

A Sermon

Preached
in the Chapel

of

ALL SOULS COLLEGE

by

Euan Cameron

on

Sunday, 19 June 2011

Many of us here in this college, however we describe ourselves, are in one form or another engaged in something which one could broadly call history. Whether as philosophers, classical scholars, literary critics, students of art and culture, or just plain ordinary historians, we work with material left to us by past ages, remote or recent. We try to save worthwhile and interesting things from oblivion or neglect. We seek to make sense of them, to see patterns, to suggest explanations, to discern more abiding meaning behind the transient phenomena. We endue our subject-matter with validity for our present concerns: what drives those concerns may be intellectual debate in our discipline, or larger, broader themes in life and culture.

We are all therefore witnesses to creation, change and decay. Whatever we study, whether it is a movement of ideas, an empire, an economic process, or a poem, came into being through some creative act. The ingenuity of a human being, the unfocused energies of a mass of people, or the impersonal dynamic of the natural world gave our subject matter its existence. Then, the world being as it is, that creative process passed away. The empire crumbled, the idea fell out of fashion. The human life reached its natural end.

Yet we witnesses are also participants. Our efforts to remember and to explain are encompassed by the same fatal destiny as everything else. Whenever we write to describe, analyse or just to celebrate some past thing, we engage in an act of creation. The books which we write, the works which we create, must themselves go through a cycle of birth, reception, possible celebrity, digestion and absorption into the literature, and, eventually but inevitably, obsolescence and probable oblivion. 'Speak for yourself', someone may be saying inwardly or under their breath. And of course I am doing. But very few works achieve the status of timeless classics.

The gift of literary or scholarly immortality is usually granted long afterwards, by the judgment of generations still unborn. Sometimes the unpredictable interplay of circumstances and talent, the crisis of the moment, or the mental and spiritual needs of one age as it reflects on an earlier one, select some people and their works for special significance. Martin Luther knew he was a celebrity, but did not expect his fame to last, because the world would end soon. Thomas Hobbes believed he was right, but suspected no-one would take any notice. Dietrich Bonhoeffer clearly planned on being a theologian-pastor rather than a Protestant saint and martyr.

We are not, though we may think we are, engaged in creating things for all time. Rather, we are participating in a cycle of creation, decay, and new birth as inevitable and as fundamental as the cycles of the seasons. We plant and grow trees whose fallen trunks will eventually nourish the fungal growths of the next generation of writers [and if you wish briefly to indulge yourselves by thinking of your intellectual successors as a fungus, you have my permission to do so ...]; and so the forest lives on.

However, what we witness may also be a cosmic battle between creation and decay, in which the likeliest natural outcome seems to be the gradual victory of disorder. Physicists and philosophers of science often discuss theories of entropy, by which ordered systems gradually give way to more disordered and un-structured but more stable states of matter. This broader reading of physical laws is controversial, and I do not propose to go further into it. Let us just note this: the fear that complex elaborate structures must naturally decay is deeply embedded in the way we see our predicament.

Cheerful stuff? Well, this is not a sermon on Ecclesiastes, with its refrain of ‘all is vanity and vexation of spirit’,¹ and I have no intention of stopping at this rather gloomy point. Today is Trinity Sunday, a day feared by preachers almost as much as by the congregations who have to listen to them. It offers, though, a wonderful opportunity to reflect on how we are called to see our predicament in the light of eternity, and in the light of the salvation narrative which we have heard again since the beginning of Lent. Unlike Alastair Campbell, I do ‘do God’: and I mean today to confront some ideas about the divine with the often tragic drama of our world.

II

Our concept of God is a storytelling and a relationship. First, a creative, designing, building, sustaining principle brings order out of chaos, separates dark from light, and produces beautiful new forms of being. The Revised Common Lectionary readings for today begin with the creation story from Genesis. After the work of creation, ‘God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good’.² Self-criticism is not an obligation on the Supreme Being. The Divine has the privilege of not always saying, as we do, ‘I wish I had done that bit differently ...’ God, you might say, does not need to issue a second edition.

And yet, in a sense, God does exactly that. As long as the world was a purely natural organism, it *was* very good: it functioned as intended and designed. Yet as soon as consciousness reached the point where ethical values (or as Genesis calls them ‘the knowledge of good and evil’) entered into the world, it rapidly became clear that all was *not* well. The created order was in fact a long way from reflecting the perfection of love. Growing to ethical awareness is a dangerous adolescence.

At that point the narrative does something extraordinary. Rather than re-working the creation, as in many creation myths, God enters into the universe as an *incarnate* being. The divine nature becomes paradoxically and incomprehensibly subject to the possibility of death and decay, fragile, and temporary. The personal presence of God in time and space teaches, heals, suffers rejection, undergoes torture, and dies a criminal’s death. The

1 Ecclesiastes 1:14 (and repeatedly thereafter).

2 Genesis 1:31.

same essence which created organic complexity by the power of the divine Word, now becomes part of the predicament of time, decay, and memory.

So it seems that the dialectic of creation and decay, of design and fragility, of structure and crumbling, is not only written into our experience of the world – it is written into the very heart and being of God. ‘Written into’, I have just said. You may fairly ask what that is supposed to mean. Am I claiming that our perception of birth, growth, and decay embodies or reflects some mysterious lesson about the nature of a god ‘out there’? Or does this insight only mean that we have designed a deity around perceptions of our own predicament? Was it merely that some super-sophisticated late Hellenistic philosophers, whom we know as the Fathers of the Church, embodied the dialectic of generation and corruption into a personal deity, and then fathered the idea on to a travelling Rabbi from Galilee executed at Jerusalem? Does our universe reflect the image of a relationship at the heart of the transcendent God, or is it the other way around – does our synthetic image of God reflect how we see our world?

Both interpretations contain some measure of truth, and (I suggest) neither need in fact exclude the other. We should *expect* that an incarnate God will reveal the divine nature gradually, progressively, through the everyday processes of cultural change and human reflection. That is how the hidden God chooses to be revealed. The God in whom we are all called to place our trust is *precisely* one whose image will develop as we reflect on wonderful yet mysterious events.³ One who can turn fishermen and tax collectors into saints and martyrs can even make use of the ideas and arguments of professional intellectuals in the ‘tiring superculture’ of late antiquity and beyond.⁴ There is hope for us all.

III

So, the dialectic of eternity and vulnerability, of creative potential and exposure to injury and death, is written into our very notion of God. However, God creator and incarnate does *not simply* mirror our vision of the cosmic predicament. (I have been misleading you slightly for the last few minutes.) This idea of God does *not* accept that creating and incarnate principles are locked into a constant cosmic struggle. Still less is the universe doomed to constant creeping entropy. Yes, faith *confronts* that state of affairs: but it then makes, as it often does, an outrageous counter-claim.

It says that the relationship between creation and vulnerability is not one of endless conflict, but of complete interdependence and mutual love. The Spirit, the principle of

3 This relates to the thesis of Wolhart Pannenberg (ed.), in association with Rolf Rendtorff, Trutz Rendtorff, Ulrich Wilckens, *Revelation as History*, trans. David Granskou (New York and London: Macmillan, 1968), esp. 131–52.

4 The phrase comes from Ernst Troeltsch, *Religion in History*, ed. and trans. J. L. Adams and W. F. Bense (Edinburgh, 1991), 52.

love, binds together the creator and the incarnate (or, if you prefer more traditional language, the Father and the Son). *Love* makes the pairing of Father and Son into a Trinity, but also binds the two together as an eternal and indivisible unity.

We owe this vision, of the Holy Spirit as the love binding together the first and second persons of the Trinity, to St Augustine of Hippo. Augustine could write ferocious and often deplorable things, but he could also write with surpassing beauty. He wrote in *On the Trinity*:

This Holy Spirit, according to the Scriptures, is neither of the Father alone, nor of the Son alone, but of both; and by virtue of that, intimates to us the shared love, with which the Father and the Son reciprocally love one another.⁵

This is an extraordinary claim, for it goes to the very heart of how our world is made. Creation and corruption, eternity and temporariness, even structure and chaos, are bound together so closely that we should think of their divine embodiments as one substance, one whom the Athanasian Creed tells us we must not divide, even as we carefully avoid confusing the persons. What binds these ‘persons’ or ὑποστάσεις together is love: the utter commitment of the one unto the other, of which our human experiences of love are mere facsimiles and analogues.

IV

However, the claims of faith do not stop there. If classical philosophers had had their way, the Trinity might have reflected only some sort of cosmic dance of the blessed spirits, a remote, inaccessible relationship and interaction between divine beings. Mere humans could not possibly have aspired to make contact with this abstract entity, let alone to understand it.

Here, again, revelation outrages us. It insists that the Spirit not only binds the divine persons together, but that it extends itself *outwards*, reveals itself to us, dwells in the inner essence of our being. Paul unintentionally created one of the great sentences of Christian liturgy, the ‘Grace’, at the end of the Second Letter to the Corinthians. On the whole that letter is rather a disagreeable text, where Paul engages in reproaches to his correspondents, setting a poor example of pastoral technique: it is full of passages wisely excluded from any cycle of readings. Yet in the last verse Paul referred beautifully to the κοινωνία, the sharing, the communion or community, in traditional language the ‘fellowship’ of the Holy Spirit.⁶

5 Augustine *De Trinitate* Bk 15 ch 17:

Qui spiritus sanctus secundum scripturas sanctas nec patris est solius nec filii solius sed amborum, et ideo communem qua inuicem se diligunt pater et filius nobis insinuat caritatem.

6 2 Corinthians 13:13:

Ἡ χάρις τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ ἡ κοινωνία τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος μετὰ πάντων ὑμῶν.

Paul knew, none better, that to talk of participation in the Holy Spirit was a dangerous thing. Already at Corinth in the 50s CE people boasted of possessing the spirit by speaking ecstatically in incomprehensible tongues, a ‘gift’ which persists today where it is cultivated.⁷ Charismatics and mystics of all kinds have struggled to grow into the Spirit, as though it were something strange and exotic.

Here there is comfort in the very down-to-earth language of John Calvin. (After Paul and Augustine, one naturally turns to Calvin.) For Calvin, the Spirit was not the author of ecstatic utterances. The Spirit quite simply caused the good that we do in the ordinary business of life.

By means of [the Spirit] we become partakers of the divine nature, so as in a manner to feel his quickening energy within us. Our justification is his work; from him is power, sanctification, truth, grace, and every good thought, since it is from the Spirit alone that all good gifts proceed.⁸

V

The ‘three-person’d God’ may batter our hearts, as John Donne asked him to do.⁹ However, as Donne also complained, he declines to take our belief by force. Our maturity and responsibility, for better and worse, remain intact. The Trinity appeals to us through sympathy, by the intuitive, aesthetic appeal of a beautiful vision, by imperceptible forces leading us into unexpected places.

It calls us to see the cosmos, not as a place where creation and decay struggle endlessly into a black night of inanition – but as one where fundamental principles discourse eternally through pure love. And since that love does not remain confined within the Trinity, but overflows into and through everything that exists, nothing can ever, ultimately and eternally, be truly lost. God be thanked, our work is never done in vain.

7 See I Corinthians 12 and 14:1-33. Paul’s famous chapter in praise of love in I Corinthians 13 was written as a reaction against over-enthusiastic cultivation of charismatic utterance and the spiritual pride which it apparently provoked.

8 John Calvin, *Institutes* I. xiii. 14:

Sic per ipsum in Dei participationem venimus, ut eius virtutem sentiamus erga nos quodammodo vivificantem. Iustificatio nostra, eius opus est. Ab ipso est potentia, sanctificatio, veritas, gratia, et quicquid boni cogitari potest: quoniam unus est Spiritus a quo profluit omne donorum genus.

9 John Donne, *Holy Sonnets*, xiv.