

WHAT IS THE CHURCH?—

I: THE WORD OF GOD

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THIS article, and the four which follow,¹ will be about revelation, about the community God has established, and about the sacraments that constitute it: they are theological, concerned with God and his dealings with men. Most of what I say will probably be pretty familiar stuff to you, but some of it may be new; this is because I shall be drawing on the results of the great theological revival which has been going on for some years in the Church but which has not yet had its full effect in England. A word in passing about this revival, because we will be constantly coming back to it. It is one aspect of a quiet reformation, a surge of new life within the Church. The most obvious signs of this are the liturgical movement, the return to the scriptures and the Fathers and, above all, the new understanding of the place of the laity in the Church. There is a good deal in common between this movement of reform and the reformation which went sour on us in the sixteenth century. Quite a lot of what we shall be saying would have delighted the heart of Martin Luther, for example. Indeed it is precisely because they would have delighted his heart that they tended to be shelved by Catholics of the counter-reformation. The urgent task then was to defend the Church against nationalism and it was more important to stress the differences between protestants and Catholics than the similarities. Now the situation has changed a good deal and many of the ideas that had been kept in the dark have been brought out into the light where they are flourishing immensely.

Theology exists because God did not only make man, he also spoke to him. Here when I say 'theology' I mean what is sometimes called 'revealed theology' as opposed to natural theology. There seems to me to be such a great difference between these two that it is a mistake to use the same word for both. What is

¹ They are based on talks and discussions with students, particularly at the universities of Hull and Durham, and at conferences of the Union of Catholic Students. The author wishes to thank all those who took part in these discussions for their help in clarifying his ideas.

called 'natural theology' is a part of philosophy; it is a certain kind of reflection on the world, it has no immediate connection with faith or dogma. It is true that philosophers, generally speaking, are the most dogmatic of men, but they cannot claim any divine authority for their dogmatism. The kind of philosophical reflection that is called 'natural theology' exists because God made the world and men. I think that this reflection can lead to the conclusion that there is a 'beyond' that transcends all that we can know. Broadly speaking we look at the world and it has a created look about it, which is as far as we can go. There used to be an idea (invented, I think, by Pascal) that the God of the philosophers was a different kind of being from the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Now of course the God of the philosophers that Pascal had in mind may very well be different from the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but the God of my philosophy (and here I am at one with St Thomas) is not well known enough to be different from Yahweh of the old testament. Philosophy tells us almost nothing about God, certainly not enough to set up a rival religion.

God made me and he made the whole world; and this is the reason why it is possible by reflecting upon the world to come to know that God exists. This kind of reflection is a matter of philosophy and like any other important or interesting philosophical question it is a matter of great controversy. So far as I know, no philosopher has ever held an interesting position which has not been rejected by the majority of other philosophers, and this business of arriving philosophically at the existence of God is no exception to the rule. Like all other philosophical positions it is a minority opinion. However, so far as I am concerned this does not matter, since the minority includes myself. I want to stress that this is a philosophical opinion but I mention it here because this kind of philosophical reflection is also called theology—'natural theology'.

I am not, in these articles, going to be concerned directly with 'theology' in that sense. Natural theology is possible, in my view, because God made me; theology in the strict sense, in the sense in which I am using it, is possible because God has not only made me but has spoken to me. Theology, in fact, begins not just with the action of God but with the word of God.

The central teaching of our religion is that we are not merely

creatures of God. Besides creating us as the highest kind of material creature God has called us to share in his own uncreated life. This share in the life of God himself is what we call grace. It is extremely important to realize that a creature with grace is not just a higher kind of creature—in the sense, for example, that a creature with intelligence is a higher kind of creature than one without. Grace does not make man a better kind of creature, it raises him beyond creaturehood, it makes him share in divinity. This share in divinity is first of all expressed by the fact that we are not merely things created, we are creatures who are on speaking terms with God. Because of the divine life in us, the Spirit of God in us, we are able to listen to what God says—this is what we call faith. Because of the divine life in us we are able to speak back to God. As St Paul says: ‘The Spirit comes to the rescue of our weakness; for we do not know what to ask for in order to pray properly, but the Spirit himself prays for us’. (Rom. 8, 26.)

Now what exactly do we mean by the Word of God? The question is not all that easy to answer, in fact the whole of this article will be spent in failing to answer it. It is one of the characteristics of the key phrases in religious discussion that their meaning cannot be exhausted by a simple definition—the same, of course, is true of important philosophical terms. Whereas in, say, physics the vast majority of technical terms have a simple and adequate definition, this is not the case in theology. I think there are good reasons for this but I shall not go into them now: roughly I should say that it comes about because theology, like philosophy, is very largely concerned with what is specifically human, and human nature in the end transcends the limits of human language. Our language is at home with objects, it has difficulty with subjects. When I say that the key theological terms cannot be simply defined I do not mean that they are inexact or woolly. The difficulty with them is that they have application at many different levels, and an explanation which will do at one level is inadequate at another. In this respect there is a certain resemblance between theological language and the language of poetry: you can go on seeing more and more depth of meaning in a poetic image without ever exhausting its implications, and the same is true of a statement such as: ‘The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us’.

Of course it can happen, and it has happened, that theologians

forget the depth of meaning in their words. This accounts for the dreary and futile business that you often get in manuals of theology; a matter of solving verbal puzzles instead of dealing with human and divine mysteries. Our most respectable Catholic newspaper has a column in which a theologian answers readers' queries. It is, alas, headed: 'Here's the answer'. I suppose this is inevitable in journalism, but it is a pity that the impression is given that theological questions can be answered in a kind of pious quiz. In theology as in philosophy there are no slick answers, which is perhaps why theologians and philosophers talk so interminably.

One reason why theological terms behave like poetic images is that the language which God chose for speaking to us is very often the language of poetry. God did not provide us with a divinely inspired manual of doctrine; instead he gave us a library of all kinds of books, a great number of which are books of poetry. The Bible is the first thing we mean when we speak of the Word of God. Later we shall look into the Bible to see what it says about itself, to see what the word of God says about the word of God, but first I want to say something in general about the theological purpose of the Bible.

St Thomas remarked that whereas men can talk only with words and gestures, God can talk with the course of history itself. He can guide the course of events in such a way as to give them a significance which reveals him to us. This is what he has done with his chosen people, he has so ordered their history that the events themselves tell us of him. The history of the Hebrews not only leads up to the revelation of God in Christ, it also foreshadows it. The development of the Hebrew people already tells us about Christ and in fact Christ is unintelligible without this background. The history of the Hebrews is like a play; things happen in the first act which symbolize themes in the play but the symbolism is only fully appreciated when we get to act five. It is not just the words of the play, but the action, which carries the meaning. Frequently in a play the characters do not themselves recognize the full meaning or symbolic character of what they do and say, hence what we used to call 'dramatic irony'. The same is true of the sacred drama of Hebrew history. Normally the Hebrews did not get beyond recognizing that their history did have a divine significance. They realized that they had a definite destiny pre-ordained by God, that they were fulfilling a divine

plan, but the shape of this destiny was hidden from them. Some of them, however, were given a greater insight into the divine plan, and these are the men we call prophets. The special character of the prophet is not precisely that he predicts the future, but that he sees the working of the divine plan in the life of his people, he predicts the future just in so far as this plan points forward to the future.

God, however, has not merely given us a divine history; he has also given us an authentic interpretation of that history. This is the Bible. The one thing that all the books of the Bible have in common is that they all have something to do with the chosen people and their destiny, but they do not simply chronicle events; the history is written up in such a way as to highlight its significance for the divine plan. The books of Samuel, for example, do for the history of Saul and David much the same thing as Shakespeare does for, say, Julius Caesar: what we have is more than a record of facts, it is an interpreted record. The difference is that here we have a uniquely authentic interpretation because the author of the interpretation is also the author of the facts themselves.

In sacred history, then, we have first of all persons, things and events which have a significance of their own, and then their significance is brought out and made clear through the words of scripture which describe them. As we shall see, in this the Bible resembles the sacraments. In each of the sacraments there is first of all a symbolic significant gesture or thing, which we call the 'matter' of the sacrament, and then the significance of this is brought out and made clear by words, which we call the 'form'. The sacraments, like the Bible, are revelations of God, and their structure, so to speak, is the same. But more of this later.

The Hebrew people had a history—this is the most important thing about them—but the Bible too has a history. It was not written all at one time; it is, as I said, a library of books, some of them centuries older than others. In the Bible we can watch the gradual process by which the Hebrews became more and more aware of the significance of their destiny. We can watch the growth of certain key ideas, certain words and images which slowly acquire a traditional symbolism. The imagery of a language embodies the life of the people who use it, and the richness and complexity of the religious language of the chosen people results

from their divinely guided history. The meanings of their words are full of historical associations. To understand, for example, what an image like the 'Shepherd' meant for them, it is necessary to know about the history of Abel and Abraham and Moses and David and so on. Poetic imagery is used by certain writers and then handed down enriched to be used by later ones. In fact it is possible to think of the whole old testament history as a period during which God was slowly preparing and maturing a language which would be fit for use in speaking of his Son. Let us watch this process at work in the case of the image of the Word of God. St John says simply, 'In the beginning was the Word . . . and the Word was made flesh and pitched his tent among us'. Let us unpack some of the meaning contained in this phrase.

'The Lord Yahweh', said one of the early prophets, 'does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets. The lion has roared: who will not fear? The Lord Yahweh has spoken; who can but prophesy?' (Amos 3, 7).

This passage sums up the thought of the Hebrews in the eighth century before Christ about the connection between the action of God and his revelation of himself. The acts of God are all revelations of his 'secret', his mysterious plan, and at every stage in the plan God reveals the significance of his acts to the prophets. God acts and speaks simultaneously. As a matter of fact the Hebrew language has a word, *dabar*, which means both word and deed. The word of God always accomplishes something. This is seen most clearly in the fifth-century poem about creation which begins Genesis:

God said, 'Let there be light', and there was light . . .

God said, 'Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters' . . . etc.

God said, 'Let us make man in our own image, after our likeness . . .'

At each stage in this vision of creation, God speaks and his word is creative. This was not, of course, a bright original idea of the author of this creation poem. He is drawing here upon an imagery which had become traditional, almost a cliché in Hebrew literature. There are plenty of other examples of it scattered throughout the Old Testament:

By the Word of Yahweh the heavens were made
and all their host by the breath of his mouth. (Psalm 33.)

Lift up your eyes and see
 who created these
 He brings out their host by number
 calling them all by name. (Psalm 40.)

Let all thy creatures serve thee
 for thou hast spoken and they were made
 thou didst send forth thy breath and they were created
 and nothing can resist thy voice. (Judith 16, 17.)

The Word of God is then first of all creative, or to put it the other way round, creation is word from God. His acts tell us of him.

The heavens tell of the glory of Yahweh
 and the firmament proclaims his handiwork
 . . . their voice is not heard
 yet their voice goes through all the earth
 and their words to the end of the world. (Psalm 19.)

But it was not first of all as creator of the whole world that the Hebrews saw God as revealing himself. First of all he revealed his secret plan in the way he guided their history. The Word of God is first of all heard in the creation and government of the Hebrews; it is only later that this is extended to the world as a whole.

The turning point of history for the Hebrews was the exodus, for this was the moment when they were created as a people. This great deed is always in their minds when they think of Yahweh. He is 'Your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt'. This is what they celebrate every year in the passover. At this feast they remember each year who they are: they are the people created by God, brought out from Egypt to accomplish a mysterious divine destiny. In its primitive origins the pasch was almost certainly a feast of the seasons, a feast of new life, just as the Christian pasch of Easter is bound up with the pagan spring festivals of the dying god and new life—but more of this later on. The important point is that the Hebrews used the feast of new life to celebrate the new life of Israel. Israel had gone down into a kind of death in Egypt, just as the dying god of middle eastern religions goes down into the underworld each year. Now at the pasch Israel rose from the dead, came up from the grave and passed through the waters of the Red Sea to be welded into a new people. All these ideas, which we will see being developed in the

theology of the resurrection and Christian baptism, are already present in the thought of the prophets of Israel.

The great deeds of the exodus are accomplished by the word of God. Just as the stars of heaven are called into being by this word:

He brings out their host by number
calling them all by name. (Is. 40, 26.)

so Israel is called out of Egypt by the word of God:

When Israel was a child I loved him
and out of Egypt I called my son,

says Hosea, and goes on:

The more I called them, the more they went from me.
(Hos. 11, 1.)

It is the word of God which slays the Egyptians, according to the author of the book of Wisdom,

While deep silence covered all things
and night was in the midst of her course
from the heights of heaven, thy almighty word
leapt down from the royal throne
a fierce warrior into the midst of a land
devoted to destruction. (Wisdom 18, 4.)

As you read these passages I expect you will be reminded of their application in the new testament to the Word made flesh. In fact St Matthew, who constantly wants to make the point that Christ himself is the new Israel, refers back to the passage from Hosea when he tells the story of the flight into Egypt. 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.' And the passage about the Word leaping down from his royal throne during the silence of the night is used in one of the masses of Christmastide to refer to the birth of Christ.

The word of God not only creates the people of God but it also comes to them in the form of the law. God speaks to Moses on mount Sinai and in so far as Israel receives this word of God and keeps the law, she remains a distinctive people, a special community. The presence of the law, the presence of the word of God preserves the identity of the Hebrews. Whenever they turn from the law they tend to mingle with the surrounding nations and this compromises their distinctive identity as it compromises their destiny.

The book of Exodus, after giving the story of the delivery of Israel from Egypt (or rather after giving at least two rather different stories of the delivery from Egypt), goes on to speak of the giving of the law, the ten commandments. Then there are many strange pages about how to make something called the ark of the covenant and the great tent or tabernacle. The point of the ark is that it was the dwelling place of the Word of God:

In the ark you shall put the testimony that I shall give you.

There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat. . . .

I will speak with you of all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel. (Ex. 25, 21.)

The ark dwells in the great tent, and it is ceremonially installed there, at a significant date:

Yahweh said to Moses: On the first day of the first month, you shall erect the tabernacle of the tent of meeting. And you shall put in it the ark of the testament. (Ex. 40, 1.)

The meaning of this ceremony is that the word of God, dwelling in the ark, has pitched his tent among the people of Israel. And this, of course, is what St John is referring back to when he says

‘The Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us’

(the phrase ‘dwelt amongst us’ is an impoverishment of St John’s words).

The word of God is thus for the Hebrews not merely something that is listened to and understood, it is creative and life-giving. The Hebrew people were created by the word of God and the Word dwells among them to give them life. In a famous passage in the book of Deuteronomy, Yahweh is represented as saying that he allowed Israel to go hungry in the desert for forty years but fed them with manna, with ‘bread from heaven’, so that ‘he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone but by everything that comes forth from the mouth of God’. (Deut. 8, 3.) Here the word of God is compared to the bread by which a man lives. The bread of Israel is to be the word of God. This, needless to say, is the background to the eucharistic theology of St John.

There is no need here for more detailed investigation into the old testament development of the image of the Word of God; the essential point is that the word of God does not merely convey information, it is creative of the people of God, it is creative in

fact of the whole world, it dwells among the people of God to preserve them, it is their bread which brings them life.

The word of God is his presence in the world both revealing him and giving life to the world. The thing is summed up in a famous poem in the book of Isaiah:

As the rain and snow come down from heaven
and return not thither until they have watered the earth
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose
and prosper in the thing for which I sent it. (Is. 55, 10.)

This is the picture upon which St John bases the structure of the poem with which he begins his gospel. The picture is of the Word of God coming out from God, bringing fertility and life to the world, and then returning once more to God having accomplished his purpose. The prologue begins with the Word 'with God', it comes to its climax when the 'Word was made flesh and pitched his tent among us' and then finishes with the Word once more 'in the bosom of the Father'. It has recently been suggested that there is, in fact, an exact correspondence between the verses on the way down and the way up.

The point I want to stress is that when St John came to write he had ready formed for him the image of the word of God. You might say that the new testament comes about by taking the old testament literally. What in the old testament was a metaphorical way of describing the action of God in the world becomes in the new testament a literal account. The thing is that unless we realize that the literal account is the concrete realization of an image, we miss the meaning. In the new testament the pictures have come to life, but the fact that they are alive must not make us forget that they are pictures. To take a look forward into a later article: in the eucharist our bread really and literally is the Word of God, but we only see the point of it when we remember the metaphor of which this is the concrete realization.

In the notion of the word of God, the ideas of knowledge and life are tied up together. The Word shows us God and at the same time brings us life from him, in fact brings us his life. This is why

St John fixed on this image to describe Christ; by receiving Christ we receive together knowledge of God and the life of God. We are given new life, reborn as new creatures, by coming to know God. The constant intertwining of the words light and life in St John's Gospel teach us the same thing:

What came to be in him was life
and life was the light of mankind. (Jn. 1, 4.)

We can say either that this gospel is about the conquest of darkness by light, or the victory of life over death.

The response to the Word of God is faith, and faith involves life:

He that believes in the Son has everlasting life
He that does not believe shall not see life. (Jn. 3, 36.)

He that believes in me has everlasting life.

I am the bread of life. (Jn. 6, 47.)

I am resurrection, I am life.

He that believes in me, even though he be dead, shall live.

Everyone that lives and believes in me shall not die for ever.

(Jn. 11, 25.)

and so on; there are dozens of places where this kind of thing is said in St John's gospel. Receiving the Word of God is not just a matter of getting to know something, it is a matter of receiving a more intense life, the life of God himself.

These two aspects of the word of God are very clearly brought out in the structure of the mass. This begins with a liturgy of the word of God in which the emphasis is on the knowledge side—the reading of the word in the epistle and gospel. It is followed by the sacrifice in which the emphasis is on the Word of God as life-giving; he is present to the sacramental symbols of food and drink.

There is no doubt at all that in the past few centuries we have tended to let these two fall too far apart. Catholics, especially since the Reformation, have played down both the life-giving character of the scriptures and the symbolic character of the eucharist. Some protestants had denied the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the eucharist and said that the bread and wine were *merely* symbolic. This naturally led them to lay a much greater emphasis than contemporary Catholics did on the presence of God in the scriptures. Catholics, nervous of protestant

contagion—and perhaps especially nervous of being mistaken for protestants by the inquisition—leaned over backwards to say the opposite. The actual scriptures ceased to be thought of as a nourishment for Catholics, and they substituted books of christian doctrine. It did not seem to them scandalous or even particularly surprising that the epistle and gospel at mass should be read in an inaudible murmur in a foreign language by someone standing with his back to them—it is all right because soon he will turn round and tell us quite audibly about the catechism and the second collection.

In the same way it was equally forgotten that the eucharist is symbolic, that it shows us something, is a revelation of God. But more of this in a later article.

There can be no doubt, then, that for St John and the early Church, the response to Christ which they call faith, the reception of the Word of God, is something that brings life with it. Of course we must not think of the response to faith as something which comes from our side to meet the Word of God coming from God's side. The response to the Word is a part of the coming of the Word, it is the Word in us.

'No man can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.' (Jn. 6, 44.) Both revelation and faith come from the Father. He sends his Word to us and draws us to his Word.

This notion of faith as a living response to Christ is the principal meaning of the word in the new testament, whether in St John or St Paul, and it is one which the protestant churches have on the whole stressed very strongly. When a protestant says we are saved by faith alone, it is normally faith in this sense that he has in mind, faith in the sense of complete abandonment to Christ, a turning from reliance on created things to reliance solely upon the Word of God. This is, as I say, the primary sense of the word 'faith', but there is another sense in which, for example, St Paul distinguishes it from love and from trust in the fulfilment of God's plan, or hope. When, he says, God's plan has finally come to complete fulfilment, faith and hope will pass away, only love will remain.

In this sense faith refers to a particular aspect of our response to Christ, our reliance on the Word of God for insight into God's plan. In this aspect our abandonment to Christ means that we do not rely on our own intellectual powers, but, confronted by God's

plan, we (literally) take his Word for it. This is the aspect of faith which is expressed in our assent to truths about God's plan; it is expressed in our proclamation of the creed.

Faith in this sense is an aspect or part of faith in the full sense, but it is a particularly interesting one because it can be detached and exist by itself without the rest. In other words we can accept, by faith, all that God has taught us, without having the rest of the divine life in us. This is traditionally called 'dead faith', faith divorced from its life which is love. It is most important to see that such faith is deformed. Love is not added on to faith from outside; normally faith and love are one thing. Faith without love is something monstrous and incomplete in itself. Certainly this deformed faith is not what St Paul is speaking of when he says repeatedly that we are saved by faith, nor when he contrasts faith with works is he contrasting faith with the deeds of love which are a part of true faith. He is contrasting it with works done without faith, which are not of course works of love, for while we can have divine faith without love, we cannot have divine love without faith.

God who at various times and in different ways spoke to our fathers through the prophets, now in these days, which are the last days, has spoken to us through his Son. (Heb. I, I.)

This is how the epistle to the Hebrews sums up the biblical idea of God's speech. God speaks first of all in the scriptures but finally in the person of Christ. And faith is our response to this Word.

I have said that we have theology because God has spoken to us and I have tried to show that this speech is not simply a matter of giving information. The word of God which is the foundation of theology is also life-giving: it is the source of the life of a community. The source of theology is the source of the Church itself. Theology is an aspect of the life of the Church and we should never try to separate it from the rest of the life of the Church. Nevertheless, as almost any priest working in a parish today will tell you, that is what has happened to a great extent in the past. Theology has come to be thought of as a highly abstract and abstruse subject with no immediate relation to things like hearing confessions or preaching or visiting one's parishioners. Theology is something one does in a seminary and then forgets when one

gets down to the practical business of the last sacraments and housey-housey. But all that is at last changing; we are returning at last to the great tradition in which theology is the intellectual aspect of our total response to the word of God. We are returning to a theology which is immediately related to the scriptures and also immediately related to our personal Christian lives, a theology which makes sense of our lives as adult Christians in the world in which we live.

ENCOUNTER WITH GOD IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

JOSEPH BOURKE, O.P.

‘**A**S the kingdom of God in its perfect form does not lie in mere knowledge, but rather in the life that the knowledge awakens, so it could not be prepared for by the mere knowledge that it was approaching, nor even by the knowledge, outwardly communicated, of what it was. It could be prepared for only by bringing in, and that in ever fuller tides, the life of which it consists. . . . What we meet in the Old Testament are two concrete subjects and their relation. The two are: Jehovah, God of Israel on the one hand, and Israel, the people of Jehovah, on the other; and the third point, which is given in the other two, is their relation to one another. And it is obvious that the denominating or creative factor is the relation to Jehovah.’

Thus a very great theologian, nowadays somewhat neglected,¹ has defined the scope and significance of the old testament. It is the record of a people chosen from among the peoples to live in the light-giving and life-bringing *presence* of Yahweh, and to draw from that presence ‘in ever fuller tides’ supernatural light and life. And this process is to continue until at last the Light of the World comes ‘that they may have life and have it *abundantly*’ (Jn. 10, 10). Again we could say that the old testament is a complex of traditions recording Israel’s awareness of the presence of God in her midst. Out of her elemental experiences of Yahweh’s *presence to her*, Israel draws the intricate web of tradition in which

1 A. B. Davidson, *Theology of the Old Testament* (1904).