



## God in our Time

Sunday 12 May 2024

Professor Alan Torrance

*Exodus 3: 1-35    John 1: 1-14*

Both our readings make the claim, one that is reiterated throughout Scripture, that God has chosen to make himself present to us. The prologue to John's Gospel takes this still further. There we find the counterintuitive claim that the One who explains why there is anything at all, has identified with creatures in the most radical way imaginable – the Word that brought creation into existence became flesh.

There is a further implication in both readings. The God who chooses to make himself present to us intends to be known in his own light – not through human speculation but through his own personal presence. To recognise the "I am" is to allow the personal agency of God to shape our understanding. God is known in and through God's free and personal presence.

In John we find seven "I am" sayings – sayings which allude explicitly to the 'I am who I am' of Exodus. These indicate not only the personal nature of God's engagement with us but also God's concern for our flourishing and well-being: I am the bread of life (6:35), I am the light of the world (8:12), I am the door... (10:7), I am the good shepherd (10:11, 14), I am the resurrection and the life (11:25), I am the way and the truth and the life (14:6), and I am the true vine (John 15:1).

The recognition that the eternal "I am" has become flesh underpins not only the entirety of John's testimony but that of the New Testament as a whole. As the Nicene Creed sought to clarify, the Christian faith is defined by the recognition that in the incarnate Son we meet God.

What this means is that there is an event of temporal becoming on the part of the one who is eternal. Unless we can affirm **that**, the whole witness of the New Testament loses its credibility. Not only the cogency of the Christian faith but also its spiritual and moral authority stands on the veracity of the recognition that the Word has **become** flesh - that Jesus is Immanuel, God become one with us.

But this raises an obvious question! Is it not intellectual suicide to suggest that the eternal has become flesh, in time? Surely to suggest that the eternal **can become anything at all** is a contradiction in terms!

Let's just consider this for a minute – excuse a little philosophical reflection! Whenever we refer to temporal events, to the realm of becoming, we invariably draw on metaphors that refer to the passage of time. We say that time flows or flies or marches on. The years roll on or, perhaps, whizz by! With respect to the present, time passes.

What the metaphors of temporal passage lead us to assume is that the essence of time is, in some sense, movement. But it is hard to make any sense of this. Why? Because movement or passage are themselves temporal concepts – we move along a road at 30

miles per hour (where 'hour' is the temporal unit). If time moves or if we move through time, at what speed does this movement take place? Hours per... what? In short, reference to temporal passage requires us to imagine either that **we move through time** or that **time itself moves!** But to do so we have to posit some kind of hyper-time with respect to which **time moves**. As one of the great Harvard philosophers has made clear, any supposition that we move (temporally) through time or that time itself moves, requires us to double our universe in a manner that both invites but also precludes coherent explanation. In short, time doesn't move in any related sense - the language of passage doesn't depict reality with any clarity.

"Where is this road going?" asks the disoriented tourist. "It's not going anywhere, it's staying right along here!" replies the confused Scotsman!

This brings us to a second dilemma - a quirk in our language that is a legacy of the Indo-European tense system. To affirm that something exists obliges us to use the present tense - exists! Consequently, to assert that something exists implies that it exists right **now** - not in the future not in the past but in the present moment. And this leads us to **index** the existence of everything to my present - **this fleeting instant** becomes the exclusive locus of everything that exists and has reality.

So, as time 'advances' or moves or passes, that which is 'not yet' is somehow brought into being and then simultaneously annihilated. It fleetingly comes into existence before being swept into the "no longer". The effect these metaphors is to suggest that the temporal existence of things is fleeting, ephemeral - the **reality** of the temporal is ultimately negated. Not for John's Gospel, however! There is an eighth "I am" statement: "Before Abraham was, I am." - Jesus' existence is not necessarily and exclusively indexed to our present.

So where is God in this? Is God another occupant of the fleeting now, subject to the so-called passage of time? For the ancient Greeks, it was unthinkable that the divine be temporal and thus subject to flux. God cannot change, **God cannot become** - God can neither acquire properties nor lose them. God is necessarily eternal and therefore timeless, atemporal.

So what of our reading? For John, the eternal one through whom everything else came into being '**became** flesh' - (sarx egeneto) and lived among us. The eternal, almost inconceivably, is defined by an event of **becoming**. God becomes what he was not previously. The creative Word acquires new properties.

John knew precisely how radical this statement was. He was familiar with the Greek thought of the time. **But he recognised** that the significance of the Gospel requires to be spelled out in such terms - indeed, its entire theological, moral and personal relevance is lost if we don't recognise that Jesus is God present with us **in time**. For the God who is love, there is no Hellenic or Platonic gulf between the eternal and the temporal. Time is not a boundary that contains or constrains God's presence. To commandeer the final verse of Romans 8, there is no feature of the contingent order that can separate us from the love of God who is in Christ Jesus. "For I am convinced", Paul writes, "that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come... nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." He could have added "And neither can any gulf between the eternal and the temporal separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

John's affirmation that there is an event of 'becoming' for God - that the creative Word has **become** flesh and that the "I am" dwells amongst us in a very specific way, this does not signify any loss of divine being. **Precisely the opposite!** What is held forth is the **fulness** of the Godhead dwelling bodily, as Paul puts it.

You see God is not content to live in transcendent isolation from the fragility and indeed tragedies of the contingent order. God loves those whom God creates and goes to unanticipatable lengths to bring about their flourishing and ultimate well-being.

But doesn't this savour of mythology – the confusion of the eternal and transcendent with the temporal? Paul doesn't deny that the Gospel is **counterintuitive** – to identify God with the crucified Jesus is foolishness to the Greeks and a stumbling block to Jews. Then he adds, but to those with the eyes to see, both Jews and Greeks, it is the power of God and the wisdom of God. God's presence in time does not diminish God's majesty. Quite the opposite – it testifies to a God who upholds the dignity of human persons at almost unthinkable cost to himself. It is testimony to God's majesty that the contingent matters, that the temporal order is real. Whereas the Gospel testifies to God's presence, our confused Western philosophies present God as distant. The intellectual arrogance of 'cultural religion' would rather have a tame lion locked away in heaven than a real, living and present God who is with us, and not in ways that should make you shrink back but in ways that you can lean into because, while He might have a claim on your life He also provides everything your heart has ever needed or could ever desire in His personal presence with you.

The Christian thinker who provided the most rigorous challenge to the fusion of Christianity with Hellenic idealism and the cultural religion associated with it was Søren Kierkegaard. What defined the Christian faith for him was both simple and profound. He writes: "the eternal itself has entered into time and desires to establish kinship there." CUP 291. It is precisely in that **kinship**, God's refusal to remain in remote isolation from the temporal, that we find the unfathomable love and glory of God.

One more thing! It is often assumed that God comes to us by grace in Jesus Christ (a God-humanward movement) but then it is over to us to provide an appropriate response, namely, worship and worthship. But what kind of response could human creatures possibly offer? It is here that the miracle of God's grace comes to the fore - in ways that the church too often overlooks. Paul argues, that what God desires *of us*, God provides *for us* - in our place and on our behalf.

In Romans 8 Paul refers to something that we all experience - that we don't know how to pray as we ought. But, he argues, we can have confidence **because** that same Lord who died and was raised is himself interceding for us, in our place and on our behalf. And that is the central argument of Hebrews. The kinship that God establishes in time is one in which God fulfils both sides of the equation. The true response **that we owe**, is provided **by God in our place and on our behalf** in his incarnate Son, the sole priest of our confession.

But what does this actually mean in practice?

In January 2008, my wife Jane died of cancer. She was a wonderful Christian woman, a devoted wife and mother. Watching her die in pain as the cancer spread throughout her body wasn't easy and witnessing our children watch her gradual disintegration not only physically but mentally as the cancer spread to her brain was hard. And there were times when, in my grief, I really struggled to know how to pray, what to ask for. An exhortation to keep praying would not have been helpful. As Jane and I prayed together right to the end, we didn't know how to pray as we ought. What meant more during these difficult times than I can articulate was the fact that as I held Jane in my arms, the sole priest of our confession was interceding on our behalf and, by the Spirit, we could repose in that.

When we prayed the Lord's prayer together as we did increasingly, we saw it as the *Lord's* prayer. That is, we were sharing in a kinship that he had established and that He was praying along with us, "*Our* Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, *thy will be done...*"

Two years after Jane died, I suffered serious clinical depression - I could never have imagined how devastating and debilitating that illness could be. It lasted for most of two years. Again, what kept me going through that long, dark night was the Lord's prayer. Why? Because I was not left to pray 'My Father, who art in heaven far removed from where I am.

Rather, I knew that the sole Priest of our confession was praying alongside: 'Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy Kingdom come....' What upheld me, and what is available to you, is this: God isn't distant and disinterested, locked up in some heavenly abstraction. God knows you, loves you, came to be with you, and when you struggle to pray know this - that Jesus your High Priest, prays for you and prays with you.

When you are worrying about student loans, or a relationship has come to an end, or your parents are divorcing or you've lost a loved one, or you've been the victim of abuse it is tempting to think that the eternal God is a mere abstract concept or a cheap fake. What our readings testify to is that God is not the tame lion of cultural Christianity or aesthetic religion but is real, God with us. When my wife was dying at my side, the god of cultural Christianity or aesthetic religion would have had nothing to offer. But the God to whom the New Testament bears such astonishing testimony had everything to offer. I was able to rest in the presence of the real God, God with us, who is so much greater than some distant abstraction, who has established kinship with us in time – a kinship that Jane and I knew in the one who was praying with us, as we prayed.

Amen.