

On 1st January 1818 Mary Shelley published her novel *Frankenstein*. If you have not read it, you will, doubtless, be familiar with the general story. In it, a young scientist, Victor Frankenstein, sets out to recreate humanity, starting afresh as it were. He attempts to make a perfect specimen of our race, reanimating dead body parts, but he only succeeds in creating a grotesque monster, a being who, although he is conscious and wants to relate to his creator, is spurned by Frankenstein who, in turn, is revolted by what he has made.

It is a tragic tale that ends in the death of the scientist and the monster in the frozen arctic wastes. The clue to understanding the novel is in its subtitle, *The Modern Prometheus*. Prometheus in Greek mythology was a Titan who created mankind from clay and gave Man the knowledge of the use of fire, thus enabling the start of civilisation. For this presumptuous act he is punished by the gods with eternal torment. In the same way, Victor Frankenstein ends by being punished for his hubris and presumption. In this way, then, Mary Shelley's famous Gothic novel plays with our fears around scientific knowledge and the dangers of its misuse.

I mention this today because it strikes me that the themes in the novel, *Frankenstein*, presents us with a reverse image of the Christian doctrine of Creation. In our story the Almighty Creator makes Man in His own image, a good creature, made *for* a relationship with God. From the love of God we were made for communion with Him; something only possible if we enter that relationship unconstrained, from free will. Through our own choice, however, we have pursued our autonomy, imagining we can break away from the source of Life, only to find ourselves fallen out of paradise into this world. Yet it is the same love of God the Creator that will not abandon Man and pursues us still in our mortal state.

The whole narrative of the Old Testament scriptures relates the story of that Love of God. From the Creation through to the call of Abraham, God establishes a friendship with the forefathers, continuing through the patriarchs of the Hebrews, and culminating in

the Law given to Moses. The Word of God summons humanity back to its origins through His anciently chosen people, the children of Israel. No matter how many times they happen to reject God's call, despite the warnings of their prophets, the Creator does not abandon Israel in His search for Man, His creation. As the prophet Hosea says: *'When Israel was a child, I loved him, And out of Egypt I called My son...They sacrificed to the Baals, And burned incense to carved images. I taught Ephraim to walk, Taking them by their arms... I drew them with gentle cords, With bands of love... My people are bent on backsliding from Me. Though they call to the Most High, None at all exalt Him. How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? My heart churns within Me; My sympathy is stirred.'* (Hos.11:1-8)

Finally, the prophets of Israel envisaged God's very coming Himself, taking on the form of a servant, born as a man, one of his own creatures, as Isaiah says, *'Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.'* [Is.7:14] The Church well knows to whom the prophet is referring. And it is in the light of this understanding that we should read the Old Testament and teach its stories to our children: the very antithesis of Shelley's classic novel.

For how different all this is, compared with Victor Frankenstein! *He* spurns his creation and flees in revulsion from the one he has made. The modern Prometheus turns out to be no Titan at all, but the same fallen creature that we are, who from dead parts can only create death. As the saying goes: *'You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear.'*

Was it by chance then or design, that today we see the true Creator of Mankind, incarnate as foreseen by Isaiah, come upon the same dead flesh, an assemblage of body parts that once expressed the being of a young man, cut down before his time? Is it only by coincidence and synchronisation of movement, or is it by the benign providence of a divine dispensation that Christ arrives at Nain, just as an unsupported widow walks beside the funeral bier of her only son? And what does Christ do? *'He said to her, "Do not weep." And He came and touched the bier.'* Then by His touch and at His word

the young man comes alive again. This is no Frankenstein, harnessing and commanding the powers of nature to reanimate what had ceased to function. This is the authority and power of the Creator Himself.

Science and human knowledge, as it has increased and expanded, has done great things in the application of physics and biology and chemistry; more of us might well live longer now than our hunter-gatherer or farming forebears. But our Promethean delusions cannot change our fallen nature, and the social and technological dreams might also distort and even abolish the very idea of our own humanity as given by God. Be particularly on your guard against those who would have you believe that we were not created in God's image, male and female, so that we might reinvent ourselves, becoming the 'Frankenstein' of our own identity. Or those who would seek to rob you of your free will, algorithmically inducing addiction to a virtually created reality, controlling and manipulating your behaviour to gain money or even political control.

The Lord God's own alternative to such Gothic horror is here before us today. This very practical compassion for the bereft widow; this raising of the dead, both serve to make manifest the kingdom of God that has come upon them. Hearing of this *singular* incident, with these *actual* people, in this *particular* place, at that *incidental* time, in this Liturgy today we *re-member* and reconstruct, encounter and pass through the same experience of that crowd: '*Fear seized them all; and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has arisen among us!" and "God has visited His people!"*'

For nothing less has happened to us, in that God has sought out each one of us and brought us together here. Like the young man in today's gospel, we too have died when we went down into the waters of Baptism, crucified with Christ, buried with Him, Baptised into *His* death. He too has touched the bier, this poor frame that carries our souls, when we were Chrismated, touched and sealed in our senses by the Holy Myron, in a mystery receiving the seal of the gift, the Holy Spirit Himself: not by the harnessing of natural forces like Victor Frankenstein, but by the super-natural power of God the Creator Himself.

God has made us for Himself and our hearts are restless until we find our rest in Him, as Blessed Augustine of Hippo wrote. Let us therefore come to this understanding, this consciousness, that the whole purpose of our existence is to find and be found; that the meaning of our life is communion with our Creator and so with one another. Let's read and study the Old Testament as well as the New and learn the mystery of the love of God that pursues down the days, for its story is our story. Let us at the very least grasp this idea: that, in the end we cannot be self-made, but that in humility we can ever repent to discover, again and again, the grace of God who has called us into eternal life.