of several cardinals), wearing a false red nose, some 500 years before 'Comic Relief' was born...

St Teresa of Avila had a great weakness for good-looking people, or those of an aristocratic lineage, especially if they could be tapped for a donation...

St Margaret-Mary Alacoque also had a germ phobia and was obsessed with cleaning...

St Benedict Joseph Labré spent most of his life travelling around as a vagabond, sleeping rough and spending all day in churches; he was very rarely able to wash (which didn't make him popular) and suffered from an anxiety disorder...

St Thérèse of Lisieux, who worked to heal and transform the world from within the walls of her convent, was a neurotic and she knew it; she spent the last two agonising years of her life in physical pain and spiritual darkness, losing her faith in anything beyond death...

However: these faults and foibles and psychological kinks are more of a help to us, most of the time, than their virtues are – because the virtues we may not be able to imitate, but the faults and foibles we probably already have. Today we celebrate the lives of those men and women throughout the ages who have shown us a way out of the matrix; the mirror of this world will always cast an inverted image and there is nothing to be done about that, but the saints have each, in their own

way, cleaned and polished it just a little. This is what we are called to do – again, and importantly, *in our own way*.

The Jewish mystics have a phrase for this work: ‘repairing (or restoring) the worlds.’ From this mystical perspective, God’s *Shekinah*, his ‘glory’ – which is feminine in both name and being – is in exile, trapped in the deep, dark places of this world. When we do some good deed, however small, or act lovingly, in however modest a way, or help someone in need, or say a prayer for someone in distress, or give some of our precious time to listen to someone – whatever it may be – we release a divine spark, a flicker of light of God’s *Shekinah*, so that it can go back up and become once again an aspect of his Being. Kabbalistic belief is that when God’s *Shekinah* is totally restored to himself, the Messiah will come again. And this is what the saints did, though they knew the work by another name. The key to it is this: *we must be conscious of what we are doing*. The saints were. When he had less than a week to live,

the otherwise unknown Benedict Joseph Labré said to a farmer's wife, in whose barn he had spent the night: "My name is Benedict Joseph Labré." He knew that the world would soon hear of it. And the world did.

Firstly, we must polish the mirror and liberate the sparks of God's glory as *a deliberate spiritual practice* – a way of living, if you like; secondly, we must offer thanks that we have been given the opportunity to do it. Those whom we can help in any way are our path to the kingdom and we owe them a debt of gratitude, always. We can use the Beatitudes as our charter: to help both the poor and the poor in spirit, to be merciful, to comfort and console those who mourn, to encourage in whatever way we can those who work for peace, to be gentle with strangers and teach others to be the same, to honour purity of heart. A word, a deed, a prayer, a coin – privately, of course: a secret between our heart and our hand – it doesn't matter how small it is; St Thérèse of Lisieux said that if we were to pick up a pin for love of God, that would be a mighty deed.

On this feast of All Saints we celebrate the men and women across the centuries who put up 'Exit' signs to guide us out of the matrix; who polished the mirror of the world so we could see what it reflects just that little bit more clearly; who suffered from all the foibles and frailties that we do; and who helped liberate the sparks of God's *Shekinah* by picking up pins for the sake of love.