

Sermon: The Truth of the Faith

Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholic faith...and the Catholic faith is this: that we worship one God in Trinity and the Trinity in unity. That is from the *Athanasian Creed* – which is not a creed and it is not by St Athanasius. It is in the Prayer Book where it prescribes we say it on major festivals. In fact, as if to deny the allegation that Reformation Protestants didn't have a drop of music in them, Thomas Cranmer instructs us in his preference that it be *sung*. We should remedy our long omission and have a go at it.

I have threatened you with some sermons on basic belief and so I ought to start with belief in God. I've spent my life doing the philosophy of religion and I confess I'm bored with it. As G.K. Chesterton said, *I tried being a philosopher once – but cheerfulness kept breaking in.* The trouble with philosophy when it thinks about God is that it starts in wrong place: it tends to start not with God, but with us – just another aspect of the galloping egocentricity and *Oh do look at me-ism* that is Original Sin.

The philosopher of religion begins his day's labour by going into his study and setting about proving the existence of God. In other words, he thinks his own existence is more certain than God's. Just put your pens down, as they say, close your eyes and think of the colossal arrogance which this procedure involves: the philosopher who is, let's say, fifty-one years old, with the first twinges of arthritis but some eggs and bacon inside him, proposes to hold court with God in the dock: *Hang on a minute, God and I'll let you know whether I'm going to allow you to exist or not.* Or, if he is a Jewish philosopher of religion, *Hang in there God and I'll see if you're really kosher.*

It may be pleasant for us to be able to blame the French for this. And there is some truth in it. For it was Descartes who began his philosophy by saying *I think*. So first making sure of himself, he presumed to adjudicate on God. But we might also blame a German: for it was Martin Luther, a little earlier than Rene Descartes, who made his *feelings about God* more immediate than God himself. But wherever the rot started, western philosophy has continued it ever since by making man the measure of all things. Modern man – that is man since the middle of the 16th century – has placed himself at the centre of attention and appointed himself the arbiter of all truth.

This egocentric view is so prevalent today – in fact it is universal. I shall not even bother to refute it for its self-refutation is obvious. I am not the origin of my own being. I cannot predict with any lively certainty where I shall be – or even *if* I shall be – at half past eight next Tuesday morning. The trouble with modern man is that he is so certain of his own opinions while being in the most radical uncertainty concerning the duration of his own being. Yes, Monsieur Descartes, you think therefore you am baby: but will you go on *ammung* if you stop *finking*? Well, it's preposterous – the idea that the basis of being could depend upon conjecture. *For which of you by taking thought can add one cubit to his stature?*

My friend Professor Antony Flew, who has been in the papers recently because he now believes in God after a lifetime of atheism, tells a lovely story about how he was sitting next to Wittgenstein at the Moral Science Club to hear a lecture. The lecturer began: *I think therefore I am* – and Wittgenstein turned to Antony and in a loud whisper said, *That's a bloody silly place to start!*

The Danish philosopher Kierkegaard knew a better place to start. He said, *It is one thing to stand on one leg and prove the existence of God; and quite another thing to go down on your knees and thank him.* This is much nearer the teaching of the Bible where our existence is revealed as the gift of God, where we are part of his creation. Why should we thank God? *For our creation, preservation and all the blessings of this life and for his inestimable love in the redemption of the world by Our Lord Jesus Christ for the means of grace and the hope of glory.*

Is there a God? Does God exist? Let's put it the other way around, as the detective says to the criminal *I am asking the questions.* It is God who asks the questions – to Job for instance: *Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth and all the sons of God sang for joy?* Or as the prophet Jeremiah ridiculed the sceptics of his age: *Can the clay mould the potter?* And if you want to get really serious, there's always the comedian W.C.Fields – the great man who said *Someone who hates children and dogs can't be all bad.* Fields was asked by a newspaperman what he thought about God, life, the universe and everything and he replied: *Well, I don't know who made the water, but it sure wasn't the fish.*

The only way following Descartes and Martin Luther was downhill. Their beliefs made man the centre of the universe and made us the origin of all explanation. Descartes in his *Fifth Meditation* said that existence belongs to God as having three angles belongs to a triangle. How kind of him to pay his Creator these metaphysical compliments! At least Descartes and the Reformation found a place in God for their scheme of things – albeit a much reduced place. The so-called Enlightenment gave God even less space and likened him to a great architect or supreme a geometrician. Oh and they probably threw in his annual subscription to the Lodge as well. But we had to wait for the modern age before we achieved the final meaninglessness of which the Reformation was the prophecy and foretaste. I shall say more about this when I talk about the sacraments next week.

It is philosophers of the modern age who deny not just the existence of God but who say that is impossible to know the truth about anything. If this be idiocy, it is consistent idiocy at least: for once God is denied then nothing means anything and everything means nothing. These modern philosophers – think of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault...yes, the French are always with us – say that *texts do not have meaning.* And, being consistent idiots, they write very long texts themselves to prove that texts do not have meanings. And they call it *Deconstruction.* And what do I call it? This is Sunday and we are in church so I shall avoid the word that first springs to mind and tell you instead what Humpty Dumpty in *Alice Through The Looking Glass* thought of it: the sheer nonsense of saying that *when I use a word it means exactly what I say it means – no more and no less.*

That is the self-contradiction to which those who begin by trusting themselves and doubting God finally consign themselves. This is what is meant by the saying about *losing your soul.* Our existence is derived and given. And the one who gives us existence is God, the Trinity in Unity. In the words of R.G. Collingwood, *God is our absolute presupposition.* Or in the spirit of that other great philosopher W.C. Fields: *We belong to God as the fish belong to the water.*

The Athanasian Creed starts, as we noticed, with the words *Whosoever will be saved*. And part of what this means is *Whosoever will save his sanity....* It is necessary to believe in God.

Well, the Athanasian Creed was written 1500 years ago in Latin. What does it mean in the language we speak today in the street? Enoch Powell knew more Latin than most, and this is how he translates for us those lines *Quicumque vult* whosoever will be saved:

The thoughts we hold about ourselves and our fellows and about our relation to the universe are overwhelmingly important, so important as to make the whole difference between true success in life and failure; between utter happiness and utter misery. Just any thoughts at our own option will not do; they have to be thoughts of a particular nature. Being each of us unique and bound by time, our failure, if we fail, cannot be made good. The tape cannot be run back, erased or edited. Once for all, believing what is true makes our eternity.