

FOUNDATIONS OF FAITH: I. GOD

“In the beginning God”

I want us to consider in the coming Sundays five of the most important words that we know, five words which, when understood together, sum up virtually all that we need to know: first, God, then creation, thirdly man, then that which follows man almost immediately, sin, and finally, redemption. We meet each of these words or concepts in the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis, and it is there that we will begin our reflections on each.

It is always with a sense of trepidation that one ventures to deal with the great concepts, or rather realities, represented by these five subjects: God, creation, man, sin, redemption, especially when one seeks to deal with each in the space of a single sermon. It goes without saying that we disavow from the outset any pretense of handling these great subjects with the slightest adequacy. But they are subjects with which we must deal, and so we will do our best.

We begin where we must begin—at the beginning—and in doing so we discover that at the beginning we have already begun—that is to say, that there is no beginning from which one can trace the beginning of all things, for at the beginning God already was. “In the beginning God,” Holy Scripture begins. One cannot get beyond that. He who at the beginning, the beginning of all we can know and conceive, at the beginning of time, at the beginning of space, at the beginning of matter, . . . he who at the beginning made all that is, seen and unseen, is himself without beginning. “In the beginning God . . .”

When we approach the mystery of the beginning of our universe, the mystery of the beginning of all universes, however long ago that may have been, we approach the mystery of God. Genesis chapter one tells us in a veiled manner something of that great mystery, but we must be careful even there. Martin Luther’s commentary on Genesis, which fills five volumes of the American Edition of his works, begins with the comment:

The first chapter [of Genesis] is written in the simplest language; yet it contains matters of the utmost importance and very difficult to understand. It was for this reason, as St. Jerome asserts, that among the Hebrews it was

forbidden for anyone under thirty to read the chapter or to expound it for others. . . . Not even with this practice, however, did the Jewish rabbis achieve anything worthwhile; for in their commentaries men twice thirty and even older prattled most childishly about these extremely important matters.

I take that as fair warning lest I who am older than twice thirty “prattle most childishly about these extremely important matters.”

However that may be, to remain silent is not an option. We cannot comprehend the incomprehensible. Our finite minds can never grasp the infinite. We who are locked in time can never penetrate the eternal. But he who is incomprehensible, infinite and eternal has, for his own inscrutable reasons, chosen to reveal himself to us, and we, by tracing the beams of his revelation, can know him by whom we are known.

It is in this light that we must understand all attempts to “prove” the existence of God. The three classic proofs, so called, of the existence of God really *presume* his existence and provide arguments that perceive and retrace the lines of God’s own self-revelation.

The simplest of the arguments, the teleological or argument from design, sees the unmistakable imprint of God on his own creation and argues from the imprint to the Imprinter. This creation of which we are a part, is so marvelously made, whether considered in its immensity through a telescope or in its minuteness through a microscope, that it clearly reveals the hand of God.

This argument received its classic statement from William Paley, an Anglican Archdeacon of two centuries ago. Wrote Paley,

In crossing a heath, suppose I pitched my foot against a *stone*, and were asked how the stone came to be there. I might possibly answer, that, for anything I knew to the contrary, it had lain there forever; nor would it, perhaps, be very easy to show the absurdity of this answer. But suppose I found a *watch* upon the ground, and it should be inquired how the watch happened to be in that place, I should hardly think of the answer which I had before given—that, for anything I knew, the watch might have always been there. Yet why should not this answer serve for the watch as well as for the stone? why is it not as admissible in the second case as in the first? For this reason, and for no other. *viz.*, that, when we come to inspect the watch, we perceive (what we could not discover in the stone) that its several parts are framed and put together for a purpose, e.g. that they are so formed and adjusted as to produce motion, and that motion so regulated as to point out the hour of day; that, if the different parts had been

differently shaped from what they are, if a different size from what they are, or placed after any other manner, or in any other order than that in which they are placed, either no motion at all would have been carried on in the machine, or none which would have answered the use that is now served by it . . . This mechanism being observed, (it requires indeed an examination of the instrument, and perhaps some previous knowledge of the subject, to perceive and understand it; but being once, as we have said, observed and understood,) the inference, we think, is inevitable, that the watch must have had a maker; that there must have existed, at some time, and at some place or other, an artificer or artificers who formed it for the purpose which we find it actually to answer; who comprehended its construction and designed its use.

And as with the watch, so with creation. The intricate and infinite purposes we behold in all the wonders of nature, from the tiniest microbes to the vast reaches of outer space, bear abundant witness to the existence and the wisdom of the almighty creator we call God. As Handel put it so wonderfully in his oratorio, *Creation*, having the full chorus sing mightily, “The heavens are telling the glory of God. / The wonder of his work displays the firmament.”

A second classical argument, the cosmological, is that associated especially with St. Thomas Aquinas. This argument, rather than resting on the design and purpose of creation, rests upon the notion of cause and effect, or rather upon effect and previous cause, which we see all around us.. When a ball on a billiard table drops into the corner pocket, the observant bystander notes that that effect, the ball rolling toward and dropping into the pocket, had to have an adequate cause, namely, that it was hit by another ball traveling at a certain speed and in a certain direction. But that cause was in turn the effect of a previous cause, namely the movement of the cue ball, which in turn moved because of a cue stick, which moved because of an arm, which moved because of a muscle, which moved because of nerves and energy which came from food and the brain, and so forth and so on *ad infinitum*.

No, not *ad infinitum*. As you trace the chain of effect and cause, back through time, there must be a beginning somewhere. There had to be a first cause. Plato called it ‘the unmoved mover.’ Aquinas thought otherwise. He said, “But if in efficient causes it is possible to go on to infinity, there will be no first efficient cause, neither will there be an ultimate effect, nor any intermediate efficient causes; all of which is plainly false.

Therefore it is necessary to admit a first efficient cause to which everyone gives the name ‘God.’”

My favorite of the classical arguments is the so-called ontological argument, for it is directed neither to the design of creation nor the cause and effect one sees therein, but to the very being of God himself. It was given its classical expression by another Anglican theologian, if we may speak of the eleventh century Archbishop of Canterbury as Anglican. I’m speaking, of course, of St. Anselm. One reason I like this argument is because it is formed in prayer, the only proper stance for approaching the understanding of God. It is *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith seeking understanding, much like the supplicant of our Lord who prayed, “Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.” That’s faith seeking understanding.

St. Anselm opens his little book, *Proslogion*, with a prayer. Let me say before I read you this prayer, or part of it, that just as there are certain mountain roads that climb so sharply that one must stop and put the car into first gear so as to make it up and around the hairpin curve, so there are certain lines of reasoning that demand that we put our minds in the lowest gear to ascend the steep grade. This prayer of St. Anselm’s demands that kind of special attention, but is well worth the effort. So stick with me. Anselm prayed,

And so, O Lord, since thou givest understanding to faith, give me to understand—as far as thou knowest it to be good for me—that thou dost exist, as we believe, and that thou art what we believe thee to be. Now we believe that thou are a being than which none greater can be thought [*aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit*]. Or can it be that there is no such being, since, “the fool hath said in his heart, ‘There is no God’”? [Psalm 14:1; 53:1] But when this same fool hears what I am saying—“A being than which none greater can be thought”—he understands what he hears, and what he understands is in his understanding, even if he does not understand that it exists. For it is one thing for an object to be in the understanding, and another thing to understand that it exists. When a painter considers beforehand what he is going to paint, he has it in his understanding. but he does not suppose that what he has not yet painted already exists. But when he has painted it, he both has it in his understanding and understands that what he has now produced exists. Even the fool, then, must be convinced that a being than which none greater can be thought exists at least in his understanding, since when he hears this he understands it, and whatever is understood is in the understanding. But clearly that than which a greater cannot be thought

cannot exist in the understanding alone. For if it is actually in the understanding alone, it can be thought of as existing also in reality, and this is greater. Therefore, if that than which a greater cannot be thought is in the understanding alone, this same thing than which is greater cannot be thought is that than which is greater can be thought. [In other words, if the thought existed in the mind alone and not in reality, a greater can be conceived, namely one that possessed reality as well as conceivability.] But obviously this is impossible. Without doubt, therefore, there exists, both in the understanding and in reality, something than which a greater cannot be thought.

And this we call God.

Each of these arguments—from design, from effect and efficient cause, from the nature of the being of God himself—seeks to trace the lines of God’s revelation in creation and in the rationality of the human mind, and each is valuable in its own way—for the believer at least if not also for the atheist or agnostic.

Far more direct and satisfying, however, is the approach of Holy Scripture. Scripture begins with the assertion, bold and bare, “In the beginning God.” To the biblical mind God is not the conclusion of an argument. He is the place from which we begin. He is before and above and beyond all things, even the question of being. We do not start with ourselves and then find God. We start with God and then find ourselves. Said St. Paul, “It is in him that we live and move and have our being.”

The most satisfying simple definition of God that I have ever been able to come up with is this: that God is he before whom I am. *God is he before whom I am.* That tells me (1) that God’s existence is prior to mine, (2) that I would not exist without him, (3) that I cannot conceive of myself without him, (4) that he is a person in some sense as I am, and (5) that my whole being is derived from him and tends toward him. It says in short that he is my beginning and my end, the fount from which my life and all life comes, and the goal toward which it tends. He is before us and behind us, above us and below us, without us and within us. He is our all, the sum total of all meaning, of all reason, of all truth, and of all beauty. And when we come to recognize that, when finally after much searching we find ourselves in him, when with blessed St. Augustine we cry out, “Thou hast made us for thyself and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee,” then we have found God, not because he was lost, . . . but because we were.

Sermon preached by the Rev'd Fr. Voris G. Brookshire at the Anglican Catholic Church of Saint John the Theologian, Pompano Beach, FL, on the Second Sunday after Trinity, July 3, 2011. Copyright © 2011.