

Tuesday Reflection 9th March 2021

“I believe in the communion of saints”

On Sunday evening I happened to watch a TV programme presented by the archaeologist Neil Oliver “A History of Ancient Britain”, and it set me thinking about the communion of Saints. Orkney presents us with the relics of a ritual landscape, which was later mirrored in Stonehenge. We have no written records, so we have to let the stones speak.

We are talking about a time some five thousand years ago - before the great pyramids of Egypt and some two thousand years before the Temple of Solomon, about the time of the passage tomb of Newgrange in the Boyne valley in Ireland.

The neolithic Orcadians constructed a vast complex which archaeologists believe was a centre of ritual marking the passage from life to death. The interesting thing on my reading was that these people believed in life and death as a continuum which carried on after the body’s physical death, so that this earthly life is but an episode in a longer saga. This would be the thinking behind such phenomena as ancestor worship, which could be simply a matter of love and respect for the deceased, but it could be more than this, a belief that the dead have a continued existence, and thus a belief in a spiritual realm.

So where did these beliefs come from?

“In the beginning was the Word”, which some interpret as the Spirit of God or the Universal Christ. I find it difficult to believe that God withheld himself from the world for over 13 billion years and did not enter it until just over two thousand years ago. God is omnipresent, at all times and in all places, so He must have been indwelling in all humans, which would have given them some notion of a Divine Presence which inspired them to massive feats. Why else would a farming community on a windswept Scottish island have devoted so much time and material to constructing edifices for which there was no conceivable practical use?

So might what we can speculate about the beliefs of the ancient Orcadians foreshadow some of our Christian beliefs in an afterlife and in the communion of saints, with those in Heaven interceding for those on Earth?

What makes our faith different is the Resurrection.