

What Religion Really Means (ii)

Behold I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come into him, and sup with him, and he with me.

I thought it would be good to carry on from where we left off last week. If God is so utterly other that we cannot even speak of Him without error, how can we possibly know Him? I'd like to start with the words with which we introduce the intercessions: *In the power of the Spirit and in union with Christ, let us pray to the Father.* As I said last week, *The Trinity is not a mathematical puzzle, but an unfolding of the mystery of God to include us in His eternal love.*

Let's first try to think about the Godhead, bearing in mind that any words we use, any ideas we have, are bound to be inadequate. In fact our words are so inadequate that we may well want to deny everything we say just as soon as we have said it and thought seriously about what we really mean. God is mystery. This does not mean that God is a puzzle to be solved or even that He is a puzzle beyond our solving. Mystery is the profound truth at the heart of existence, truth to which we must always aspire, but never, in this life, expect to attain.

As we said last week, God is not a being. God is being and everything which exists depends on God for its existence. Our language describes things in the universe. Our ideas derive from what we know of the created order. As we seek God, we seek the One Who both fills the universe and contains it, not the created order which we can know, but the Creator Who surpasses all knowledge.

We may experience God in prayer and contemplation. We may sense God in our awe at the wonders of creation or in our enjoyment of its beauty. Metaphors and images we discover in the Bible and in the teaching of the Church point us towards the knowledge of God. He is love. He is eternal. He is infinite. He is beauty. He is wisdom. He is justice. Yet He is not love as our understanding of love is limited. He is not eternal in our limited sense of eternity. He is not infinite as we can understand infinity – say the place where parallel lines meet. His beauty, wisdom and justice are not beauty, wisdom and justice as our weak intellects comprehend them. We deny what we think we know so that we may advance towards a greater knowledge of God, though we shall never fully know Him so long as we remain on earth.

Given that God is in all things, the Creator of all things and the Sustainer of all things, we can seek and find Him everywhere, at any time and in everything. We can always pray. We can always meditate on God. He is always with us.

We ought to avoid a false distinction between the natural and the supernatural. There is a tendency to suppose that there is a natural world – the world we can see and touch, the world investigated and described by Science – and that this natural world more or less runs itself predictably and in accordance with scientific laws. God does not seem to have much to do with this natural world, except perhaps as the One Who started it all up billions of years ago, the first Cause, the Originator of the Big Bang. Then, almost as an optional extra, we may

think there is a supernatural world, the possibility that God will intervene with a miracle or an answer to prayer, which will somehow make things different from the way they would have been if nature had been left to her own devices. If we think like this, dividing supernatural and natural, we may imagine that God is not present or active in everyday life and that we only encounter Him in church or during our prayer time. It is a false distinction between natural and supernatural. Everything depends all the time on God. We may not know how He is sustaining and directing our lives, but He is. *He's got the whole world in His Hands.*

This means that, as St Paul says, we ought to be thankful in all things. We ought always to pray. We ought always to act in accordance with what we believe to be God's Will. When we pray, we seek to align our wills with His Will, to pool our love with His Love and our prayers become part of His providential plan for the ordering of the Universe. We are not telling Him what He doesn't know or suggesting something He might not have thought of or asking Him to intervene in opposition to Nature or Science. Prayer is working with God in order to achieve His loving purposes. So we are thankful in all things, not just when we think we've been specially or unexpectedly blessed. We seek to do God's Will in our personal relationships, our paid employment and our shopping trips, not just in those areas of our lives which we attempt falsely to distinguish from the rest as "spiritual."

God is in everything and God sustains everything that is. Human beings, however, are special. The Bible tells us that God breathed into us the breath of life and made us living souls. Human beings are made in the image of God. We are created to love and to be loved, to love God and one another. God is in everyone and everyone is made in God's image. If we are truly seeking God, we will *live in love and charity with our neighbours*. As Jesus taught us in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, there is no end to neighbourliness. Every human being is potentially our neighbour and therefore the object of our love. If we truly seek God, there must be a compassion, a sympathy, in our relationships with all other people.

This brings us to Jesus, the perfect man. Last week, we spoke about the dangers of images and idols, but Jesus really is the image of God, the icon of God. In Jesus we see God as He truly is. We may know Jesus through meditating on what He did and what He said as recorded in the Bible. We may know Jesus individually in prayer. We may know Jesus in the fellowship of the Church, His Body. To know Jesus is to know God and to know God is to have eternal life.

This is not merely knowing about Jesus as a character from history or even knowing about Him as the hero of the *greatest story ever told*. This knowledge of Jesus is a unity with Him, a union, just as husband and wife become one flesh in marriage. It is *in union with Christ* that we pray to the Father. The Church is the Body of Christ and the Bride of Christ. Our unity is with Him and with one another and our public worship ought to reflect the glory of Heaven. If it does not, there is something sorely lacking.

Then there is the Holy Spirit. Although God has not left Himself without witness in the glories of Creation or in the great facts of revelation recorded in the Bible, we depend on His

initiative to make Himself known to us. Indeed we don't only need Him to make Himself known to us; we also need Him to give us the power to recognise His self revelation. This is what the Holy Spirit does. It is by the power of the Holy Spirit that we recognise Jesus as Lord and God as Father. So the Spirit is *the Lord and Giver of Life*. In the power of the Spirit and in union with Christ, we pray to the Father.

The Trinity is not a mathematical puzzle, a teaching invented by the Church to drive us mad trying to work out how three can be one and one three. Dare I say that God is beyond number, just as God is beyond words? God is one (in our terms) because He is simple, unchanging, the Source and Origin of everything that is. God is revealed as three because He perfects His human creation by uniting Himself with human nature in the man, Jesus Christ, and because He dwells in human beings (and indeed in all created things) to draw all things to Himself in love. God is one and God is three and the essential unity of God is divine love.

Human beings who accept the love of God in their hearts are caught up in this unity of the Trinity. We dwell in God and God dwells in us. The Holy Communion service both symbolises our union with God in Christ and the Spirit and makes that union more real. Holy Communion is a union with all God's people and a union with God. Holy Communion is the form of public worship which most clearly reflects the worship of heaven, which is why we say, *therefore with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven, we proclaim your great and glorious name for ever praising you and saying: holy holy, holy...*

God is so utterly other that we cannot know Him through our own human cleverness, virtue or strength. If we humbly wait on God, however, He makes Himself known to us. To know God is to have eternal life. St Paul puts it like this: *Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God.*