

What God is Not – Exploring the God of Philosophy

Genesis 12.1–4a

Romans 4.1–5,13–17

John 3.1–17

A few years ago, I taught a classroom of plucky 13 year olds about the incomprehensibility of God. ‘No one knows what God looks like,’ I declared. Before I could say another word, several pupils responded, ‘Don’t worry, you will soon.’ They proceeded to draw beautiful images of religious symbols and the natural world; to write pieces of poignant poetry and heartfelt prose. These things whispered of something more, an unselfconscious glimmer of the divine. I had been wonderfully shown up. I found myself in sympathy with the character of Nicodemus in our Gospel today. After a brief exchange, when Jesus tells Nicodemus about the need to be born again by the Holy Spirit, Nicodemus declares: ‘How can these things be?’ And Jesus responds: ‘Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?’

In this second sermon in our Lenten sermon series, I want to look at the title of the whole series ‘the God who is’ by considering ‘what God is not’. In doing this, I am, with Nicodemus, going back to basics: to the notion that there is no God *but* God; that God is not something human beings have invented; indeed, that God is not some *thing* at all. In doing so, I’m claiming human beings can ask penetrating questions about reality and search for meaningful answers. In the West, this

conviction comes from ancient Greek thinkers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle and been baptised and handed on by Christian thinkers such as St Paul, St Augustine of Hippo, and St Thomas Aquinas. One way of summarizing this legacy is to say that every person is fundamentally a philosopher – literally, someone who seeks after and loves wisdom. This is no abstract philosophy accessible only to the few. Rather, the search for wisdom is a universal human vocation. It requires humility to let the reality of things speak for themselves; a willingness to keep learning; and a capacity for wonder and mystery as well as critical thought. This sense of philosophy is central to the life of faith.

This is especially true regarding the question of God. Over the centuries, the philosophical quest has motivated Christian theologians to reflect on how we can speak about God in a way that is intelligible yet faithful to divine mystery. This concern is vital to a faith seeking understanding. Yet we can easily lose sight of this through overfamiliarity with the word God; an overemphasis on the purely personal aspects of faith; through feeling we have to accept without question what others in authority tell us to believe; or, out of wanting to avoid controversy in a society where many do not believe in God.

But what do we mean by God? The culmination of Christian philosophical thought offers a startling response. As Thomas Aquinas says: we do not know *what* God is. We only know *that* God is and *what*

God is *not*. On hearing this, we might find ourselves, like Nicodemus, suddenly in the dark. Yet, this reflects a long tradition of so-called negative theology which emphasizes God's incomprehensibility and transcendence – God's deep, dazzling darkness, as the early Church puts it. Such a view comes out of the biblical witness of the old testament in which God is the transcendent creator and redeemer beyond all finite reality yet who acts in history. A key text is the encounter between Moses and God at the burning bush in the Book of Exodus where God reveals his mysterious name as I AM WHO I AM. On this view, we can never domesticate God. When thinking about God we must not to turn God into an idea that can be comprehended and controlled by the human mind. Yet, the opposite challenge is not to make God completely incomprehensible, distant and remote. This would make God simply irrelevant or a threat to our finite reality and understanding, both of which come from God.

Here we arrive at the central part played by the act of creation in a Christian philosophical approach to God. Rather than beginning with an abstract notion of God's essence, creation asks that we wonder at the fact that anything exists at all and let this wonder open us to God. We are directed us not to an idea of God but to the actual being of the world around us, our own existence and the people we encounter. As we consider this real world, we discover that none of the things we know to be real can be the source of their own existence. They point

beyond themselves. To wonder at the reality of creation is to affirm how everything exists in any moment because it receives its being from God, understood philosophically, as the source of existence itself.

This has at least four implications. First, creation is a relation of absolute dependence of everything on God who transcends all things. This establishes a fundamental distinction between God and everything else. Nothing exists without God, yet God has no need for anything to exist to be God. This does not mean God is remote from creation. On the contrary, it stresses how our existence does not serve some divine need or ulterior motive but is an expression of the free gift of God's love for what is not God. God creates by saying 'let there be....'

Second, creation tells us what God is not! If God is the creator and sustainer of everything that exists, then God cannot be just another being or thing that exists. This means, categorically, God is no old man in the sky with a beard. It also means that God is not a being alongside other beings whose great power puts him infinitely beyond our reach. Rather, as the Christian philosophical tradition says, God is the superabundant act of being itself. God is that generous self-communicating mystery which simply exists-in-itself, and creation is that mystery which exists-by-participation in God's being.

Third, God is intimately present to each thing in the act of their being. It is because God is not just another, very powerful, being, but the transcendent act of being that God can be, as St Augustine says, more intimate to me than I am to myself. God's radical intimacy to all things means the relationship between God and created reality cannot be competitive. God and creation are not two things competing for the same space. Rather God is fully active as the distinctive existence and activity of each creature. This means, paradoxically, the closer we come to God, the more our difference from God shines out and the more we give glory to God.

Finally, though the gift of being is something only God can give, and without which nothing would be, it is a gift truly given to creatures. God truly gives himself away, revealing himself in the astonishing plurality of creatures and their activities. This means that everything that exists, in its distinctiveness, points to the divine source of existence beyond itself. This means the person sitting next to you, in their solid fleshy reality, shimmers with the mystery of divine being – just as God's being shines out in liturgy, the words of scripture, the natural world and things of human beauty and goodness, like the art and poetry my students confidently produced. Each thing sings of the divine gift of existence according to its unique nature. For human beings, this means we come to know, love and share God's being

through the exercise of our own creative acts and loving service in relation to others.

So, to get God right philosophically we must hold together the following: God is the mysterious and transcendent source of all being. God cannot be a thing or just another, all-powerful, being. God is radically intimate to all things in their being. Our very existence is a gift of divine being given freely out of love to be shared as gift.

To be faithful to 'the God who is' calls us not to escape the world but to live more deeply within the intimate relationship between God and creation, and the relationships between all things in God. Like Nicodemus, we must allow the ordinary forms of thinking and interacting to be fractured open by the ever-present God who is above all yet intimate to everything. A faithful philosophy reminds us that we can never control or define this relationship on our own terms. We must live it out in openness to the gift of divine being as shared by all. Beyond philosophy, theology reveals that the divine self-gift in creation reaches its fullest when God gives himself even more intimately by taking on our wounded nature in Jesus Christ. Yet the philosophical perspective reminds us that to say Jesus is fully God means that his life, death and resurrection have significance not just for humanity but for being as a whole. In Jesus, God comes not to condemn the world but save it, recalling all things to their true character as a gift of divine love. Jesus here fulfils the human vocation

to seek and love wisdom in all things. By the gift of his Holy Spirit, and in the waters of baptism, we are made true philosophers and share in Christ's fulfillment of our human vocation to know God in and beyond everything. Like Nicodemus, we are led more fully into the truth of things heavenly only because we have learnt to encounter 'the God who is' in the real things of earth.