

An Irrelevant God? A Sermon for Quinquagesima

Exodus 34 vv 29-35 p94, 2 Corinthians 3 v12 – 4 v2 p1160, Luke 9 vv 28-36 p1040

By the word of the LORD were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth. Psalm 33 v6.

And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth. John 1 v14.

For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Hebrews 4 v12.

Classic Christianity proclaims that God is all in all. He not only created everything that exists, but He is also responsible for everything that happens. So we sing:

He only is the Maker of all things near and far;
He paints the wayside flower, He lights the evening star;
The winds and waves obey Him, by Him the birds are fed,
Much more to us, His children, He gives our daily bread.

If you recognise that God is like that, every sunset is a reason to be thankful, every meal deserves a grace and prayer is the natural response to every problem.

God is interested in us as individuals and He cares about the way we live our lives. Classic Christianity teaches that God not only looks after each human being, but also that He judges us for the way we live. Every one of us is accountable to God for what we do in our lives. God's Law is revealed in the Bible and taught by the Church. We are rewarded or punished as we deserve (in this world and the next) and the standard by which we are judged is God's Word, to which Holy Scripture bears witness.

That is classic Christianity. It is my fear that the world in which we live is drifting away from classic Christianity towards a practical atheism in which God, if He exists at all, is largely irrelevant. It is also my fear that we, who call ourselves Christians, are in danger of drifting with the world towards the rocks of atheism, instead of fulfilling our true vocation, which is to act as a light to warn of the dangers and to illuminate the way.

As I said, classic Christianity sees the Hand of God in everything. Every flower that blooms, every bird that sings is a miracle. God makes the sun rise and set. Children are a gift from the LORD. The lions roaring after their prey, seek their food from God. This is the world of Jesus, Who said that not a sparrow falls to the earth outside the love of God. For Jesus, God feeds the birds and clothes the grass of the field with the wild flowers. Will He not much more feed you, O ye of little faith?

But we are too sophisticated to share the naïve faith of Jesus. With all the blessings of modern Science, we think we know how the world works. The sun rises and sets because the earth is spinning. Crops need fertilising not blessing. If you are ill, you take medicine rather than pray. God is a hypothesis of which we believe we have no need. There is no room for God in this world. People are either atheists – believing that the Universe exists in itself and that there is no God – or they are deists – believing that God created the Universe a very long time ago and set it to run (like an immense and complex mechanism) according to certain

rules and principles, but not being at all involved in every day affairs. Deism (believing that God is a remote mechanic) is practically the same thing as atheism. There is no immediate reason to be thankful for a particular flower or a meal or the birth of a child. All these things are simply the effects of the blind operation of scientific laws. Neither is there any point in prayer if God does not intervene in the day to day running of the Universe - unless perhaps it is to make the person saying the prayers feel better.

We are also too sophisticated to share Jesus' naïve belief in divine Law and its concomitant judgment and the need for forgiveness. For a start, our society does not really believe in moral absolutes. "Everything is relative. It is all shades of grey, no black and white. We are all entitled to our opinion and who is to say that anyone else's opinion is wrong? If there are such things as "right" and "wrong", who can say with any certainty what is right and what is wrong?"

The Christian belief that the Bible reveals the Word of God and that the Church teaches that Word, depends on the belief that there is a God and that He does intervene in the affairs of this world. If we believe that God does not intervene, He did not inspire the writers of the Bible. In that case the Bible would have no more authority to guide our conduct than any other collection of ancient writings. Unless God truly has inspired His Church with the Holy Spirit, what the Church teaches is entitled to no more respect than the lobbying of any other pressure group or political movement.

In practice, many Christians do not base the way they live their lives on what the Bible teaches. They derive their values and their ethics from the world we live in and then selectively quote the Bible to justify themselves. The Church hesitates even to suggest to the world that our way, Christ's way, may be better than theirs.

Then there is the question of reward and punishment. Our society has lost the sense that punishment is part of the moral order, balancing out the evil we do. We liberals recoil from the idea of punishment altogether, while neo-conservatives advocate punishment as a means to an end, as a deterrent or a way of reforming the bad guy. We find it hard to conceive of a God Who punishes either in this world or the next. I guess that people generally believe vaguely that, if there are such places as Heaven and Hell, most people (certainly they and the people they know) will finish up in Heaven. "If there is a God, He must surely be too nice not to let people in just because they did not believe in Him or take much notice of Him during their life on earth."

So we have Deism, a practical atheism, a God Who, if He exists, is irrelevant. There is no point in saying "Thank you" to God if He did not intervene to create this flower or that bird. There is no point in praying if God does not intervene in the affairs of this world to make a difference. The standards by which Christians try to live are no different from the standards of everybody else. There is no reward or punishment in this life or the next. The Bible is no more special than any other book. Church services come to focus more on the worshippers (and their perceived needs and wishes) than on the One Whom we claim to worship. If we are becoming deists, it is not surprising that Sunday is no longer special, people do not prioritise prayer or bible reading and that church-going is dying out. God is largely

irrelevant to our lives. Faith makes no real difference to the way we live now or to our prospects for eternity. Religious observance is therefore no more significant than leisure and less important than career and family.

Deism not only undermines religion; it also has a profound effect on our understanding of what it means to be human. On the one hand, deism (like atheism) appears to make us masters of the universe because we have no God to answer to for what we do. On the other hand, however, deism (like atheism) reduces us to the status of highly evolved animals. We can no longer regard ourselves as made in the image of God, dust of the earth become living souls by the inspiration of the Breath of God.

Good News! We can redeem the deist and make him once again a theist – a believer in the living God Who is all in all. Our redeemer is Jesus, properly understood. The Christian doctrine of Creation is not that God made the Universe billions of years ago and set it to run in accordance with scientific laws and with no more intervention from Him until, perhaps, the end. The Christian doctrine of Creation is that God made and sustains the Universe by His Word. Scientific laws are just as much the Word of God as the Ten Commandments. We discover scientific laws by observation and the Ten Commandments by revelation, but both kinds of Law are the Word of God. And the Word of God is Jesus. Scientific laws, the principles on which the Universe functions, are not impersonal, blind and amoral. Scientific laws are expressions of the Word of God; they are Jesus working out His Father's Will in making, sustaining, and indeed, transforming, God's World. Jesus fills the Universe and He holds it all together. We can, therefore, and must thank God for all the flowers and birds. They do all exist as expressions of His Love, the Love made flesh in Jesus. Birds and flowers are miracles – because miracles are signs of the presence of Jesus in God's World. The regularity which we discover as scientific law is another miracle, another sign that God loves us. Fertilising the crop is one aspect of blessing the crop. Medicine and prayer are aspects of the healing process. It is foolish to pray and then to refuse scientifically based treatments. It is equally foolish to believe that fertiliser or medicine make prayer superfluous. It is the fool who said in his heart that there is no God.

As we say, we pray to the Father in the power of the Spirit and in union with Christ. As Christians, we are the Body of Christ. We are children of God, and Jesus, God's Son, is our brother and one with us, we in Him, He in us. When we pray, we are joining Jesus in doing God's work of sustaining and transforming the world. Prayer is profoundly important and we should pray every day and about everything, individually on our own and corporately where two or three (or two or three hundred) meet in His Name.

Given that it is in God that we live and move and have our being, our faith profoundly affects our values and gives us the standards we try to live up to. Again Jesus is the Word of God. We interpret the Church's teaching and we understand the Bible in the light of Jesus. When He Himself radically re-interprets the Law, as He does, for example, in the Sermon on the Mount, He does so as the One Who is the fulfilment of the Law. The standard by which Christians have to live is Jesus, Whose love is obedient even to the death of the Cross.

If we truly believe that Heaven is the dwelling place of God, if we believe that eternal life is to be in His presence and to know Him as He knows us, we cannot take a place in Heaven for granted. Only the pure, only the holy, would have the right to go to Heaven. We cannot expect to get to Heaven because we deserve to be in God's House in all eternity. Neither can we expect God to turn a blind eye to our failings, letting us in simply because He is too nice ever to say "No" to His children. Again Jesus is the answer. We have an inheritance in Heaven because God loves us so much that He died for us in the person of Jesus Christ. We should regard our place in Heaven as priceless, not valueless.

The deist, then, can be redeemed by Jesus. If we recognise that Jesus fills and sustains the Universe, if we recognise that He is in us and we in Him, then Christian life, the whole of our lives, is walking with Jesus. Life is co-operation with the Holy Spirit. This means that we are thankful for everything He gives us. We pray for all our needs. We seek to live Christ-like lives and we say we are sorry when we fail. Reading the Bible and praying are vital to us every day. To take part in public worship is our duty as well as our joy. Participation in Holy Communion is something we do simply in obedience to His commandment; "Do this in remembrance of me." The blessings follow according to His promises. I spoke earlier of our perceived needs and wishes as worshippers. What we actually need is what all human beings actually need – to worship God in spirit and in truth because in Him we live and move and have our being.

Maybe the observances of Lent could be an opportunity for us to recover that sense that God is all in all and to use the means of grace, which He so generously offers us, to reconnect with Him, to feel that He is in us and that we are in Him, as we journey towards our eternal home in God for ever.