

St. Brendan's Parish, Muirhouse, Motherwell.

Biblical Paper Number One - 12th January 2020

God the Father

Many philosophers consider that it is possible to establish the existence of God by natural reason. How slight the knowledge of God acquired by natural reasoning really is, may be seen from the varied and distorted pictures of gods developed in ancient God centred religions. *The God Who Speaks* has delivered us from these false images.

By contrast, now that it is firmly established that the creation stories of the Book of Genesis are not in any sense historical or scientific, we can listen to them for the lessons they teach about ourselves, and also, principally, about *the God Who Speaks*. Already in the nineteenth century the Archbishop of Dublin suggested that *chapter 1 of Genesis* was not a history but a development of an Egyptian poem intended to celebrate the days of the week, so referring more to the present situation than to any past happening. *God speaks and the universe is in being according to God's Word*. It is only one step from this to see the account not as a - foreshortened history of the creation of the universe but as an imaginative way to give an analysis of present relationships. *It teaches such lessons as the equality and partnership of man and woman and the basic goodness of all that is, for the Creator is pleased with all his work of creation, indeed 'very pleased' with the final work, the creation of the human couple*. But the qualities which shine through are the love of the Creator for his creation, and especially for the human couple. God carefully takes stock before creating them: 'let us make man in our own image' and the account breaks into poetry to share the delight. The task of the couple is to continue and complete God's work of creation, not only filling the earth to make it teem with animals but completing the animals themselves by giving them names. The first surgeon carefully sews up the wound in Adam's side from which God has taken the part nearest the man's heart to create a partner for him. *Even after the fall God comes tenderly seeking them out as they hide in the shame of their nakedness. God goes to the trouble of personally sewing them clothes to cover and comfort them. Their disobedience means that they have no place in the peaceful and harmonious Garden of Delights*. But they are not thrust out before God has promised that evil will not prevail and that the seed of woman will be responsible for reversing the situation. *It is almost like a sorrowful, loving parent sending off the young couple in the knowledge of all the trials and troubles they will undergo on their gap year voyage*.

The same love and forgiveness continue as God continues to speak. At the Burning Bush Moses is given a personal name for God. This is already a sign of love and favour, an enormous advance in intimacy, placing Moses in a situation where he will trust his God through the dangers and worries of the Exodus. *If you have no name by which to address a person, you are always at an awkward disadvantage, held at a distance. The disclosure of a name is a sign of a desire to open a relationship*. A nagging feature is that it was a secret name; we do not even know how it was pronounced. It is as intimate as the mother/baby-name which every young child has with its mother. It should never be told to others. Indeed when the Voice says 'I am who I am', this seems even a brusque refusal to disclose its meaning.

It is not until the failure in the desert that Israel comes to know the meaning of the Name. Immediately after Moses receives the covenant on Sinai, Israel shows its quality. As Moses comes down from the Holy Mountain, carrying the Ten Commandments which are the terms of the covenant between God and Israel, he finds the people dancing round a golden calf.

This is the first move in the dread cycle of Israel's history, a four-fold cycle of infidelity, followed by punishment, moving then to repentance and rescue by the Lord; it is a cycle which continues right up to the exile. In despair Moses begs the Lord to take his life: he can cope no longer. Then he begs at least to see the Lord. But no man can see the Lord and live. Only then does he learn the meaning of the Name given at the Burning Bush, for God passes before him, as he crouches in the cleft of the rock, crying. 'The Lord, the Lord, a God of tenderness and compassion, full of mercy, forgiving sin' (Exod. 34.6–7). This is the definition of God which echoes down the Scriptures, quoted again and again and into the New Testament.

The Son

The analogy used by the early Church Fathers during the development of the Doctrine of the Trinity is still very useful. Ancient actors in a Greek or Roman theatre would hold before themselves a painted mask, which would indicate for the benefit of more distant members of the audience which *person* they were playing. Thus, several actors could play the one *person* or one actor play several *persons*. It is the same, or at least comparable, in the Trinity: we can see the same godhead speaking in different *persons*, so to speak, in different masks.

In Jesus God speaks in human form, but it is the same loving God speaking. He speaks to all classes of people, gathering in the sinners and tax-collectors like Zacchaeus. It is a universal love, for he speaks to Gentiles too. So he provokes and challenges the Syro-Phoenician mother and the Samaritan woman before finally drawing them to follow him. But like the God of the Old Testament, Jesus is no easy touch, for he can be demanding and severe. From the rich young ruler he demands total generosity, for the camel will not get through the eye of the needle. He will have no truck with the man who comes and asks him to adjudicate over an inheritance. Again and again he shows the divine power: by his word he imparts the gift of life to a daughter of Jairus (we even have the word, in Aramaic, '*Talitha, qum* – Little girl, get up') or to a Lazarus. By his word he wipes out the power of evil which has taken possession of a Gerasene demoniac or an epileptic boy. The evangelist brings out the parallel with the God of the Old Testament by describing the calming of the storm in exactly the terms and sequence of God raising and calming a storm at sea in Psalm 107:

²³ Some went doun to the séa in shíps, to tráde on the míghty wáters.

²⁴ These have seen the déeds of the Lórd, the wónders he dóes in the déep.

²⁵ For he spóke and ráised up the stórm-wind, tóssing high the wáves of the séa

²⁶ that surged to héaven and drópped to the dépths.

Their souls mélted awáy in their distréss.

²⁷ They stággered and réeled like drúnkards, for áll their skíll was góne.

²⁸ Then they críed to the Lórd in their need, and he réscued thém from their distréss.

²⁹ He stílled the stórm to a whíspér, and the wáves of the séa were húshed.

³⁰ They rejóiced beáuse of the cálm, and he léd them to the háven they desíred.

Here we see the same storm, the same helpless fear, the same appeal to the Lord, the same rebuke to the element and the same relief of the sailors. In John's version, also the same swift arrival at the haven they desired (Jn 6.21).

A further fascinating detail is that we can even recognise Jesus' way of speaking. Repeatedly he is shown in the Gospels as speaking with a four-member double-contrast in which he abrogates a human interpretation. On each occasion he returns from a distortion or misinterpretation to the real and profound meaning of Scripture:

What God has joined let no **man** separate (Mk 10.9)

Man is not made for the *Sabbath* but the *Sabbath* for **man** (2.27)

Abandoning the command of *God*, you **exalt** the tradition of *men* (7.13).

Give to **Caesar** what is **Caesar's** and to *God* what is *God's* (12.17).

In the first instance Jesus abrogates the permission 'for the hardness of their hearts' to divorce, returning to the basic story of the creation of man as male and female. In the second instance he again returns to the purpose of the Sabbath in the creation story ('not made for' or 'did not come into being' – the Greek verb *egeneto* which comes throughout the story of the - creation). In the third instance he abrogates a merely human tradition to return to the basic fourth commandment, the first commandment which has a promise attached, the commandment about family values. Jesus is not merely playing with words, for on each occasion he thrusts aside a superficial interpretation to return to the meaning really intended by the sacred author, the fruit of personal and intimate meditation.

Perhaps the most striking of all instances of Jesus' control of Scripture is on the commandment of love. To the enquiring lawyer he first asserts that the Great Commandment is the *Shema*', the greatest commandment of Judaism in Deuteronomy, 'And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and strength'. He then goes on to use the rabbinic principle of interpretation to subjoin the other commandment (*gezerah shawa*): 'two passages of the scripture in which the same words occur should be interpreted together'. The only other passage of the Hebrew Bible where 'and you shall love' occurs with a direct object is Leviticus 19.18, 'And you shall love your neighbour as yourself'. This is the warrant for Jesus to put the two commandments on a level. It is no surprise that the lawyer applauds this faultless piece of *exegesis*. Jesus knows his Bible; he is still speaking – and in a human way – through his own Scripture.

It is the same when Jesus speaks about himself. Many titles are offered him, 'Son of David', 'Messiah', 'Holy One of God', 'Son of God'; but the only one he himself uses is 'son of man', a mysterious title which must surely refer to the mysterious 'son of man' in Daniel 7.13, who will lead the People of God to triumph after persecutions. With this title he speaks of his relationship to the Father, of his suffering and triumph, of his limitless authority. It is perhaps at the heart of his conception of himself and his role. The Scripture is naturally at the heart of Jesus' thinking.