

CWCC – TALK 1 - 6 MAY 2010

I will start talking a little bit about our faith, and I am starting with the word 'God'. What does that word stand for? Who is this God? How is this God as I believe?

I always start off by making a big distinction between reality and perception. What there is and how you see it. What sense do you make out of it?

There is a bit of water between England and France, which we call the English Channel. The French call it *La Manche*, The Germans call it *Armel Kanal*. For England it means defence. For Germany and for France it meant a pain, an obstacle. Napoleon couldn't invade and Hitler couldn't invade. Same reality, two completely different perceptions.

As with that piece of water so with the whole of reality. What there is is there; atoms, molecules, animal, and vegetable, mineral: huge Space-Time which started 13.7 billion years ago with the big bang probably. But how do we see it? How do we structure it?

Now I, as an engineer, because I am a civil engineer Imperial College, haven't got a faith strong enough to believe that all of this happened by pure chance. There was a big bang and 13.7 billion years later here I am with my hands, with my ear with the way it works, with my eye the way it works and I came from a teeny little egg and a teeny little bit of sperm and from that comes this. If you believe that happened by pure chance you have got a faith as big as a skyscraper.

There is someone behind that. An incredibly, exquisitely, wonderfully, subtly design architect, artists, whatever it is. And that is what we call God, the Creator.

The difficulty of talking about God is that everything we say is only an analogy, is only a comparison, it is only 'like', because, for me, God is infinite and on the infinite you can't put a boundary and if you can't put a boundary you can't have a concept because a concept is a boundary.

So as soon as you say something you know it is inadequate, in some way wrong. So I use words, but the words I use are a little bit like sending a missile towards the sun that evaporates before it gets very far. And yet that is the only way I can do it.

Essentially God is mystery. Not a mystery as in a detective story, but as in the image I always use: like an island rising from the ocean whose mountains go up above the clouds. There is a lot under the water obviously which you can't see; there is something above the clouds – you know it is there because occasionally stones fall down – but in-between you can see something and it would be churlish – an act of blind faith - to say there is nothing above and nothing below.

It is God who is The One that is the answer to the question 'why?' God is someone about whom I know something, but about whom I accept I know very little. And the more I know the more I know I don't know and I don't know what I don't know. So it is a constant quest.

I am constantly curious. How can I restructure it better? How can I explain it better? How can I make more sense of life? For me, and I am, as I said, an engineer and I am a theologian – Master of Engineering, Doctor of Theology – there is no clash between authentic religion or faith and science. They work in completely different intellectual areas

Science deals with ‘what?’ and ‘how?’; religion, faith, deals with ‘why?’ and ‘who?’: something science can’t touch.

If you ask ‘how did the world come into being?’ I am not going to go to scripture to find the answer to that. That’s not – we now know - the job of scripture. Scripture was written to motivate, to encourage, to stimulate, to keep people’s hearts at peace, etc, in a society when people didn’t understand very much about science.

We humans, across the millennia - are constantly trying to make sense of reality. Along comes Newton and wow! Fantastic, we have now got a grip on the whole of the universe and for 300 years we did.

Then along comes Einstein and we said blimey, wow, um, um. Now, post-Einstein comes the Universe as a huge living organism where we swirl in galaxies and black holes and white dwarfs and expansion and.....

If it’s impossible to imagine even ‘Creation, don’t think we can understand the Creator.

And yet this infinitely infinite Creator, I believe, expressed himself in a person called Jesus of Nazareth. The Word became Flesh. God spoke and, in speaking, you can learn something about who was speaking. A bit like you are learning something about what is inside my head by what I am saying. What you are hearing is much less than who I am. Honest.

The Word is absolutely God but God is infinitely more than Jesus.

Yet, through Jesus, I can get to know how God is. Is he terrifying? Is he scary? Is he a bully? No, he is loving. Utter love. And that’s what, for me, was revealed in the Easter mystery, the Paschal Mystery, and Easter doesn’t finish, remember, until Pentecost. Until the Holy Spirit comes.

The Holy Spirit comes and suddenly you have Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That’s how God revealed himself in stages. Creation, then 13.7 billion years – take a millennium or two - Redemption and then the presence of God on earth in the Holy Spirit.

Now – as things always were but gradually we realised - the Father and the Son and Holy Spirit is God. God within God, as it were, the sub-atomic God. In God’s relationship with Creation God is always one but, inside God, there is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, like inside an atom there are electrons. protons and neutrons. There is much going on inside every atom.

[I hand clap. Repeated]. A question I ask people is ‘which hand claps the first? Left or right one?’ Precisely.

If I ask you what comes first, a parent or a child? Neither, both. There is no parent until there is a child. So parents give childhood the instant the child gives parenthood. You might think you are a parent but if the old curse comes back you are not. It’s the child that gives parenthood the instant parents give child childhood.

In other words, in the Trinity you have got the Father, the Son and the Mother, the Holy Spirit, because we are made in the image and likeness of God, ‘male and female he made us.’

In God there is a life that is love. That word for that reality is the nearest thing we can understand from what we have on this earth.

‘God is Love’ so it is Love, spiritual love, that underpins all human love. We have one life but that one life has got has the four dimensions I have mentioned before; PIS the PIES of life – the physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual.

On all those levels ‘love’ means and is expressed in different ways. Physically, yes it might be intercourse but it is also making a cup of tea. It is kissing somebody better. It is cooking, shopping.

Intellectually it’s trying to understand. Emotionally is sympathising, empathising and spiritually it’s needing and respecting.

If you love somebody you can always say ‘God, I need you’, but I also have to say ‘I respect you. I need you to be the way you are. I need your alterity; I need your otherness’

That’s what it seems is the life within God. To be son, the son has to respect both parents. The son needs Father and Holy Spirit; both of them. And vice versa. There would be no mother without a father and a son.

There is a mutual need but there is a mutual respect because if you destroy any of them the other two disappear.

God, we see, lives by loving, where loving is essentially giving.

Christ came on earth and gave himself completely, that’s the Crucifixion. Because he gave himself completely he was on earth in space-time as God is – alive again. Wounded, but alive.

He is still with us in The Spirit; that’s what draws us together. So God, for me, is Love as expressed through the way Jesus Christ lived.

That changes everything. There is no need to be worried if I am a bad boy - or girl - if I have done something silly.

One of the key things Jesus said to us was “Unless you become as little children you cannot enter the Kingdom of God.” In other words, unless you see yourself as a child seen by a loving parent, you can’t understand what I am here for.

God sees me at the age of 71 as a loving parent sees a child. A small child, not a teenager. That’s a big mistake some people make about God, they somehow think that God is as their parents were when they were a teenager.

“If you don’t put that away you can’t go out” Conditional. “If you pass your exams go and enjoy yourself”. But a small child, a baby, isn’t like that. A small child can puke over its mother’s best dress. “Oh you poor darling.” And that’s how God seems me.

If I mess up, if I get something wrong, if I lose my temper, whatever, - and repent and say sorry - instead of God saying “you are going to be punished because I see you as a parent sees a teenager, or as an adult is seen by a policeman” God says “I love you. YOU can do better.”

Jesus came to show us that God is unconditional love. Not soft love! Because God wants what is good for us. As I always say, God loves us as we are, but loves us too much to want us to stay the way we are.

God is like a loving parent who loves a one year old who can almost stand up. “Isn’t it wonderful,” but hopes that one day he or she will actually be running around talking, smiling. God loves us like that.

It is not sort of ‘be yourself, lad, you are OK as you are.’ No, no, God wants me to be better at being me and he wants each of you to be better at being you. Doing whatever job you are doing.

Never think that your job is not good enough for a ‘good Christian’ because like you, God when He became human, from the age of probably 5 or 6 and until he was 30 did nothing ‘specially-religious’. He was a carpenter. Pure, materialistic carpenter. Just as materialistic as numbers on a computer.

It’s not what you do, it’s how you do it; it’s why you do it. If you put your heart in and do it as well as you can as a gift to God, then that’s fine. It’s not what you are doing; it is how you are doing it and why you are doing it.

If you make too much money give it away, there is no problem there. “It’s terrible, Vlad, I’ve got this terribly large bonus at Christmas”. “That’s OK. Let me have it. Keep 10% and let me have the rest and I can build a school or I can dig for water somewhere or I can educate people or You know.

So don’t be afraid to make too much money. That’s a cop out. It’s why you do it, it’s how you do it, and it’s what you do with it.

God needs us to be ourselves.

The way I understand God - and this is a bit radical for some people - is that because God is love and love has to respect, God who creates creation, respects creation and thus God cannot tinker with it. That's why there are tsunamis, volcanoes, floods and earthquakes.

Precisely because he created us out of love he loves us and an essential – eradicable! – element in love is respect.

God respects the whole of Space-Time just as God respects me.

People say 'God can do anything'. He can't. God is an 'omnipotent God' but remember, the original meaning of 'omnipotent God' meant that everything that exists was made was made by one God. That's the core message in the first chapter of Genesis.

Everything has been made has been made by one God. God is Omni-creative, but he cannot make a square triangle and he can't make me love him. He can't make me love anybody. What a creator!

God needs us to help him make the world a better place. That's how I see my vocation. So that where I am, at least, there is light and warmth and I am ACE: Affirming, Consoling and Encouraging. All I can do is to do all I can: to do my best and leave the rest to God.

What I achieve doesn't seem very much, but it is terribly important.

There is the famous story of the man walking along a beach covered with hundreds and thousands of washed up starfish and he picks up one and throws it into the sea and picks up another and throws it into the sea and a man coming along says "You are wasting your time. What difference are you going to make to all these?" and he said "To this one I am making all the difference."

So you are my starfish today, I hope.

I would love to deal with all those 18.000 Catholics on Canary Wharf - and all the other people in Canary Wharf - but something is something and you are the same.

If you can change for the better one thing for one person....

Don't think your life is unimportant.

The two big mistakes in life are to try to do everything or nothing. It is to do a little bit, and that little bit can be enormously important.

I always think of Jesus on the cross, dead. Who would put any money on Christianity Good Friday afternoon? Yet, here Jesus is 2,000 years later with a billion followers.

Essentially, God is mystery. We can't describe God yet so many people try to reduce God to religion. Another big mistake.

It's why a lot of people who attack God are atheists. They deny God because they don't like religions yet the real, authentic God is beyond the reach of religion.

People can misuse God and they have misused God. Just think of the inquisition and the crusades!

People see the way they are and, for a long time, they acted as though they had forgotten that God was love.

You were told that to be a good girl, a good boy, you had to keep the rules. If you kept the rules you were good. You showed you loved God by keeping the rules, by going to Mass on Sunday.

Yet "What you do to the least of mine you do unto me". It is the way you relate to people that matters!

You can express the presence of that God sacramentally "When two of you are gathered in my name there I am and my name is love."
If two of you are there and loving God is present.

Now that's fantastic. You can do that in your office with whoever it is. Keep your eye open for someone who is a bit low. What that means in practice is up to you. Each of us is different.

But try to remember that God is so close; always and everywhere.

I remember seeing on TV when the first astronauts and cosmonauts starting going round the world there was a meeting, in Helsinki, I think, between an astronaut and a cosmonaut. The Russian said: "I was up in my Sputnik and I looked outside. I saw no God." And the American said: "Well, gosh, if you had stepped outside you would have seen God immediately." Exactly.

The palpable experience of God is one heartbeat away and, for me, being my age God is getting ever closer. Thank God.