

Being with God Sermon Trinity VII 2006...

We're in church again, so let's talk about God. I'll start with a story – a story some people here have heard me tell before. But perhaps our friends in the Guild of Air Pilots and Air Navigators haven't heard it. It's a good story anyhow, so let's have it again. A friend of mine, a philosopher, now eighty-five years old, was taken under the wing of the great Ludwig Wittgenstein back in the 1940s. You know Wittgenstein – he was the philosopher in the Monty Python football sketch sent off for arguing with the referee.

Anyway, Wittgenstein and this friend of mine went to the Moral Science Club in Cambridge to hear a lecture about Rene Descartes. The speaker began, "I think, therefore I am". Wittgenstein turned to his companion and in a loud whisper said, "That's a damn stupid place to start!"

This is exactly what has gone wrong with the modern world when it thinks about God. Of course even in these disastrous times you're still allowed to believe in God. But ask most people and they'd say belief in God requires a leap of faith. They'd say reason can only take you so far, but then you have to make a decision. Either you believe in God or you don't. But this position involves the mistake that Wittgenstein pointed out. To start with the certainty of my existence and then try to proceed to belief in God's existence is a damn stupid place to start.

It implies that my existence is more certain than God's. And that is preposterous. It is Descartes' mistake. It is the mistake of the Enlightenment when metaphysics was given up and replaced by epistemology. Thinking became more important than being. Shakespeare understands this supremely in *Hamlet* when he speaks of reality being "sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought". In the great soliloquy in Act Three he identifies the basic issue, "To be or not to be – that is the question". Not thinking, but being.

When I start with myself rather than God, I get into all sorts of trouble. I plunge into a world of anxiety and dread because no matter how I might try through a million diversions to conceal it from myself – and we all do – I know deep down that my existence is uncertain and finite. The next problem when I start with "I" is about morality and judgement. For if I am the centre of things, then again we are forced to admit with Shakespeare, "There's nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so". That is the end of morals. It is the sad state of society today in which anybody's moral opinion is regarded as good as anyone else's. That is why we inhabit social anarchy and moral chaos.

But start with God and with God's law, and order is restored. There is more to be said. If I set myself up as arbitrator – shall I believe in God or not? Well, let's see, is there an "r" in the month? Or toss a coin. If I set myself up as judge, then I am supposing myself more intelligent than God. But my intelligence is fallible. I know it is, because I can recall my mistakes. God's intelligence is to be trusted ultimately and it is expressed in dogma.

I saw someone wince over there. It's because I've said a dirty word: "dogma". The modern world hates the idea of dogma. OK – take a look at the state of the modern

world. This is because it is generally thought that dogma is terribly restricting. It isn't. As G.K. Chesterton said, "The spike of dogma exactly fits the hole in the world". To say that dogma is restricting is as stupid as saying that the rules of arithmetic get in the way of mathematical thinking. Dogma is liberating.

So – we begin by submitting our being to the greater being of God. And we proceed to submit our intelligence to his – to God's intelligence as expressed in dogma. Practically when we do this we find we are not restricted at all but made gloriously free. This is because we are thinking what is true and real. A comparison: when you learn musical notation and counterpoint, you are in a position to begin being creative musically.

When you learn the letters of the alphabet, you are able to start to read and write. When you learn the times table, you can start to think mathematically. If anyone said to you, "Don't learn the alphabet – it'll stop you being able to read" – you'd say they were barmy. But somehow the modern world has got into its silly head the idea that to learn dogma is to restrict your understanding of the truth. As Wittgenstein said, "Damn stupid".

So far, so good. But it's not nearly far enough. For we are not disembodied mind. We are bodies, parts and passions. And God is an incarnate God. God is personal. God does not want us to stand on one leg and prove his existence. He wants us to go down on our knees and adore him. This is because he loves us. And he knows that we find true happiness only in loving and adoring him. As St Augustine says, "O God thou hast made us for thyself and our hearts are restless till they rest in thee"

God is not a schoolmaster ready to chastise us. He is not some abstract moral authority. God is love. And giving up yourself to God's love is the cure for all your heartache. This is not deep academic philosophy. It is practical wisdom. It's not like trigonometry or the differential calculus. It's more like baking a cake or mending your bike. It takes practice. And practice makes perfect.

All our unease, our anxiety and fear – or just that vague feeling of discontent – comes through our not giving up ourselves to the love of God. God is not beyond the stars. He is infinitely close. God gave you breath and he is closer to you than your breath. God wants your happiness. Ask him then. He is here, right here, beside you. Speak to him. Ask him to give you himself. Ask him to make you love and desire him. Ask him to give you the comfort of his presence. It is not a remote intellectual exercise – proving the existence of God like a theorem. It is a case of proving the being of God in your heart.

He is your lover and your friend. We are bodies as well as minds, not just intellect but feelings. God will comfort you if you ask him. Nag him to do it. "Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people saith your God... Like as the hart desireth the water-brooks: so longeth my soul after thee, O God... Why art thou so full of heaviness O my soul: and why art thou so disquieted within me. Put thou thy trust in God which is the help of my countenance and my God". The love of God comes readily to those who have most need.

Throw all your anxious rubbish on to God. Forget all your unease. Forget yourself.
Get yourself off your back. Let God be your emotional centre.

*Batter my heart, three-personed God; for you
As yet but knock, breathe shine and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o'er throw me and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn and make me new*