

02. God's 'word' to us

God cannot be identified with anything of which we have immediate experience. This is not to say that God does not communicate with us, nor are we saying that we do not experience God. We do experience God, but only insofar as God is expressed and revealed in a limited way in everything that exists. Creation may be compared to the colour in a stained glass window. We would not see the colour if there were no light, but without the stained glass the light itself would be invisible. It is seen only insofar as it is picked up by and expressed in the stained glass. In Paul's words: God is 'understood and seen through the things that God has made' (Romans 1:20).

It is the universal presence of God that explains the inter-connection of all things. It is God who is creating everything that is, bringing it into existence moment by moment, energising everything and binding everything into a single universe through mutual love-attraction. We might speak of the gravity of grace drawing us into communion with God, and so into communion with everything.

When we experience movements of thought and feeling that engage our yearning for communion with God, the One for whom we long, the One who is the source of all that is, it is important to realise that it is our own thoughts and our own feelings that we directly experience. We experience God as the one who communicates with us in and through them. When we experience people and events around us that speak to us of God and engage our yearning for communion with God, it is important to realise that it is actual, limited people and events that we directly experience. We experience God as revealed to us in them, as the one who attracts us through them. When we read the words of the Bible written by the actual historical people who were inspired by God's Spirit, it is important to realise that it is their limited words that we directly experience. We experience God as the one inspiring their words.

The inner movements and the outer realities engage our yearning for God because they disclose something of the truth, reveal something of the beauty, and participate in something of the goodness of God; but while they participate in God they are not to be identified with God. 'God' is the name we give to the One whom we want to know and whom we come to know in part whenever we know anything. 'God' is the name we give to the One with whom we want to be-in-love, and whom we enjoy in part whenever we are in communion with anything. But God always transcends any knowledge or communion we have. What we come directly and immediately to know and love is a world that is made intelligible and lovable by God, and a self that yearns to know and to be in communion with this God. However, since both the world and the self exist by participating in the being of God, it is God whom we come to know and love in all these experiences.

John the evangelist reminds us that 'No one has ever seen God' (John 1:18). This truth is reiterated by all who have reflected on the nature of our religious experience, as is exemplified in the following sample quotations.

'If you have understood something, then know that it is not God that you have understood. If you were able to understand, then you would understand something else, not God. If you thought you could understand God even partially, then you have deceived yourself with your own thoughts' (Augustine, d.430, *Sermo* 52, vi, 16).

'I have never seen you, Lord my God, I have never seen your face.'

(Anselm of Canterbury, d.1109, *Proslogion*, 1).

'Nothing the intellect can grasp and nothing that desire can desire is God.'

(Meister Eckhart OP, d.1327, *Sermon* 42).

‘Since God is inaccessible, be careful not to concern yourself with all that your faculties can comprehend and your senses feel, so that you do not become satisfied with less and lose the lightness of soul suitable for going to God’ (John of the Cross, *Sayings of Light and Love*).

‘In divine communications, the soul experiences neither God nor God’s action, but only the movements produced within by that divine action’ (Marie Eugène OCD, *I want to see God*, page 353).

‘Everything we know about God should lead us to God, but when we stand before God we should leave all this knowledge behind, however true and rich it may be.’

(Anthony Bloom, *Courage to pray*, page 22).

Everything around us is created and sustained in existence by God. God is the ‘heart’ of all that exists, for creation is a participation in the very being of God. The closer we are in touch with anything that exists the closer we are in touch with God. We grow in union with God not by escaping from the world, but by penetrating to the heart, for God is at the heart of all God has made. In the New Testament we read: ‘All things came into being through God’s Word’ (John 1:3). ‘In God we live and move and have our being’ (Acts 17:28). ‘In God all things hold together’ (Colossians 1:17). At the same time, God is the ‘beyond’ of everything, for God is not identified with creation, but transcends it. The closer we come to the heart, the more we are taken beyond into mystery.

When we speak of creation as a “word” we are saying that God communicates with us and reveals God’s Self to us in creation. In the prologue to his Gospel John writes: ‘All things came into being through the word of God, and without this word not one thing came into being’ (John 1:3). Reflecting on the beauty of creation, Augustine writes:

‘But what is my God? I put my question to the earth.

It answered, “I am not God”, and all things on earth declared the same.

I asked the sea and the chasms of the deep and the living things that creep in them, but they answered, “We are not your God. Seek what is above us”.

I spoke to the winds that blow, and the air and all that lives in it replied, “Anaximenes is wrong. I am not God”.

I asked the sky, the sun, the moon, and the stars, and they told me, “Neither are we the God whom you seek”.

I spoke to all the things that are about me, all that come through the door of the senses, and I said, “Since you are not my God tell me something of my God”.

Loud and clear they answered, “It is God who made us!”

I asked these questions simply by gazing at these things.

Their only answer was their beauty’ (*Confessions* x.6).

The Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, expresses this truth in his poem *God’s Grandeur* (1887):

‘The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil

Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil

Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs –
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and ah! bright wings’.

Teilhard de Chardin often gives expression to the mysterious attraction to God, which we experience in experiencing creation:

‘The true union that you ought to seek with creatures that attract you is to be found not by going directly to them, but by converging with them on God, sought in and through them. It is not by making themselves more material, relying solely on physical contacts, but by making themselves more spiritual in the embrace of God, that things draw closer to one another.’

(*Writings in time of war*, page 143)

‘By means of all created things the divine assails us, penetrates us and molds us. We imagined it as distant and inaccessible, whereas we live steeped in its burning layers. “In him we live”. As Jacob said, awakening from his dream, the world, this palpable world which we were wont to treat with the boredom and disrespect with which we habitually regard places with no sacred association for us, is in truth a holy place and we did not know it’ (*The Divine Milieu*, page 89).

When we examine the various religious movements in the world, we came up against obvious distortions and projections. We observe human needs being projected and human pathology attempting to find an escape. However, for all their imperfections, at the heart of religion there is this constant attempt to respond to the attraction of the divine. This was recognised by Justin, an early Christian writer. In his second open letter to the Roman emperor in defence of Christianity, he values the wisdom found in the religious writers of Rome and attempts to present Christian wisdom as bringing this wisdom to its flowering:

‘Whatever lawyers or philosophers uttered well,
they elaborated by finding and contemplating some part of the Word.
But since they did not know the whole of the Word, which is Christ,
they often contradicted themselves.
Whatever things were rightly said among people are the property of us Christians.
For next to God we worship and love the Word
who is from the unbegotten and ineffable God.
The Word became human for our sakes,
so that, sharing in our sufferings, he might also bring us healing.
For all the writers were able to see realities in an obscure way
through the sowing of the Word implanted in them.
But the seed and the imitation imparted according to capacity is one thing,
and quite another is the thing itself of which there is the participation and imitation
according to the grace which is from him’ (*II Apologia*, c.160AD).

We find a similar understanding in Irenaeus, a contemporary of Justin:

‘The person who is truly spiritual, knowing always the same God,
and always acknowledging the same Word of God
(although the Word has but now been manifested to us)
and acknowledging also at all times the same Spirit of God
(although the Spirit has been poured out upon us after a new fashion in these last times)

will know that the Son of God descends even from the creation of the world to its end upon the human race simply as such, from whom those who believe God and follow God's Word receive that salvation which flows from God' (*Against Heresies* [c.180AD] IV,33.15)

This same Irenaeus has a wonderfully positive image for the various ways in which human beings give expression to the divine. He writes: 'God put the human race together in many ways to effect a symphony of salvation' (AH IV,14,2). To leap immediately over to modern times, let us listen to Pope Paul VI:

'The Church respects and esteems these non-Christian religions because they are the living expression of the soul of vast groups of people. They carry within them the echo of thousands of years of searching for God, a quest that is incomplete but often made with great sincerity and righteousness of heart. They possess an impressive patrimony of deeply religious texts. They have taught generations of people how to pray. They are all impregnated with innumerable "seeds of the Word" and can constitute a true "preparation for the Gospel", to quote a felicitous term used by the Second Vatican Council and borrowed from Eusebius of Caesarea' (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975, n.53)

While recognising in the various religions of the world a response to God's self-communication, it is the conviction of Christianity that God's self-communication reached its perfect human expression in Jesus of Nazareth. It was he who clarified for us in his person and in his teaching who God really is: a God of love. He also showed us how to respond to God in love.

In the prologue to his Gospel, John expresses it in this way:

'The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth ... From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace ... No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, who is in the embrace of the Father, who has made God known' (John 1:14,16-18).

This conviction is expressed again and again throughout the documents of the New Testament:

'In Christ the whole fullness of God was pleased to dwell' (Colossians 1:14).

'Christ is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, who sustains all things by his powerful word' (Hebrews 1:3).

Pope John-Paul II expresses it this way:

'In this definitive Word of his revelation, God has made God's Self known in the fullest possible way. God has revealed to humankind who God is' (*Mission of the Redeemer*, n.5).

It is the Spirit of God that fills all things. Now that Jesus has been raised to fullness of life by his Father, it is the Spirit of God in Jesus – the Spirit of love which binds him to the Father – that fills all things, giving life wherever it is welcome. The sacrament of this Spirit, the place where Jesus' Spirit is powerfully effective, is the community of the Church, an extension in the world of Jesus' body, carrying out the will of God and bringing about on earth the reign of God's love. It is in a special way in and through the church that God speaks God's word and communicates God's Self to the world. We find this truth enunciated in the New Testament: 'God has put all things under the feet of Christ and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all' (Ephesians 1:22-23).

Since God is present in everything that we experience, the depth and intimacy of our communion with God depends on the depth and intimacy of our communion with the world to which we belong.

Of special importance is our communion in love with those who have given themselves over to the attraction of grace and allowed God to permeate their being.