

## TALK 1 - The reality of God.

We believe in God. That is what the Catholic faith is about – believing in the reality of God. That is easy to say but what is less easy is to say what this he, she or it is. Christian thinkers have always found it easier to say what God is not, than what he is. So God is not a thing, an object, not even a being however highly exalted. If we were to assemble in one room, Fred the plumber, Don the local MP, Gordon the Prime Minister and President Obama, we would have four beings who exercise a variety of power – with, of course, the President of the USA at the top. If we were now to say that God is also in that room, would we then have a 5<sup>th</sup> being, even more powerful than the President? The answer is No – for God is not just another being we can add to the list of beings – not even if we place him right at the top of this hierarchy. God is not the Superman. The gods seen as super-beings are, says the tradition of catholic thinking, simply human fabrications, projections of our dreams or of our nightmares – gods made in our image and likeness, in other words IDOLS. And it needs to be said again and again, that such idols can be fashioned out of words and ideas as much as out of stone and wood.

So far, it seems, so negative! In fact Christian thinkers have spent a lot of time clearing away wrong notions of God. Don't forget that the earliest ones, who attacked the pretensions of emperors to be divine and took a scythe to the burgeoning of gods many and various, were called atheists. Which is why we are wise to pay attention to the critics of faith who can sometimes help us in this continuing task of clearing the jungle of idolatry. Even without such critics, this has always been and remains one of the important tasks of theologians. What God is, insists one of the greatest of them, Thomas Aquinas, our minds cannot grasp. God, says another one St Anselm, is simply 'that than which no greater can be conceived.' As we shall later see, our pictures of God, our ideas about God, are important, but what Anselm is saying, is that each

one of these has to have a question mark placed over it or rather a plus sign added to it. God is always more and beyond our most holy words and images. One more recent philosopher of religion (see Ian Ramsey 'Religious Language') has spoken of models and qualifiers. We may have our 'models', pictures of God as King, Shepherd, Rock and so on but then we have to use words which 'qualify' these pictures, telling us not to take them literally. Thus we use words like 'immortal', 'eternal', 'infinite' to indicate that this King, Shepherd, Rock is like no other. So Tradition has seen us looking towards God as those standing on the beach gazing out to the far horizon. That horizon, we know, always recedes, moves away from us. It is an image of looking on, and on, and on. We cannot ever capture the horizon. So it is with God. We cannot ever grasp God. Indeed some modern theologians call God the Ungraspable Mystery (see Karl Rahner) In the bible this is represented by the unsee-ability of God. He is the one hidden in the cloud and darkness. So, it is said, that human beings cannot see God and live. God is a dangerous fire, a dazzling threatening brightness. Put out your hand to steady the Holy Ark and like the unfortunate Uzzah you may be struck dead (2 Samuel 6.6)

What God is our minds cannot grasp but insists St Thomas, that God is our minds can grasp. Believing in God, claimed the late Fr, Herbert McCabe (McCabe 'God Matters') is less a matter of having an answer to questions and more claiming our right to go on asking questions. It is he writes 'to claim the right and need to carry on an activity, to be engaged in research.' It is surely anomalous, he continues, 'to hold that while it is legitimate and valid to ask 'how come?' about any particular thing or event in the world, it is illegitimate and invalid to ask it about the whole world'. The believer dares to ask not only 'HOW all this but WHY all this and not nothing?' Believing in God is using our minds to pursue this line of enquiry and refusing to be stopped. It means not only asking questions about HOW things work, but also questions of meaning and purpose – what is it all FOR?

When atheists paint the sort of crude pictures of God, which Dawkins does, then we should signal our agreement with him – and declare that neither do we believe in such a being. Where we part company is when the atheist simply does not see that there is any problem or mystery here, who remains content to ask questions within the world, but cannot see that the world itself raises a question. That question Why which we insist on asking, the unbeliever says is a meaningless question. But why is why meaningless? Attend to young children and you will soon discover that the question ‘why’ fascinates them. It is the one they endlessly ask. Exasperated parents are tempted to close down the questioning with the blunt ‘Well, it simply is!’- Which is exactly Bertrand Russell’s response to this why about the universe and everything – the universe is just there! He dogmatically declared. But the child’s question WHY is a fruitful question, one which in fact lays the foundation for all intellectual search. By going on insisting on asking that question WHY they learn, they grow in knowledge. Shutting down the question is simply narrow-minded dogmatism.

Of course the question HOW is also a very good and fruitful question. The methodology of scientific enquiry has produced real knowledge and brought tangible gains. In our search for truth we need the sciences. The recent fashion to stir up conflict between science and religion is as foolish as it is tragic. I was brought up to acclaim the discoveries of Charles Darwin along with the truths of the Bible because I was also brought up to recognise each used a different language and that both languages are needed to get at the truth. The trouble with the militant atheists says the philosopher Mary Midgeley, is that they reduce all search for the truth to one language, that of the sciences (see Midgley ‘The Ethical Primate’ and ‘Science and Poetry’.) To be a fully human searcher after truth we need, she insists, to be able to speak a number of languages, to be engaged in a number of activities of the mind. While we don’t go to Shakespeare’s Macbeth for a history lesson, what exactly happened in Scotland so many years ago, we do go to it to discover truths about the perils of the unremitting pursuit of political power.

So too the portrait painter may reveal more truth about a character than a rather bland photo in a passport. Great music may explore the reality of deep human experiences, whether of sorrow or of joy, in a way that nothing else can. We need poetry as well as prose to explore the rich mystery of what we call life.

Ah MYSTERY – that is a word to conjure with! EM Forster called it just a fine word for a muddle! But to take life, as seriously as poet, painter, dramatist and musician do, it is a word we cannot avoid. Their work reveals to us a life which is not simple and buttoned up but ever more deeply mysterious. They show us that the more deeply we go into it and reflect on it, the more mysterious it becomes. So it is unlike the mystery of an Agatha Christie novel – which is simply about a puzzle to be unravelled. Human mysteries do not unravel; they take us ever deeper into complexity. Yes we can describe a person in physiological, psychological or sociological terms. And there are clear uses for all this – for healing, for understanding how we tick as individuals or as groups. But woe betide us if we then imagine that we have the person captured, taped, buttoned up, filed away. Then we begin to reduce persons to things, to commodities. In truth the closer we come to human beings, the more we get to know them, the MORE mysterious, not less, they become. Real life is the very reverse of the Detective puzzle – instead of mystery dissolved, it is deepened. And it is the poets, the artists, the novelists, the musicians who guard and explore this mystery. Guarding and exploring the otherness of other people – resisting the stripping away of mystery – nothing could be more important. It is this uniqueness, this ungraspableness which is what matters. We call it love. Such is our understanding of the mystery, the otherness of the one we call GOD. Religion does not close down our questions, remove our doubts, it makes us ask ever more questions, and refuses to stop asking them when the pundits cry ‘That’s enough – we’ve got it sorted now’ – Ours is an exploration which never ends for this is the exploration of ‘that than which no greater can be conceived.’

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**TALK 2 – THE MYSTERY WHICH COMMUNICATES.**

How come there is anything instead of nothing? Many atheists, writes Fr McCabe, imagine that Christians claim that they have discovered the answer to this question- that there is ‘ in the universe some grand architect of the universe who designed it, just like Basil Spence only bigger and less visible, that there is a Top Person in the universe who issues arbitrary decrees for the rest of the persons and enforces them because he is the most powerful being around.’ If it is atheism to deny that then, states McCabe, he and all other disciples of Aquinas are atheists too. (‘God Matters’) The real issue between faith and unbelief is to do with how we see the world. Is it just a package of puzzles to be solved or is it all that but more – one in which there is inexhaustible mystery to be explored? Perhaps this is what the theologian Paul Tillich was getting at when he wrote that ‘ preparation for believing in God comes by deeper immersion in existence.’ Such an exploration, we claim, needs more than one language, one way of thinking. Scientists have their contribution to make but poets, novelists, painters and musicians make theirs as well. People can be analysed and dissected and real knowledge can arise from that. But people are in the end beyond analysis and dissection – they are themselves, inexhaustibly mysterious. To be a real humanist is to both guard and explore this mystery. And that is the true task of religion – the guarding and exploring of ‘that than which no greater can be conceived’, of the ultimate ungraspable mystery which we call GOD.

Religion is a human activity and it seems to be a universal human activity. That does not mean that there is really just one religion, which is common to human kind. We know that real religions as practised by real people are immensely diverse. Our religions may have a single concern – the guarding and exploring of the mystery we call God or gods but at different times and in different places adherents of religion come up with different results. Instead of

trying to pick and choose from this rich menu, the best way to proceed seems to be, to start from where we are – from that tradition in which we find ourselves. And if we are too easily put off by that word ‘tradition’ then the words of the late Sir Karl Popper addressing the Rationalist Press Association in 1948 may help. His subject was Tradition and in particular the Scientific Tradition. It is an illusion, he argued, to imagine that each thinker can start from scratch, ‘it is a very simple and a decisive point’, he went on ‘that we cannot start afresh, that we must make use of what people before us have done in science...In science we want to make progress, and this means that we must stand on the shoulders of our predecessors. We must carry on a certain tradition.’ Scientists, he says, have to be part of a tradition (literally a handing on process) but of course always critically part of it. We don’t have to take from the past all that the past hands down. We have to be an active part of this handing down process – making our own contributions to what JH Newman called ‘development’ (see Newman ‘An Essay on the development of Christian doctrine.’)

So, if we start where we are in religion, we start as part of what is called the Abrahamic family of faiths – Judaism and its offshoots Christianity and Islam. This family reality is recognised and celebrated by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council (Lumen Gentium 15) and provides the platform for inter-faith dialogue to which the Catholic Church is committed. These three religions share the common inheritance of what we call the Old Testament to which Judaism adds rabbinic commentary, Islam the Koran, and Christianity the New Testament. But with this common background we share the conviction that the mystery of God, which we cannot grasp, yet grasps us and reveals itself to us. In other words God is a God who reveals himself. Just as we have to accept that we cannot grasp the mystery of people, we also rejoice that they can reveal themselves to us. For this to happen we have to renounce our sometimes desperate attempts to make them in our image and likeness, and just be silent and give them space to speak for themselves. In its particular development of this common inheritance, Christianity has insisted that God’s communication, what is called his Word, is

not just a list of ritual or moral instructions, but also a communication of himself. In revelation the veil of mystery is lifted but without the mystery being dissolved. Again this is what is surely true of the self-communication of one to whom we have come close, where the intimate sharing of thoughts and hopes in no way dissolves the mystery of that person which we must go on respecting. She may reveal herself but still I cannot grasp her! ‘She is beyond me!’

The Old Testament itself is not a single book but a collection of books and a very diverse collection of books it is. Here we stumble upon bits of history, of what an historian would say actually happened once upon a time. But often the hard facts emerge out of a mist of folk memories and myths – which of course is often the case when it comes to ancient history. Along with the bits of history there are edifying stories like the Book of Ruth or Jonah. There are collections of poems, some religious like the Psalms, some erotic like the Song of Songs and collections of wise sayings like the Book of Proverbs. Oh yes there are rules about how to live and how to observe religious rituals and properly perform feasts and ceremonies. But all this piety goes along with the doubt and questioning of the book of Job and the frank scepticism of the book of Ecclesiastes where the pursuit of wisdom ends with the cry ‘vanity of vanity – all is vanity’ – man hath no better thing under the sun than to eat, drink and be merry - better to be a living dog than a dead lion.’(e.g. see Ecclesiastes 2 and 6)

This is a very human collection of literature. This is not all exalted piety or dreams of what life should be like – this is real life, life as it is warts and all. If there are stories about temples and religion, there are also stories about wars and what we would call politics. If there are some heroes there are also lots of villains as well and some of those heroes are pretty flawed. Take one of the greatest of them, David the slayer of the giant Goliath. He was capable not only of gallantry and great generosity to his foes, but also able to descend to adultery and murder.(compare 1 Samuel 26 with 2 Samuel 11) This is what has made some Christians down the ages

a bit queasy about the Old Testament. Some find it too earthy, even offensive, so it has to be massaged and given a more spiritual meaning – or simply rejected in favour of more high-minded fare.

But it is this raw humanity, which makes it so important for the Christian tradition. So what is it which holds this deeply human collection of writings together? It is the conviction that the mystery of God is mixed up in it all. When God speaks to Moses out of the burning bush and calls him to set his people free from slavery, Moses asks who or what it is that is calling him and the reply is ‘I will be what I will be’. (Exodus 3). In other words, it is in and through these human events that God will show what he is like. It is through the very texture of the life of this people that God will speak his word, reveal himself. Again and again Moses will seek clarity. He wants to see God but that he cannot do. Instead a moment comes when God sets him in the cleft of the rock and when God sweeps by in a raging wind, Moses is allowed to catch a glimpse of his back as the divine mystery disappears into the distance (Exodus 33). It is a wonderful image of what Newman called God’s ‘Reserve’ in communicating with us. The glimpse is given but the mystery is guarded.

The Old Testament becomes a single Book as this diverse human collection of writings is united into what has been called ‘The Book of the Ways of God’ (see FD Maurice ‘The Kingdom of Christ’). In and amidst this human activity is the activity of God. To begin with this people were not much interested in questions about the origins of the world – they were focussed on the divine presence in the here and now. This God was a saving, rescuing God, one who sought to bring his people out of slavery and into a promised land flowing with milk and honey. God was all about freedom and the good life. But this involved a struggle with the people themselves for they were often afraid of freedom. Life in the desert was perilous and insecure. They kept moaning and groaning and looking back to the security of slavery – at least they had cucumbers to eat then. And it was not much better when they got into the Promised Land. There the temptation was to abandon

the God who had travelled with them through the desert – the mobile nomadic God whose symbol was the rough old ark that they had carried around with them – to abandon such a God for the more spectacular gods of the people with whom they now lived, gods who were honoured in lavish temples. And with the abandoning of the true God went the abandoning of the old way of life, the solidarity, brotherliness, and neighbourliness of the desert and the pursuit of an every man for himself way and an exploitation of the poor.

But the story runs that, in all this, God does not give up or let go. So through it all, the Psalmist insists, ‘his mercy endureth for ever’. God raises up his servants the prophets who, rather than foretelling far-off events, traced the hand of God in present events. Through these events God went on communicating something of himself. Yes – there was the mercy shown in escape from Egypt and the gift of the Promised Land, but there was now also judgement in the disasters, which were about to hit them. Their land had always been vulnerable, to great powers to the east and west. Now from the east came the Babylonians and the Israelites had to endure the destruction of Jerusalem and, for the leaders of the nation, captivity in Babylon. God’s judgement was not, as they had liked to imagine, just something reserved for their enemies, it could fall on them as well. ‘By the waters of Babylon we sat and wept.’ Yet, like all God’s judgements this was creative. Here in a far land faith developed and grew. ‘How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?’ That was the question. If the God of the homeland had been defeated, perhaps the sensible thing to do was to switch allegiance to the gods of Babylon? But instead out of this grew the conviction that the God of the homeland was indeed the one God of all the world. Instead of faith shrinking and being destroyed, it was expanded and deepened. Through the disaster God had gone on speaking, communicating with them.

Eventually that exile was ended, the leaders of the nation returned to their broken land and the temple was rebuilt but the insecurity remained. This time that little strip of land fell to the successors of

Alexander the Great and became part of the Hellenist Empire, which in turn fell to the Roman power. Having to face this political vulnerability, the incompleteness of rescue, left the people dreaming of a day when God's rule of justice and peace, would at last be secured. Perhaps a new king, a bigger and even better David, would arise, who would prove to be not a tyrant on some ego trip but a true servant of God. Perhaps at last there would a real rescue, not just from exterior enemies, but also from their worst enemy, themselves. Perhaps now instead of laws set in stone, that law might be written on their hearts. Such were the hopes and dreams that bubbled up in these dark times. Perhaps the God who had spoken in varied and fragmentary ways to the forefathers would now speak in a new and clearer way. Perhaps the light which had gone on shining in the darkness – that light which despite all had not been overcome – would now come in some new and wonderful way. Whatever their failings this was a people who had taught the world to live in HOPE.

TALK 3 – WORD MADE FLESH – THE HEART OF MYSTERY’S COMMUNICATION.

That collection of Israel’s literature we call the Old Testament guards the ungraspable mystery but also allows us to glimpse God’s back as he disappears into the distance. ‘I will be what I will be’ he announces to Moses. Attend to what is going on around you and you will discover that he speaks in fragmentary and varied ways of his mercy and judgement. Yes there is judgement for this People have to live with the consequences of their failure and disobedience. But still his mercy endures forever and because of that, Israel dares to live in hope of a new and deeper liberation.

A section of this People comes to believe that this Day of Liberation has now dawned through one man Jesus of Nazareth. With the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews, there are those that say that the God who has communicated himself to our forefathers in ‘fragmentary and varied ways’ has now spoken in his Son(Hebrews1) or, with St John the Evangelist, that God’s Word, that self-communication, is now made flesh and has dwelt among us(John 1). In this Jesus of Nazareth, it is said that we have seen the very glory of God – that is the very ‘godness’ of God. For that part of the Abrahamic tradition in which we live everything seems to be narrowed down to this one point – the solitary human being Jesus. It is he who is said to be ‘set above the angels’ ‘the image of the invisible God’(Colossians 1.15).

How do we know anything about this Jesus? There are those who say that the gospel stories are just another set of ancient religious myths. Stories of the doings of the gods are many and various. Indeed the gospels, through which we get our information about Jesus, are not written by so-called ‘detached’ historians. In fact you will not find any ancient history written by such scholars. All write from a position of religious or political commitment – yet from their writings we can discover ‘historical truth’, what was in

fact the case. Yes these ‘gospels’ are written to tell the ‘good news’ that the promises of God, those wild hopes of faithful Israel are fulfilled through the living, dying and what they call the ‘rising’ of this Jesus of Nazareth. In this sense they are like political manifestoes but assuredly grounded, not in fairy stories, but in fact. The language and images of what we might call mythology are used but the heart of it is that at a particular time and in a particular place – the stories became flesh, a little bit of real history.

What is probably the first gospel, that attributed to St Mark, begins without preliminaries with the terse ‘this is the beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.’ John the Baptist is seen preaching and baptising at the river Jordan. Jesus of Nazareth simply erupts on to the scene. He shares in the baptism of John and is said to have been driven by the Spirit into the wilderness. Soon after he returns to Galilee preaching God’s Good News saying ‘The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Good News.’(Mark1) And this is what he goes on to teach particularly in those teasing stories called ‘parables’ and to enact in mighty deeds of healing. The great hope of Israel is no longer remote and distant – it has ‘come near’- it is ‘amongst them’ in what Jesus says and does.

In what we call the ‘Synoptic gospels’ Jesus does not go around explicitly saying that he is ‘God’ – that would have been language unintelligible to his hearers. Indeed this raises a serious question about whether he could truly have shared our humanity if he thought of himself as God. Some early Christians did have fantasies of the child Jesus lying in his cot thinking about how as God he was sustaining the whole universe! One has only to articulate the fantasy to realise the problem it raises. Surely, as a wise theologian has said( see Austin Farrer ‘Saving Belief’), although Jesus did not know that he was God; he knew how to be God. So he articulates in prayer the special relationship, which he has with the one whom he addresses with the intimate Abba - Daddy and expresses in bold actions and sayings the very actions and sayings of God. So he carefully uses the great images of

Israel's tradition to make the audacious claim that in his work God's order has broken into this old order. Although the strong tyrant evil holds God's children prisoners, now the stronger one has come to tie up that tyrant, ransack his house and let those prisoners go free (Mark 3.27). The new order of the stronger one is the order of the God whose mercy endures forever, especially for the poor, the ground-down, the despised and excluded. It is not a coincidence that so much of the ministry of Jesus was focussed on Galilee 'of the nations' – that borderland of mixed races and diluted religion. Nor is it a coincidence that he took deliberate care to welcome to his table tax gatherers and sinners.

It was inevitable that this new order of indiscriminate mercy would come into conflict with the old order. In the very earliest chapters of Mark's gospel that old order of church and state begin to gang up on him and plot his destruction (Mark 3.6). And that, of course, is what happened. They did him to death. All gospel writers devote what seems to be a disproportionate amount of space to the arrest, trial, suffering and dying of this Jesus of Nazareth. This short life seemed to burst like a rocket into this world and then end in tragedy - another death of another good person ground down by a wicked world. The gospel writers are frank about the harsh reality of this doing to death and the impact it had on his followers. One of those followers betrayed him, another denied that he ever knew him and they all forsook him and fled. It was the failure of a mission. Human brutality seemed to have snuffed out that rule of mercy.

And yet something transformed this disaster – something turned a frightened bunch of men into a movement spreading both east and west. The communication system of the Roman Empire meant that it could travel to Rome itself where, despite intermittent but savage persecution, it was to become the religion of the Empire. And that 'something' which fired the enterprise, these Christians alleged to be what they called his Resurrection from the dead. The claim was that this Jesus, truly dead and buried, appeared as alive beyond his death - alive in a way that his friends could meet him again. They

did not always at first recognise him but then they did. 'It is the Lord' they said. Yes this was the real thing, the Jesus they knew, not a ghost, not a vivid memory, but himself – all that he was but mysteriously more so.

These witnesses were clear that his so-called 'rising' did not mean a denial of the reality of the cross. There were rival accounts told by those who could not take that this Jesus was a flesh and blood human. These, whom we call 'Docetists' who saw the human body of Jesus simply as a disguise, told the story of Calvary as one of a human body suffering, but the 'real' Son of God floating above it all, impassive and untouched. But the gospel witnesses rejected this – this Risen Lord carried the real scars of that suffering. That bodily past was not wiped out but carried through to Glory. It is important to notice that one of the earliest debates on the understanding of Jesus, witnessed to in the New Testament, was not with those who failed to see the 'godness' but with those who could not take this Jesus 'come in the flesh' (see Johanne epistles.)

The followers of Christ had embarked upon a journey to express what they had been given in Jesus. In the New Testament we can overhear various writers laying hold on traditional words and images of Israel, bending and straining them to bear adequate witness to his reality. Thus he is seen as 'the image of the invisible God', 'the word of God made flesh' – so that he who has seen Jesus 'had seen the Father.' So the journey began which led to what we call the doctrine of the Incarnation – God in our human flesh and blood. Yes this was a real human life, of one born of a woman, who as he grew as a child grew not only in stature but in knowledge and understanding,(Luke 2.52) a human being who knew not only tiredness and hunger but also loneliness and fear(Mark 14 – Gethsemane) – one who was tempted as other humans are tempted(Hebrews 4.15). This was real humanness, not just physical, but emotional and psychological was well – Jesus was human through and through.

And yet it is through this complete humanity that the life of God is lived. Jesus was not, like the Roman emperors, raised up to be a god – nor a human so good that he achieved divinity like a public servant raised up to the House of Lords. The initiative, his followers came to see, was always God's. He was the word, the expression of God from his very conception. That is what the story of the annunciation is really about and why it is that his Mother can truly be called Mother of God. From the moment of his conception Jesus had embarked upon a life's journey through all its stages, from womb, to cradle to grave, in all of which the life of God is expressed. So recent theologians (e.g. Karl Rahner) have spoken of Jesus as the original sacrament – the foundational sacrament of God – the visibility of the invisible God. This is only to restate the Church's confession – Jesus Christ truly God and truly human.

Note that we are not saying that Jesus is half God and half human. There were those who simply could not accept that the suffering passable Jesus could be the expression of the eternal impassable God, so he had to be a creature, highly exalted, but one-step down from God. That was the Arian view which seemed simpler and more acceptable to many who had been brought up to believe in a hierarchy of divine and semi-divine creatures connecting us humans with the mystery of God. Indeed it was for a while the official religion of the empire, a faith expressed and promoted in fervent and jolly hymns which the followers of Arius sang in the streets and markets. The Catholics fought back with a song of their own, a song which is now called the Athanasian Creed and which declared; 'the right faith is that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is both God and Man. He is God, of the substance of the Father begotten before the world, and he is Man, of the substance of his mother, born in the world.'

Such was the affirmation, which the Christian community made about the mystery of Jesus. They did not think that they had solved the mystery. In 451 the Council of Chalcedon produced what has been called its 'definition' but in truth this was simply a statement of the mystery. 'We confess one and the same Christ, the

Son, the Lord, the Only-Begotten, in two natures unconfused, unchangeable, undivided and inseparable. The difference of natures will never be abolished by their being united, but rather the properties of each remain unimpaired, both coming together in one person and substance, not parted or divided among two persons, but in the one and the same only-begotten Son, the Divine Word, the Lord Jesus Christ.’ Nothing had been solved – the coming together of the divine and the human is not explained, so the journey to explore ‘the unsearchable riches of Christ’ after than Council continued and still continues.

This was not a puzzle to be solved by some bright theological Hercule Poirot but a mystery to be guarded from easy simplification and borne witness to in a constant hammering of words into shape. Of course in the end the reality of the Incarnation could not be reduced to words – for the Word was made flesh. So the Scottish poet Edwin Muir protests at the attempt to return the flesh back into mere word. ‘Word made flesh is here made word again, and God three angry letters in a book, and here the hook on which the mystery is impaled and bent, into an Ideological instrument.’(Edwin Muir Collected Poems – ‘The Incarnate One’.) So, all these quite proper theological explorations have to keep turning back to the person of Jesus, to the stories which those gospel writers tell, to that personal presence which goes on touching us through the sacraments and signs of our faith.

For our catholic faith is an earthy faith, one which is often more at ease with water, oil bread and wine than it is with words. And that instinct is right, bred into us by the earthiness of our roots in the Old Testament and the conviction that instead of escaping from flesh into words and ideas, that Word must in the end be always flesh. The catholic taste for seeing and touching relics is often frowned on as being either morbid or idolatrous but this is the same fastidiousness which would have us lay aside those crude stories of the Old Testament and which confuses spirituality with escape from the flesh. In this matter it is often the artists who are our surest guides. From the reserve of their earliest cautious

stylised images of Christ they were to move to that greater realism and humanism inspired by Francis of Assisi – so that amidst real people in a very real world we see the Word made flesh in the crying child in the manger and the suffering Christ on the cross. Faithful witness to this homeliness of the holy God was given not only by the art of painters but also in the development of Christian theatre where the mystery of the invisible God, 'that which was from the beginning' is experienced as that 'that which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands' – that inaccessible eternal life of God, made accessible to us in the Word made flesh (1 John 1. 1-3).



TALK 4 - HOLY SPIRIT BOND OF LOVE>

Jesus, the gospels tell us, prayed to that ungraspable mystery we call God and addressed him as Father – indeed as the very intimate Abba – Daddy. In St John’s gospel, Jesus says that ‘the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever he does, that the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son, and shows him all that he himself is doing.’ (Jn 5vv 19,20) Or again – ‘the Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand’ (Jn. 3v 35) In this relationship between Jesus and his Abba we are given a glimpse of the nature of the mystery of God. But when we come to pray, we pray ‘In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’ and give Glory to this Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So what about this Holy Spirit – where does he, she or it come in?

Now it is sometimes doubted whether Catholics have room for Holy Spirit. Do we not often live with an image of a somewhat distant Father, more at home being a judge than being very cuddly but with the human, more compassionate and understanding Jesus who pleads for us to that stern Father? And if he forgets to put in a word for us, well – there is always Mary his mother who can give him a nudge and remind him that he has, after all, died for us!(see Lingard ‘Hail Queen of Heaven’ verse 2.) But is then the Holy Spirit made redundant, turned simply into what is called ‘the soul’ of the Church – the petrol which drives the ecclesial car?

Now, in the Old Testament, the Spirit of God appears as the giver of rather rare gifts. So the talented craftsmen who built the tabernacle were said to be men of the Spirit (Exodus 35.), as were great heroes like Samson upon whom the Spirit descended with a rush and he goes out and smites a few Philistines (Judges 14.19). The prophet Ezekiel was said to have been lifted up and carried by the Spirit (Ezek.3vv12, 14.) When the going gets hard for Moses and he is persuaded to delegate some of his work to the 70 elders,

the candidates are gathered and the Lord comes down in a cloud and is said to have 'taken some of the spirit that was on Moses' and puts it on these elders. There is a sort of parcelling out of the Spirit of God's power – and then it is said that they prophesy (see Numbers 11). But there is an odd and rather important footnote. A couple of the candidates Eldad and Medad did not come to the Tent – they stopped in the camp. Perhaps they had overslept. But then the Spirit catches up with them and comes on them as well. Now Eldad and Medad also prophesy. Joshua gets very worked up at this unruly behaviour of the Spirit. 'My lord Moses, forbid them!' he cries. But Moses will have none of this petty-fobbing bureaucracy. 'Would that all God's people were prophets' he cries 'that the Lord would put his Spirit upon them.'

And it is this vision of the Spirit poured out on all, which is the hope of the prophet Joel (Joel 2.28). 'The day will come when God pours out his Spirit on all flesh.' And that, according to St Luke, is what happened on that Day of Pentecost, when in the wind and tongues of flame this Spirit comes upon the followers of Jesus (see Acts 2). This is the mighty Spirit, which blasts down the barriers of race and nationality and brings the human race together in the love of God. This is the Spirit which sets a group of frightened men and women ablaze, which becomes the very life-blood, the 'soul' you might say, of the Church.

But we need to go deeper. According to St Luke, after Jesus had been baptised by John in the river Jordan and was praying, the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him 'in bodily form as a dove' (3v21). And then, it is said, that Jesus 'full of the Spirit' returned from the Jordan and was 'led by the Spirit in the wilderness.'(4v1) Then, after the wilderness experience, Jesus returns 'in the power of the Spirit into Galilee' and, when he comes back home to Nazareth and is in the synagogue, the passage which he chooses to read from Isaiah, is the one which contains the words 'the Spirit of the Lord is upon me.' And from Nazareth we move on to Capernaum where the battle is launched between this one on whom the Spirit of God rests and the unclean spirits. For St Luke

the Son seems connected to the Father through Holy Spirit and the Church was to take up this theme of the ‘connecting’ Spirit as the ‘Bond’, the love, which binds Father to Son and Son to Father.

Of course this is the same Spirit that Luke, in his 2<sup>nd</sup> volume, the Acts of the Apostles, sees poured out at Pentecost on the followers of Jesus, binding us with Jesus to the Father. So St Paul says that it is through the Spirit that the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts. It is Paul who develops this image of our share in this ‘bond’ of divine love through the further image of ‘adoption’ (see Galatians 4). The Son is bound to the Father through Holy Spirit by ‘nature’ – that is how it has forever been before any of us were around. But now, as it were, we are ‘adopted’ into this divine family circle into this already existing giving and receiving of love. With splendid realism Paul states that we simply do not know HOW to pray – but then adds that this Spirit comes to our aid in our weakness (Romans 8). The Spirit who can see us through and through, who explores our very depths is able to take those inarticulate moans and groans which make up so much of our prayer and can make them part of the prayer of Jesus – that Abba Father before the inexhaustible mystery. We, the adopted sons and daughters, enter into and share the prayer of the Son, who is the Son by nature.

And this does not just apply to our Praying but to all our living. We are given a share in the life of this family, the giving and receiving of love. That is why St Paul insists that this living is not by Law but is the way of Freedom. ‘For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery.’ (Gal. 5 v1) But, as in all sharing in family life, this ‘freedom’ is not just a matter of ‘doing as I please’. We are to ‘use’ freedom through love to be servants of one another. (Gal.5v13). ‘Walking by the Spirit’ means showing in our lives the fruit of this Spirit of creativity – things like ‘love, joy, peace, patience, kindness’ and so on (Gal.5v22) The summons to Christian living is not to adherence to some rule book or to the dictates of some clerical nanny but to live, in this world, through

the Spirit God's very life, the life of the giving and receiving of love.

This life is seen as the breaking through of that longed for new age into this age. Christians are, says St James, 'a kind of first fruits', the first sample of the harvest to come. (James 1.18) and St Paul using the same image says that they have 'the first fruits of the Spirit' (Rom.8.23) Our call is to live the life of the kingdom to come, here and now on this earth. This is the source of both the joy and discomfort of our situation. St.Peter employs another image, that of the immigrant, telling us that we are 'aliens and exiles' of the kingdom in a foreign land (1 Peter 2.11) We have not yet arrived in that kingdom in its fullness; we are pilgrims on the way there, not yet 'seeing' but walking by faith, not 'possessing' the truth but, as St John says, allowing ourselves to be led by this Spirit into all truth. It is through this Spirit that even now, on the road, we can have a taste of the kingdom, a real share in that giving and receiving of love which is the life of God and so the life of that kingdom. So the heart of what we call Church is not made up of a set of institutions but of this 'communion', this sharing together in the friendship of God. Because the agent of this 'communion' is Holy Spirit, we may certainly call the Spirit 'the soul of the Church'.

But we must beware of treating Holy Spirit as our 'possession', under the control of church functionaries for we must not lose sight of that vision of the prophet Joel, the Spirit of God poured out onto all flesh. St Luke insists that the outpouring of Spirit on devout Jews and fellow-travelling proselytes at Pentecost is followed in the house of the centurion Cornelius by a second outpouring on the Gentiles (Acts 10). As St Peter concludes, God has no favourites; this Spirit is not to be caged. This 'wind blows where it will. (Jn.3.8) God goes free working everywhere with the energy of his love. This is why we see the activity of the kingdom, those acts of justice, mercy and love not just tied up in the Church, but here, there and everywhere. Which is why on that Day, when all things at last become clear, Jesus says that many who have served him in

this life will have done so without knowing what they were doing. 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry and fed thee, or thirsty and give thee a drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee? – And the King will answer them 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.' (Matt. 25) These are the ones whom the great theologian Karl Rahner has called 'Anonymous Christians'. This means, says Pope John 23<sup>rd</sup> that those who believe that they know whom they are following dare not look out at the world with bleak hostility, suspicion or fear. Instead we are always to be trying to 'read the signs of the times', looking for the Spirit's activity, peering to see the face of Christ in unlikely places. For our God is always the God of surprises – his love so much bigger than we imagine. As the old hymn of Fr Faber has it:

There's wideness in God's mercy  
Like the wideness of the sea.  
For the love of God is broader  
Than the measures of man's mind;  
And the heart of the Eternal  
Is most wonderfully kind.



TALK 5 GOD – HOLY TRINITY.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit – so we pray. It is not only, says St John, that ‘we are to love one another; for love is of God’ but also quite simply ‘God IS love.’ (1Jn. 4:7&8.) At the heart of the story of Jesus we are shown the Son loving the Father and the Father loving the Son and, moving between them both, as the bond of love, is the one we call Holy Spirit. The ungraspable mystery is revealed as the mystery of love. It is not just a matter of us being loved by God – though that of course is amazingly true – but that, before there were any of us to be loved, God was still perfect complete love – as it were ‘having the space’ within the divine for the giving and receiving of love. God does not need us, need a world, need a universe, to be a loving God.

Go back to that scene of the Baptism of Jesus. There is the Son standing in the waters of the Jordan – there is the Voice from heaven declaring who the Son is – and there is the hovering Dove connecting the Voice and the Son. Now – where in this picture do we see God? In which character of this drama is the mystery of God revealed? The answer must be – in all three. God is revealed in this interaction of love.

Does this then mean that Christians are not really monotheists, worshipping the One God but that they are, at least closet, tritheists, worshipping three Gods – so deserting that Abrahamic family of faiths? That is the continuing charge of our cousins in religion, Judaism and Islam. Although, proclaims the Athanasian Creed, the Father is God, the Son God and the Holy Spirit God, yet ‘there are not three Gods but one God’. What, we believe, has been enriched for us is our understanding of the nature of this divine oneness. As one 19<sup>th</sup> century theologian (FD Maurice) put it we do not worship ‘a bare mathematical notion’ – but a unity, which embraces diversity. This, of course, involves a real revolution in

our understanding of God. Gone is the image of the sole lone dictator God before whom we can but grovel in abject submission. Gone too are those hierarchical pictures with Father as the Top man, the Son a bit lower and the Holy Spirit running a poor third. Instead of a straight line the image of Trinity is the triangle: 'in this Trinity there is no before or after, no greater or less; but all three Persons are co-eternal together and co-equal.' Instead of the models of hierarchy or dictatorship – there is the model of the community of love between equals. And that should have distinctly revolutionary consequences for how we understand both the life of the church and the life of human society. So the Athanasian Creed is not a plodding piece of theological pedantry but rings out as a manifesto for living. 'The Catholic faith is that we worship One God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity.'

A medieval poem, which we often sing as a Christmas carol 'Tomorrow shall be my dancing day' captures the vitality and movement of the divine life. Here that life is seen in the image of a dance of love. Onto the dance floor of this world comes, the Son as the divine Dancer, who dances amongst us in our flesh and blood the dance, the movement of the giving and receiving of love. And why does he do it? To call us his 'true loves' to that dance – to catch up the lonely wallflowers into this divine movement.

It seems to me that this image of the dance helps us to see that to worship 'God in Trinity and Trinity in unity' has very practical implications. Instead of this talk about Trinity being a weird conundrum or a convoluted theory, it actually shows us what our faith is like, what it offers and where it leads us. Being caught up in this great divine movement of the giving and receiving of love is rather different from having to obey the arbitrary rules and regulations of the Top Person. Instead of being offered just a way of rescue from the grip of sin, we are offered as well some glimpse of what we are being rescued FOR – some vision of the goal of human life. We are made for love – love for one another rooted in that love which is God.

This is the way of love, which we can begin to experience here on this earth, in this present age but we reach our fulfilment only in that Kingdom to come, in what we now call heaven. What this final life will be like we do not know, admits St John. (1Jn.3-2)- that is we have no photo no Satnav of the heavenly Jerusalem but this we do know, he goes on, we shall be like him because we shall see him as he is. Instead of our present stumbling on in the darkness having to trust in the little bits and pieces of light we are given, then at last there will be a SEEING. In the heavenly City, says the writer of the Apocalypse, there is ‘no Temple’ (Apoc. 21.22). That might seem odd as the goal of religion. Getting rid of churches at last! But here there is no longer any need for those signposts to point us to God. Here he is the very life and light of the City. The clouds will clear away, the darkness end and there will be clarity. But not the sort of clarity which for an eternity might spell endless boredom – but a seeing into ‘the unsearchable riches of Christ’ which will entice us ever onwards. We are in for an eternity of exploration – the joyful discovery of ever more treasures.

This ‘seeing’ says St John will be a creative seeing – it is the sort of seeing which is life-changing. We shall become like him- that is the promise. We shall be drawn ever deeper into the activity of love – so that we shall love one another as we have never loved before. All the incompleteness, the loose ends of our relationships will end in fulfilment. This is in stark contrast with those who have seen our human destiny as the flight of lone souls to the lone God – a solitary pilgrimage to a privatised heaven. If the very life of God is not the life of the lonely Top Person but the life, the interaction of love – then to be ‘like him’ is to be part of that same interaction of love. So the Apocalypse sees our journey ending not in bleak isolation but in a City(21.2) where humans live together in solidarity and friendship.

But this life in the City of God, this being caught up in the life of God, does not mean the loss of our individuality – as if we were like little drops of water destined to be absorbed in the vast sea of

the Divine. So catholic faith resists the blandishments of Reincarnation – a future life as something else. The Triune God whose life we are to share is one in whom the ‘persons’ are not confused. ‘There is one person of the Father, another of the Son, another of the Holy Spirit.’ The integrity of the so-called ‘persons’ of the Trinity is preserved. So our faith affirms the value of our individuality in its stubborn insistence on the resurrection of the Body – which holds that we come to our fulfilment, as we are, Tom, Dick Jack and Jill. We shall be ourselves only more so.

For all this is to do with our share in Christ’s Easter victory over death. ‘Christ is risen; we are risen’ – so in song we affirm our being raised with Jesus. As I have already said – the Rising of Jesus is not his return to his former earthly life but a carrying of that life forward into Glory, to the fulfilment, the completion of that life. So, in his great classic passage on this 1 Corinthians 15, St Paul, teases out the themes of both the discontinuity of death and its continuity. ‘How are the dead raised up and with what body do they come?’ That which thou sowest is not that body that shall be but bare grain...But God giveth it a body as it hath pleased him.’ So there is a distinction between, what the Apostle calls, ‘the physical body’ and ‘the spiritual body’. This same tension between discontinuity and continuity is found in the stories of the Resurrection appearances. There is something mysteriously different about this Risen Jesus – one minute he is here and the next he is not – and when he is here, he is not always recognised. But when he is recognised, they know full well that this is the real thing, no ghost, no spirit, no mere memory but the Jesus who had walked with them on the roads of Palestine. ‘It is I myself’ – that is the cry of Jesus, which we believe, will also be our cry: ‘Yes it is I myself – yes the same old funny thing but now come to my fulfilment in the Love of God.’ It is the solidity of our identity, which is witnessed to by the resurrection of the body. So in his story ‘The Great Divorce’ – all about an outing from purgatory to heaven – C S Lewis shows that it is the visitors from below who are thin, wispy and insubstantial while those at home in heaven are

solid, frighteningly substantial. No weight-watchers in heaven – it seems.

This ‘earthiness’ I have suggested throughout these talks, is a characteristic of our faith in the Incarnation. At Journey’s end it is not jettisoned but carried through to Glory. Such is the great good news, which we proclaim on the feast of the Ascension. Incarnation, insists the Athanasian Creed, is not ‘the conversion of Godhead into flesh but the taking humanity into God.’ There was, even within the last century, an old Oxford don who, when he lost a tooth, carefully preserved it so that it could be buried with him. He was determined not to arrive at the heavenly Banquet without the means to enjoy it. That is a rather extreme literalism – suggesting the life of the world to come as a simple extension of this one. Discontinuity as well as continuity has to be preserved. But we have to beware of a flight from earthiness. The fullness of Christian hope is not jettisoning but transfiguration, as the old hymn ‘Jerusalem luminosa’ has it:

O how glorious and resplendent,  
Fragile body, shalt thou be,  
When endued with so much beauty,  
Full of health and strong and free.’

Now there’s something to look forward to – and I believe this embracing of the earthly to be an insight of unexpected and important relevance for our times. In the great picture of the coming Kingdom in Isaiah 11, we see earthly creation not jettisoned but carried to glory. ‘The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. – They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.’ St Paul seems to be taking up the same theme in Romans 8 where he writes: ‘The creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God, for the creation was subjected to futility (but subjected in hope) because the creation itself will be

set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God.’

All this has something to say of our human solidarity with the rest of the created order. Instead of seeing humans as just having dominion over lesser creatures and the fabric of our world, here is instead a picture of the solidarity of creation, all bound up together in the bundle of life, sharing common earthy roots and a common hope of glory. Instead of a vision of salvation, which cuts humanity off from this material world, a world which is destined for the dustbin, while we float away to some distant heaven – somehow creation itself can come to share in ‘the glorious liberty of the children of God.’ How to make sense of this is not easy to see. Clearly we have to avoid the crude literalism of our Oxford don but we have to find ways of embracing this wider vision of salvation. For we know indeed that the whole of creation does groan in travail and that a care for this fragile suffering creation needs to be built into our understanding of God’s healing work. And that at least involves a reshaping of the notion of human ‘dominion’ into that of stewardship, care and responsibility for this fragile earth. Perhaps again this is an insight witnessed to more effectively by poetry than prose – in Francis of Assisi’s Canticum of the Sun:

All creatures of our God and King,  
Lift up your voice and with us sing.

There is an affirmation of our roots in this material world, our solidarity with all creatures and the recognition of our vocation to be the servant Priests of creation. We are able to give voice to the universal celebration of that Triune Love from which we come and to which we go.