

Letters and Papers from Bishop Richard Wood.

This is a talk delivered by Bishop Richard Wood at the University Chapel at Hull University on June the 10th 1979. - Trinity Sunday

'Star Wars' and 'Close Encounters' whet our appetites to make contact with other intelligent life in the universe. The Jodrell Bank experiment of projecting radio signals into space, may eventually give evidence of other civilizations. If U.F.O. Sightings are genuine one wonders why Beings, able to travel in such a remarkable manner through space, are unable or unwilling to make rational contact with us.

In order to know our friends from another world there has to be a process of revelation within the context of our own ability to relate to them, a way of sharing experiences, some common denominator of mutual understanding. Without this we are in the realm of either science fiction or religious faith.

On one occasion I stopped the car I was driving in the middle of the Nubian desert. There was a companion car ahead and incredibly in this remote area, two donkeys walking head to tail in the distance. In that moment, hot air currents or something whisked the image of the car and the donkeys away and I was alone. The engine was making metallic noises as it cooled. I walked away from it. Then there was silence.

A silence like that, is so silent that one has the feeling of being on the threshold of another way of apprehending knowledge and existence. I had experienced an illusion, caused by the limitation of my human powers of perception. Had I the receiving apparatus to detect them, I was being bombarded all the time with a variety of rays and particles. Here again we are on the border of science fiction or faith, for rays that can now be recorded, made the science fiction of not so many years ago, and it is likely always to be like that.

Should we eventually learn how to travel at speeds approaching that of light, I wonder what we would find in our super- developed planets? Does whatever we may mean by the original sin pervade the universe? What do they know about God? It's likely that, even having made contact with other beings, we shall be no nearer to answering questions about what is outside our universe and what the one who created it is like.

In order to explore those realms. we shall have to learn to travel faster than light or learn new ways of traveling, like traveling inwards or with Anna from 'Mr. God, this is Anna', somehow turning ourselves inside out. Again, we come back to science fiction or faith and the need for revelation rather than transportation. This of course, is what we have been given.

If there is some eschatological significance to creation and life, the only way we shall know, is for it to be revealed to us, to be demonstrated, and even that affords no ultimate proof, because we can go no further than our human senses allow. We do not have the equipment to comprehend existence as seen through the spiritual nervous system of an Angel, nor for that matter, a worm. Of course, we don't know the limits of what it is to be human, the most we could know would be to be shown what it is to be perfectly human, and even that would only be partially understood because of our imperfect response. The 'image of God' in us is a great mystery but it is still only describing what it is to be human. We cannot know what we cannot experience through our humanity; and I suppose that is why all the great theophanies are expressed in spatial terms; the burning Bush, wheels and eyes or great Thrones set in a crystal sea. God has always somehow to be related to our human perceptions and understanding even

though this three-dimensional description is inadequate unless it leads to a worshipful awe; ...'take off your shoes'... 'he fell down like one dead'. Or Paul being raised to the 7th heaven but unable to communicate what this might mean in words. If you were God and wanted to make yourself known to someone like me, how would you do it?

I remember reading a book called 'Flatland'. It's the account of a Mr. Sphere in his three-dimensional life meeting a Mr. Square in his two dimensional life. Mr. Square couldn't understand where a disembodied voice came from and was even more startled when his three-dimensional friend touched him inside his stomach. "How can you touch me inside and at the same time tell me that you are looking at me from the outside?" Mr. Square asked plaintively. "Alright, I'll show you what I'm like". And Mr. Sphere proceeded to pass himself in front of Mr. Square. "Now do you see me?" Mr. Sphere asked. "Yes, If that is you. I see a point which grows most strangely into an expanding circle, gradually shrinks to a point and then vanishes."

"Yes. Well, I'm not a circle. I am a sphere."

"I don't understand what you mean by a sphere. Show me again" said Mr. Square. But this time he charged at the strange object and tried to destroy it with one of its more angular corners.

So I suppose, in our knowledge of God, we can only experience him within the frailty of our human nature. Beyond that, it is a matter of faith and trust that the God who is outside us yet has the ability to touch our innermost being. This facility to respond by faith and trust is, perhaps, of all things the most remarkable difference between ourselves and other branches of the creation we know.

Very much a part of this is our need to ask questions.

Is there a God? If there is, what sort of a God?

The God that Jesus told us about; is he the Buddha, or the Hindu pantheon? Or is he the God that Jesus revealed to us not just told us about but revealed to us?

In The Gospel of John Jesus states "The one that has seen me has seen the father". What are we seeing? God Incarnate all perfect humanity? Could you tell the difference? I think that what I am saying is that we have seen in Jesus the perfection of humanity, something so extraordinary; but we believe it was by a special revelation of God himself. Then we might ask how is this God making himself known to us today? And the specifically Christian response leads us to faith in the Holy Spirit, the Church, Sacramental acts, the lives of people, and prayer. This makes us want to worship, as an expression of something too big for words.

I suppose we have to be very circumspect in the way we talk about God. In the Athanasian creed the Holy Trinity is described by what it is not. It is undoubtedly presumption to talk about the inner nature of the Christian God as if it were not present with us as we do so. We are operating in an area of faith. We have no blueprint; no molecular model, but if one has to chance a description with all sorts of caveats, I suppose there has never been a more elegant description; a more inspired hypothesis, than to speak of the Blessed Trinity.

This is a concept which, if pressed too far, inevitably becomes a heresy or an anthropomorphic absurdity. In the Old Testament, Yahweh describes himself as "I am what I Am", or "I will be what I will be", or just simply "I am". This is God's name.

We are in a mysterious, complex universe, full of wonder and surprise and our often-despised human nature is also so rich and mysterious and human experience so poignant. What must the creator and sustainer of all be like? Well, the Blessed Trinity sets loving, creative, active relationship as the centre from which 'all that is' comes forth. The incarnation reveals to us a God of heartbreaking humility of limitless compassion, and it raises the value and authority of the life of Jesus to an infinite significance. This life is continually mediated to us and all creation, and if it were not so, the mediocrity, if not the direct evil, in the world might make it possible for us all somehow to slip out of God's grasp into the abyss. Our God is too great for that. With Trinitarian faith we have the assurance of hope, for this God of ours has done all that ever could be done to claim us as his own. In Trinitarian faith, matter and spirit are united by prayer, sacrament and life. We are raised into the life of God himself and this faith really has the power to transform the mundane into the holy and the holy into the mundane.

If this is only to be achieved by coming so close to Jesus that the quality of his life can be seen in us, one could argue that, for the lack of this only, has the faith lost its attraction and its power. Certainly, there has been no new discovery which proves anything other, and the power of a life lived in that faith is as beautiful and powerful as ever it has been. One day we shall know.

The revelation of the reality of God which lies for us, the knowing of the things seen darkly, will be the most exciting and satisfying experience that we, in our ultimate reality, whatever that may be, will have. I doubt if we shall respond any differently from the 'Holy, Holy, Holy Lord, ... Heaven and Earth are full of Thy Glory', that we use today.

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