

## PLAIN TALKS ON FUNDAMENTALS

II. *God and the Creeds*

WE have seen, in the first place, how indispensably, supremely necessary it is for us to *know God*—necessary for us even in order to know ourselves and to be ourselves and to fulfil the purposes for which we exist. We have seen too what sort of a knowledge this is—not an abstract, academic knowledge, but a knowledge which we have to *live*, a knowledge which must permeate our whole being and give unity, direction, purpose to all we think or say or do; that it is also a knowledge of a *Person*, a personal God; not the knowledge of an abstract science or system; that, nevertheless, if we are to know God we must have some sort of creed, some sort of dogma. Our minds are so made that knowledge cannot be conveyed to us or by us except through words, by stringing together ideas in sentences, formulas, propositions. A creedless religion is an impossibility. We must conclude, therefore, that if the knowledge of God is necessary for us, so too must be dogmas, creeds, doctrines. We cannot do without them.

We must now take our inquiry a short stage further. For we are no pragmatists. We cannot jump to the immediate conclusion that because dogmas work, because they are necessary to our mental make-up, dogmas and creeds are therefore true or even can be true; still less that the dogmas and creeds of the Catholic Church are true. But, in order to approach the question of their authority and truth, we must first deal with an important preliminary question: quite apart from the authority and truth of the actual dogmas of the Catholic Church, how can *any* dogma or statement about God be true; how can any human words be valid to convey or express knowledge of God? To put the same question in another way, what sort of truth, what sort of validity do we claim for the words of Holy Scripture, for the creeds and dogmas and all the definitions of the Popes and Councils and the answers in the catechism?

For obviously, as those who want a “creedless religion”

constantly remind us, this does, at first sight, present a difficulty. These people tell us, and tell us quite truly, that human ideas and the human words which express those ideas are infinitely inadequate to express the Infinite. You cannot, they tell us, bottle up the Absolute in a formula. In more simple language, we cannot form the remotest idea what God is like. And since human words are the expressions of human ideas, no words can convey to us any idea of God.

Now, there is a certain amount of very important truth behind this objection to creeds and dogmas. No man has seen God at any time. True, we hope one day to see Him face to face, to know Him even as we are known. We believe that by His almighty power our finite minds will be so strengthened that they will be enabled to behold the Infinite. But at present, in this life, it is not so. Any knowledge we can claim to have of God is, to use St. Paul's phrase, to see Him as it were in a glass, in a dark manner. We know that the highest knowledge the greatest saint can have of God is infinitely inadequate. We assert, with St. Thomas Aquinas, that the highest and most accurate knowledge we can have of God in this life is the knowledge that He transcends infinitely the very highest and noblest idea that we can form of Him. There is a very real sense in which the greatest mystics, those who know God best, are the greatest agnostics, for it is they who are most conscious of the incomprehensibility, the ineffability, the Mystery, of God. Their very knowledge is darkness; they are, to use their own language, plunged in the "cloud of unknowing" where they realize to the full the utter incapability of our finite minds to know the infinite God. Very truly we may say that the more we know about God the less we find we know; and conversely, the less we know about Him the more confident we are that we know Him.

Are we then to conclude that we can think nothing, say nothing, about God? Are we to deny that we can attain to any truth about God? Are we to assert that all creeds, dogmas, doctrines, all assertions about God are utterly invalid and valueless? Are we to say (as some have said)

that it is equally false and futile to say that God is good and God is bad; that He is love and that He is hate; that there is intelligence and will in God and that there is not intelligence and will in God; that God exists and God does not exist; that there are one, two, three, four, five, or five hundred persons in God; that Jesus Christ is God and not God? Are we to give up all hope of what we have seen to be absolutely necessary for us, namely that we should somehow *know* God, and that words should convey to us truth about God?

The answer is, of course, an emphatic negative. And it would be an emphatic negative even if God had not revealed Himself to us in Jesus Christ. And it would be an emphatic negative because, although no man has seen God at any time, although no man has or can see God face to face, yet we *can* and *do*, as St. Paul says, see Him as it were in a glass, a mirror, in a dark manner. We cannot see God, but we can see the reflexion of God. For although we cannot see or hear or form any adequate idea of God, yet we can see and hear and think about things that reflect God, that tell us about God, that in some measure reveal God to us.

For God is, in the first place, reflected in Nature. In St. Paul's words, "The invisible is clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made by Him—His eternal power and His divinity." We cannot see God: but we can see trees and flowers and hills and valleys and seas and clouds and stars. And we can see, not the works of nature only, but the great works of the art of man—paintings and poetry and symphonies and cathedrals and locomotives. There is not a thing that we can see or hear that will not tell us, if we think about it, of God.

There is not a thing that we can see or hear, in nature or in art, in the world around us or in our own consciousness, that does not tell us, in the first place, that God *is*. For if we think about it we shall find that we cannot explain a single phenomenon adequately and completely unless we conclude that there is a God. We cannot explain the smallest, meanest thing—not a breath of wind, a flash of light, the flicker of an eyelid—if there be not a First Cause, an Ultimate Explana-

tion, whom we call God. This is not the place to work out the scientific formulation of the arguments for the existence of God. We are here concerned only to state our position, to show how we can justify our assertion that we can and must make statements about God which are true and valid, and reject others as false and invalid. And we maintain that our own experience of the world around and within us compels us to conclude that the statement "There is a God" is a true statement, and that the statement "There is no God" is a false and foolish statement.

But nature reveals more to us than the bare fact that God exists. It compels us to further statements regarding the very nature of God. For as the handiwork of the artist not only compels us to conclude that the artist existed, but tells us also something of the artist himself, and as the perfection of the work of art reveals the perfection of the artist, so does the handiwork of God compel us to conclude something of the perfection of God. We find in creation, for instance, truth, goodness, beauty. We are compelled, therefore, to attribute truth, goodness, beauty to Him who created. And because God is God and infinite, we know that we must attribute that goodness, truth and beauty to God in an infinite degree—we know that the goodness, truth and beauty of God infinitely surpass the goodness, truth and beauty of His works. In God's creation we discover all manner of other perfections—intelligence, will, love, for instance. And even in inanimate things which have no intelligence and will there are abundant signs that they are the product of intelligence, will and love.

Such considerations lead us a step further. We are compelled to say that the statements that God is truth, is goodness, is beauty, is intelligent, is love are *true* statements; and that the contrary statements that God is falsehood, is evil, is ugliness, is blind force, is hate are *untrue*. These truths we call the truths of natural theology, that is to say truths about God which are revealed to us by nature. We are not at present concerned to discuss them in detail: we are interested in them solely because they show that, in spite of the fact that God is infinite and ineffable and in-

## BLACKFRIARS

visible, in spite of the fact that no man has seen God at any time, we are nevertheless compelled, simply by using our eyes and our ears and our brains on the world around us and within us, to conclude that certain statements and words about God are true, and that others are false.

There is, of course, nothing specifically Christian or Catholic about these truths concerning God revealed to us in nature. Any pagan could, and many do, reach the same conclusions. But we believe that we have another, a much more important source of information about God. "No man has seen God at any time." The text goes on: "The only begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father has declared him." We believe that though no man has seen God, yet One Who *has* seen God, Who has dwelt with God, Who is the Son of God, has come among men, come into our world, our history, has Himself become man, and has told them infinitely more about God than they could have found out for themselves, has in fact revealed God Himself to them in His own Person. Of that self-revelation of God in and by Jesus Christ we shall have more to say subsequently, for this is the source of all specifically Catholic dogma. At the moment it is enough to realize that doctrines, statements about God, are possible in themselves as well as necessary for us. Although it is true that God is invisible, unseen and incomprehensible, although we cannot form any adequate idea of what God is like, although He infinitely surpasses the very highest idea we can form of Him, yet we can and must assert that certain words and statements about God are absolutely true and compel our assent, while others are false and must be denied and rejected.

That knowledge may be very imperfect, inadequate—often it is merely negative. But, as St. Thomas tells us, the tiniest hint of knowledge about God far surpasses in value and importance the most perfect knowledge we can have of anything else.

PRÆDICATOR.