

# THE MYSTERY OF GOD

ONE OF OUR MOST frequently-used religious words is ‘God’. We often use it so matter-of-factly that we can give the impression we understand this God we are talking about very well. Familiarity breeds complacency. We need to keep reminding ourselves that God is totally other than we are, God is spiritual, God is the ultimate mystery. If we can say anything at all about God it is because God has revealed to us something of himself and his plans.

Indeed, there are lots of things we can say about God based on what God has revealed to us of himself. But significant and all as what we know of God is—and there are whole libraries of books and articles on the subject—the insights we have are but glimpses into the mystery of God. We can say what we can say about God because our God is personal and our God speaks to us—our God is a God who speaks. He speaks his Word to us, he communicates himself personally to us. But even so God is far more hidden than revealed—infininitely more hidden. God lifts the veil of the mystery of himself just a little. This is not because God is stingy with his self-revelation—on the contrary, it is because God dwells ‘in unapproachable light, whom no-one has ever seen or can see’ (1Tim 6:16). God is too bright for us, beyond what we human beings are able to contemplate.

God speaks to us human beings in ways that we can understand. God communicates with us: ‘In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets’ (Heb 1:1). All the Old Testament is the record of God’s self-communication to the People of God preserved in the writings of inspired authors. ‘But in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son’ (Heb. 1:2). In Christ Jesus God communicates himself fully: ‘He [Christ] reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature’ (Heb 1:3). Christ is the Word of God (Jn 1:1)—

in this Word God expresses himself fully—and the ‘Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us...we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father’ (Jn 1:14). ‘No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known. (Jn 1:18). ‘He who sees me sees the Father; I and the Father are one’ (Jn 14:9).

Pope Benedict XVI has written:

God has become quite concrete in Christ, but in this way his mystery has also become still greater. God is always infinitely greater than all our concepts and all our images and names.’ (Pope Benedict XVI in JF Thornton and SB Varenne (eds.) 2007: *The Essential Pope Benedict XVI*, p.10.)

John the Evangelist conveyed something of his ecstatic joy when he wrote (1Jn 1-4):

Something which has existed since the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our own eyes, which we have watched and touched with our own hands, the Word of life—this is our theme.

That life was made visible; we saw it and are giving our testimony, declaring to you the eternal life, which was present to the Father and has been revealed to us.

We are declaring to you what we have seen and heard, so that you too may share our life. Our life is shared with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.

We are writing this to you so that our joy may be complete.

Our knowledge of God is always mediated—God is spiritual, not visible to our bodily senses, and we come to know God, to encounter God, to hear God’s voice, through things, persons and events of our experience and our world. In other words, all God’s self-revelation to us has a ‘sacramental character’ (cf. John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* par. 13). A sacrament is a reality of our world imbued with the hidden presence of God (cf. Paul VI, open-

ing address before the second session of Vatican II).

The Word of God, the Son of God become man, the Word made flesh and come to dwell amongst us, is the great sacrament and symbol of God's presence with us. In Jesus God became 'Emmanuel'—God-with-us—and the disciples walked and talked with him and observed him in his ministry and heard his preaching. We now do not experience Jesus of Nazareth in the flesh as the first disciples did, but we are invited to continue to make personal contact with him in his Church, which is the Body of Christ, and in his word.

The word of God as we read it in the Scriptures and as we hear it proclaimed in the Church also is sacramental (cf. Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church, 30<sup>th</sup> September 2010, par. 56):

We come to see that at the heart of the sacramentality of the word of God is the mystery of the Incarnation itself: 'the Word became flesh' (Jn 1:14), the reality of the revealed mystery is offered to us in the 'flesh' of the Son. The Word of God can be perceived by faith through the 'sign' of human words and actions. Faith acknowledges God's Word by accepting the words and actions by which he makes himself known to us. (*Verbum Domini*, *loc. cit.*)

God speaks to us in the Scriptures, he communicates with us, reveals himself to us through the written word of God, and especially as it is read in Church. Through his word God discloses—lifts the veil on—the mystery of himself.

It has been suggested that the most far-reaching reform of Vatican II was the reinstatement of the word of God in Catholicism, the three-year cycle of readings in the Lectionary being a product of that reform. When we consider what God is doing when we ponder the word and when we hear the word in the sacred liturgy we can see why this might be so.

God reveals himself also in his creation—revelation is cosmic as well as historical (in the history of the People of God and in the person of Jesus Christ). God created the world. Nature is God's handiwork and thus it manifests his goodness and glory. 'Through the grandeur and beauty of the creatures we may, by analogy, contemplate their author' (Wis. 13:5). Or, in the words of the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins: 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God [...] There lives the dearest freshness deep down things' (*God's Grandeur*).

At times in the history of Christianity 'divine revelation' has been understood as the communication of information that can be expressed in propositions—this is called the 'propositional theory' of revelation. In contemporary theology, reflected in the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* of Vatican II, revelation is understood as God's gracious personal *self*-revelation, and only secondarily as a communication of information.

It is cause for our joy that God, without losing anything of his mystery, reveals himself, communicates himself, speaks, listens and answers, inviting us to live more deeply in his company as friends.

—Barry Brundell MSC, Editor

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*Everyone is aware of the great impulse which the Dogmatic Constitution [of Vatican II] Dei Verbum gave to the revival of interest in the word of God in the life of the Church, to theological reflection on divine revelation and to the study of sacred Scripture.*

—Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Verbum Domini*, 30th September 2010, par. 8.