Trinity College, Cambridge, Sunday Evensong 27 February 2011

'**God and Some Theologians**'

John 17: 1-8; 20-26

Church Dogmatics II.1 pp. 654-655

Karl Barth's Sober Intoxication

by

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Karl Barth, in the words of another great twentieth-century Swiss theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, was 'a God-intoxicated man'. 'Let God be God' was one of his cries, and the six million words of his main theological work, the *Church Dogmatics*, might be seen as his attempt to encompass us with speaking and thinking of God, to soak us so thoroughly in a God-centred understanding of reality that we too become inebriated with this sober intoxication.

Crisis

But his path towards the *Church Dogmatics* was not straightforward. He had a major crisis in his late twenties. He had been born in Basel in 1886 and decided to become a theologian at the age of sixteen due to the influence of a particular inspiring teacher. He had the best university education available in four universities, Berne, Berlin, Tuebingen and Marburg, and then became a pastor for ten years from 1911 to 1921. The crisis was partly occasioned by the difficulty he found in developing and applying in his Swiss industrial village parish the liberal Protestant theology he had been taught in university. It did not seem to work out well in confirmation classes, sermons and pastoral work, or in the turbulent local industrial relations and politics of confrontation between mill-owners and workers. But the critical moment was the outbreak of the First World War in 1914.

Ninety-three German intellectuals, including his own most distinguished theological teachers, signed a declaration of support for Kaiser Wilhelm II when he went to war. As Barth wrote later: 'To me they seemed to have been hopelessly compromised by their failure in the face of the ideology of war'. Barth saw much of European Christianity as deeply compromised by having acted as a chaplain to imperialism and capitalism without offering any prophetic challenge. Christianity had been domesticated, and at the heart of this was a domestication of God within a religion whose talk of God was actually more like 'talk of humanity in a loud voice'. In response, in conversation with some close friends, he began to rethink his whole theology, focusing on Paul's Letter to the Romans.

When his commentary on Romans came out in 1919 it met the mood of radical dissatisfaction that followed the First World War. When he rewrote it in a second edition in 1921 it was explosive in the continental European theological world and beyond. But how could this prophetic protest (in which God's 'No!' in the crucifixion of Jesus judged all human efforts to relate to God, and God's 'Yes!' in the resurrection was a free gift, utterly God's initiative, that simply invited us to be grateful and to live trusting in its light and life) develop beyond protest into a habitable Christian theology with a deep and rich understanding of God? That is the task the *Church Dogmatics* undertook, and our reading this evening was from one of the climactic passages in his doctrine of God. Before he arrived at this point there was a hectic decade through the 1920s, with much controversy and polemics, including Barth's famous response to Emil Brunner entitled '*Nein!*'

God's Glory, Joy and Beauty

In the first volume of the *Church Dogmatics* Barth had treated the doctrine of the Trinity. Now in the second volume he examines the main attributes (what he calls the 'perfections') of God. He does this in an original way. The being of God is throughout conceived in terms of action, above all the act of loving, and God is 'the One who loves in freedom'. The perfections of the divine loving are treated at length in pairs – grace and holiness, mercy and righteousness, patience and wisdom; then the perfections of the divine freedom – unity and omnipresence, constancy and omnipotence and then, as the culmination of the perfections, the eternity and glory of God. You will notice that our passage recapitulates all the perfections in relation to God's glory. God's glory is the expression of his free and loving self-communication in attractive, radiant presence. It is the overflow of 'the infinite exultation in the depth of His divine being', of the 'jubilation with which the Godhead is filled from eternity to eternity' (II.1.647-8), of the fact that God is 'pleasant, desirable and full of enjoyment' (651). And that leads in our reading to what can be seen as the supreme attribute of God, uniting love and freedom: joy. 'It is a glory that awakens joy, and is itself joyful. It is not merely a glory which is solemn and good and true, and which, in its perfection and sublimity, might be gloomy or at least joyless… It is something in God, the God of all the perfections, which justifies us in having joy, desire and pleasure towards Him, which indeed obliges, summons and attracts us to do this.' (655).

Then, in the final sentence of our reading, Barth goes a step further, and it is a step that as he well knows is a rather controversial and dangerous one for someone in his own Protestant Calvinist tradition. He actually says: 'God is also beautiful' (655) – admittedly in a sentence with a question mark at the end. The glory of God culminates in the joy of God and inseparable from that is the beauty of God. In classical terms, Barth has added to truth and goodness the third 'transcendental', beauty, and this has helped to generate much theological aesthetics. Indeed Hans Urs von Balthasar attributes to Barth the main imptus for the renewal of theological aesthetics after a barren time in modernity, and his own major work on the subject is entitled *Herrlichkeit* (*Glory*).

In Barth's further reflections after our reading he has a fascinating aside for us theologians. Theology is 'a peculiarly beautiful' discipline and 'the theologian who has no joy in his [or her] work is not a theologian at all… A theological proof is itself a *delectatio* [a delight].' (656-7)

Yes

Barth goes on in CD II.1 to work out his theology of glory first in relation to his understanding of God as Trinity and then in relation to his favourite of all themes, the incarnation of Jesus Christ. And that brings me to my biblical text from Chapter 17 of the Gospel of John. After CD II.1 Barth wrote a few more million words – on God, creation, Jesus Christ, salvation, sin, church, ethics and much else – before he returned at length to the theme of glory in *Church Dogmatics* IV.3. That is a remarkable volume, written with considerable freedom and daring when he was in his seventies. Among other features it shows throughout his immersion in the Gospel of John. The later Barth is a deeply Johannine thinker, and John 17 allows him to explore further his central themes of the glory, joy and love of God. Jesus opens: 'Father… glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you' (17:1); he prays for his disciples 'that they may have my joy made complete among themselves' (17:13); and he concludes this final prayer before going to his death: 'I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.' (17:26) In this last completed volume of the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth celebrates (see especially IV.3.231-237 on the Gospel of John) the intensity of mutual involvement in glorifying, rejoicing and loving, the revelation of the the 'inner divine mystery' of love and freedom, and the universality of that love. Barth in this later work is far more concerned to say 'yes' than to say 'no' in the polemical way he often did in his earlier theology. This is not just the mellowing of old age: it is grounded in his confidence in the God of Jesus Christ, whose glory is in His love and joy shared without reserve, and enacted above all in loving the world though sending His Son (John 3:16; *Church Dogmatics* IV.3.235f., 487, 767, 773).

Mozart

There are, of course, many problems one might find with Barth's theology, and I have myself written on several of them, besides supervising seven or eight doctorates on Barth, each of which has its own angle of critique. But this evening I have been concerned with something that I think most would agree on: that he 'thinks God', the God of Jesus Christ and classical Christian orthodoxy, with a depth and richness of conceptuality and theological imagination that is matched by very few in the last two millennia. The final word goes to that theological imagination, which is far more musical than visual.

Barth once recalled: 'I must have been five or six years old at the time… My father was musical and fond of improvising on the piano… One day he was playing something by Mozart. I can still picture the scene. He began a couple of bars from *The Magic Flute* ('Tamino mine, what happiness'). They went right

through me and into me, I don't know how, and I thought, 'That's it!'' (Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth* p.15) Later he seldom went a day without listening to Mozart, he wrote a book on him, and at the Mozart Bicentenary celebrations in 1956 he said: 'The golden sounds of Mozart's music have always spoken to me – not as gospel but as parables of the Kingdom revealed in the Gospel of God's free grace, and they continue to do so with the utmost freshness. Without it I could not think of what moves me personally in theology, in politics.' (Busch p.410)

It is, perhaps, in the intoxication we sometimes experience through music (to which worshippers in the Chapel are no strangers) that we may find the most fitting parable of Barth's intoxication with the mystery of God.