

# Coming to the Father : a sermon

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'Nobody comes to the Father but by me' (John 14 : 6b). Can we really take that literally? Can we even take it seriously? 'Nobody' (he is talking about the whole human race) 'comes to the Father' (he means God) 'but by me' (he means himself).

There are, I think, around four or five thousand million people alive today and countless millions have lived in the past; and most of them—apart from a few eccentrics—have thought about God one way or another, communally or individually. I mean they have thought about the mystery that things are, the mysterious purpose of human life, or however they have put it; and they have sought to come to God. There have been great religions devoted to meditating on these things, whole civilisations sustained by some kind of worship of God, there has been endless striving to come to the Father. And now, amongst all these teeming millions, it is being asserted that, after all, nobody comes to God except through this individual carpenter in Palestine.

The egoism is breathtaking. Surely there must be some mistake.

Let us then think about this for a minute or two.

First of all, St John is not saying that nobody sees or understands God except by getting to know Jesus of Nazareth. People can seek to understand God, they can wrestle with this problem or explore this mystery quite apart from faith in Jesus Christ. John does not think they will get very far, for he says 'No one has ever seen God'; but having faith in Jesus Christ will not get them any further. People can seek a way of life in which to be united with God, they can try to come to the Father quite apart from faith in Christ. They will not get very far; but they will not get any further by having faith in Christ.

Christians are not people who think that because they have faith they have an advantage; that they are better informed about God than other people or have reached a position closer to God than other people; that they have discovered the secret of coming to the Father. Christians do not claim to have any secret and private knowledge about God or to have discovered any new secret way to the Father.

We come to the Father in Jesus Christ not because he has revealed to us the way by which we may go. (Thomas wants to know about this and Jesus tells him that is not the point; that is not what he offers.) We come to the Father in Christ simply because Jesus is the way in which the Father comes to us: not first our way but the way the Father comes, the Father's truth, the life of the Father. And when the Father comes to see us in the human life of Jesus it is not to show us how to know, how to be successful at coming to him or at anything else. He comes to us in a complete failure, in one who suffers and is defeated, as a condemned and despised and executed criminal.

The *Word* of God is made flesh not to tell us something, to make us better informed; he does not show us how to teach the world new secrets; he shows us our ignorance, our failure to understand. Christians claim that they know of God. Christians think that anyone who claims to know God has set up some kind of idol in place of God. Christians say that they are in the dark; it is the special darkness they call faith. Christians are not *proud* of being in the dark; they just know that they are. Christians are not proud of failing and being defeated by the powers of this world; they just know they constantly will be, if they love as Christ loves. They would much rather not be in the dark and not be defeated, but they do not think it matters all that much, because their faith is not in themselves, in their success and their understanding. Their faith is in the power of God which appears as weakness, and in the wisdom and understanding of God which appears as folly. And they know it is by accepting this darkness and accepting this defeat that they will be given victory in light.

The thing that does make Christianity unique, really different from all the other wisdom teachings and religions, is not that it has a special secret but that it has no secret at all; it has nothing special to it. It has no way of its own, no truth or wisdom of its own, no life of its own. It has nothing of its own to offer: it just asks us to accept, to submit to, whatever God has to offer, to the way and the wisdom and the life which is God's. And if you ask: 'What is that?', Christianity will only take you to a defeated human being hanging from a cross. For the secular world looks for a wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified ... the power of *God* and the wisdom of *God*.

I am sure you all know the nasty story of the ecumenical gathering when one Divided Christian says to another: 'After all, aren't we all going to the same God, you in your way, and I in his?' But that really is what the Gospel says. It makes no claim to know the way, except to refuse to believe in any such claims. There is no Christian way of perfection that is better or worse than anybody else's: the actual gospel is that we do not need it; God is taking humankind, the human race, to himself. There are ways we can learn to be more human, to grow in

human virtues. There are no ways we can learn to become divine, to come to the Father; making us divine is God's business.

It was always an illusion to suppose that by wisdom or ascetic practices, by meditation or by building the Tower of Babel, we could come to the Father. The good news is that the Father comes to us. In one way, a negative way, Christians do perhaps understand God better; because they won't have any substitutes, any idols, any gods. They have the sort of clearer, uncluttered, understanding that atheists have—except that most atheists cultivate some little idol of their own on the quiet. But, apart from that, Christians do not expect or want *their* understanding of God to improve; they want to be taken over by God's understanding of God—and they do not mind much if, at the moment, this seems like nothing but greater ignorance for them.

This is what John is talking about at the beginning of his Gospel when he calls Jesus the Word of *God* made flesh. Jesus is God's Word, God's idea of God, how God understands himself. He is how-God-understands-himself become a part of our human history, become human, become the *first* really thoroughly human part of our human history—and therefore, of course, the one hated, despised and destroyed by the rest of us, who are frightened of being human.

In Jesus we can watch God understanding himself. God's understanding of God is that he throws himself away in love, that he keeps nothing back for himself. God's understanding of God is that he is a love that unconditionally accepts, that always lets others be, even if they want to be his murderers. God's understanding of God is that he is not a special kind of person with a special kind of message, with a special way of living he wants people to conform to. God's understanding of God could not appear to us as someone who wanted to found a new and better religion or recommend a special new discipline or way of life. God's understanding of God is that he just says: 'Yes, be; be human, but be really human; be human if it kills you—and it will.' The Law of God is a non-law; it has no special regulations. The Word just says: 'I accept you as human beings—what a pity you have such difficulty in doing this yourselves. What a pity you can only like yourselves if you pretend to be superhumans or gods.' God could never understand himself as one of the gods; only as one of the human race.

Let us be absurd for a minute and try to imagine what it means for God to understand himself. I do not mean try to think or understand it—of course we cannot do that—but let us try to imagine understanding that limitless abyss of life and liveliness, that permanent explosion of vivacity and awareness and sparkling intelligence and, of course, humour—and remember that in understanding himself God will thereby be understanding all that he has done and is doing, all that he holds in being, every blade of grass and every passing thought in your mind. The

concept he has of himself in all this is his Word—this is what is made flesh and dwells amongst us in the human suffering and dying Christ.

And in contemplating his life in this Word, in this concept, in contemplating all he is and all he does, God has surely a huge unfathomable joy, an immense excitement and enjoyment in all the life that is his and all the life he has brought into being. God takes immensely more joy in one little beetle walking across a leaf than you can take in everything good and delightful and beautiful in your whole life put together. If he takes that pleasure from one beetle he has made, think then what joy he takes in being God. This limitless joy is what we call the Holy Spirit.

To be able, through faith, to share in Christ, in God's understanding of himself, to be in Christ, is to be filled ourselves also with this joy, this Holy Spirit. It is a joy so vast that we can only faintly sometimes experience it as our elation and joy; just as our sharing in God's self-understanding hardly at all seems to us an understanding, a being enlightened. We have a life in us, an understanding and a joy in us, that is too great for us to comprehend—quite often it has to show itself as what seems its opposite, as darkness and suffering. The Word of God is Christ crucified. But it is God's way and the truth of God and the life and joy of God. And this is in us because we have been baptised, we have faith, we have been prepared to go into the dark with Christ, to die with Christ. And we know that this means that we live in Christ. And that life, the divine understanding and joy that is in us, will one day soon show itself in us for what it truly is; and we shall live to the Father, through the understanding which is the Word made Flesh, in the joy which is the Holy Spirit, for eternity.

*Editorial note:* Herbert McCabe's four Advent sermons broadcast on BBC 1 (the third of which we published in January) have been published under the title *Hope* by the Catholic Truth Society of London, price 80p. (U.S. \$1.60).