FINDING GOD IN ALL THINGS

By GRAEME GARRETT

UNTIL RECENTLY I HAD NEVER QUITE noticed how much our understanding and worship of God is tied up with prepositions. Once the fact is pointed out, of course, it becomes obvious. Prepositions no doubt have their place in any enquiry. But in theology their influence is immense. The reason is simple. Prepositions are words that point to relationships. They describe the way something is situated in connection with something else. In theology prepositions describe how we think of God in relation to the world, and hence to ourselves. Take a famous example. In Ephesians 4:4–6 Paul appears to cite an early credal formula celebrating the unity of the Church in the power of the Spirit. It concludes with an expression of praise to the oneness of God in his universal sovereignty: 'One God and Father of all, who is *above* all and *through* all and *in* all'. Above, through, in—these three prepositions situate God in relation to the world and the world in relation to God. Note it is the world, the universe in its entirety, that is at issue here. The word 'all' used four times in the one sentence presumably means what it says. Not *nearly* all, or all *important* features, or all *human* beings, but *all* in the universal sense, simply every aspect, function, being, system—the whole creation—is situated in relation to God as described in these three prepositions.[1]

Such theological prepositions have caused some notable headaches for the faithful. Almost thirty years ago John Robinson in his famous book, *Honest to God*, stirred up a lively row over the preposition *up*. Much of the language of scripture, he argued, following the suggestions of Bultmann, Bonhoeffer and Tillich, presupposes a three-decker universe—'heaven above, the earth beneath and the waters under the earth'—in which system God is conceived of as located *up* there, meaning up in heaven.[2] But in the modern world this way of looking at things is naïve at best, wrong at worst. It encourages people to think of God as somehow located vertically upwards from the earth, or, if they are a little more sophisticated, at least to think of God as 'out there', beyond the limits of interstellar space. In the age of radio-telescopes, rocket probes and (now) Stephen Hawking's cosmology, such theology is exploded, Robinson concluded, since 'there is no room for [God], not

merely in the inn, but in the entire universe; for there are no vacant places left'.[3] If the idea of God is to be rescued from oblivion we need to think of God as *down* here. God is the ground of being, the ultimate source of all that is. For human beings, God is thus the infinite and inexhaustible depth of our life here in this world, not somewhere 'beyond'. If we are aware that life is not merely shallow or trivial, if we sense that life has depth, we are already in touch with God. For (following Tillich) 'depth is what the word *God* means'.[4]

Such was John Robinson's attack on the theological *up* and defence of the theological *down*. Of course there are other contenders in the preposition stakes. The eschatologists, and the political radicals who follow them, want to see God *in front* of us. God is the power of the future, the One who approaches us from the perspective of the coming kingdom which stands as lure and judge of all contemporary reality. The conservatives prefer to see God *behind* us, situated in the past. The truth and reality of God is available mainly in scripture, in Jesus of Nazareth and in the history and creeds of the Church. One thing is clear. We cannot escape some prepositions in dealing with God. Perhaps the message of the Ephesians text is that we ought not to get attached to any one to the exclusion of others. God is situated in relation to us in a complex way that no one preposition can encompass. That, at any rate, is the view I want to explore in what follows.

'One God and Father of us all, who is *above* all.' At the risk of offending the followers of John Robinson, the *up*-relationship remains solidly in evidence here. Indeed, it is hard to know how we can express what we feel about God without using it somehow. Obviously, 'above all' does not mean 'up there' or 'out there'. No matter how far we go 'up there', we never get above 'all'. We are simply in a different place within 'the all'. That is exactly what Paul is saying. God is not just another part, however important, of the bits and pieces that make up the universe. God is not any part of 'the all'. Nor is he 'the all' itself. God transcends all. He is the creator and Lord of all. 'The all' is his creature. And that includes us.

This is important to know. It tells us that we are not locked completely into the totality of this finite world. There is something more. And that something more breaks into the world in our experience of God. This has important consequences for our sense of what it is to live a human life. It means that the ultimate boundaries, the iron limits we meet in the world, do not necessarily have the final say. Death, for example. If there is nothing that transcends 'the all' which is our world, nothing *above* 'the all', then death faces us as the absolute boundary of life.

It is true that many people of our time have felt that exactly this is the cold reality of our human situation. The suffering of the world is proof of the world's futility. The Marcan account of the passion has the crucified Jesus utter a terrible cry of abandonment at the moment of death. 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' (Mk 15:34). Modern critics of the faith (e.g. Jean Paul, Hermann Samuel Reimarus, Friedrich Nietzsche) have been quick to interpret this to mean that at the final moment Jesus discovered to his horror that the life he had lived on the basis of supreme trust in the presence of an all-encompassing love was illusory. There is no such love. In place of the divine eye that catches and holds all in its compassionate gaze there is only, to use the chilling phrase of Jean Paul, 'an empty and bottomless socket' staring sightless at the 'eternal storm which no one governs'.[5] The upshot of such a vision is that any and all values which we humans know and cherish have meaning only on the basis of our own decision, and significance only within the limits of our individual life-span, or at best the life of society at large. Nothing beyond human experience grounds, validates or preserves such values.

This leaves us, amongst other things, without any place to put the feelings of outrage which seem inevitably to arise in us in face of the evil and injustice of the world. What does the eternal storm care for our human sense of justice? Only if God is above all, that is beyond death, can we make any ultimately positive sense of the human longing for a life that speaks to death in this world and a justice that addresses the injustice of this world. If God is not above this world—to mention only one example, but an example which, as Dostoevsky said, raises the question of justice most acutely—there is no possible redress for the children of our dark and violent history who die before they have a chance to live. The promise of their lives comes to nothing. Indeed the very idea of promise is a mockery. For ultimately there is no one who makes a promise, and no one to oversee its fulfilment. Unless there is a reality, a compassion, that transcends this world, we can never speak of a grace that can break in to judge and heal this world, or of a faithfulness which can redeem the apparent promise of life so often cruelly incomplete within this world. God *above all* is crucial for human hope.

A claim for the ultimate reality of God as love encompassing the world is made by the gospel story at almost every point. In spite of the critics, Christian faith interprets Jesus as one of the places—indeed the most important place—within the world where that which transcends the world breaks in. In Jesus, God the 'above all' becomes powerfully visible inside 'the all'. But he does not fit comfortably. How could he if he

truly is from beyond? There is a mystery about him that puzzles and offends. Things that do not seem possible within what we know are the bounds of this world, become possible in him. Take, for example, the account of the feeding of the five thousand in John's Gospel (Jn 6). In this story the impossible possibility is presented as the miracle of the feeding of a huge crowd from what seem utterly inadequate resources. It does not fit. It is beyond the limits. The 'above' impacts on the 'below', and things are not left unchanged. The issue is not simply unexpected loaves and fishes for a hungry crowd, as John makes clear. The issue is the nourishment of our human existence as a whole. What sustains our human life in the final analysis, in the face of what we know this world is like? Jesus answers: 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry' (Jn 6:35). In terms of Johannine theology this means God in Christ is the giver and sustainer of our life. Human living reaches beyond this world. In the end the whole universe cannot really sustain us. In the end God alone can give that wherewithal through which the promise, the longing, the hope of our life is fulfilled.

This is the significance of eucharistic worship. We come to the Lord's table to acknowledge that our life and our death, and the life and death of all others in this struggling world just will not fit into 'the all'. Something in us spills over the limits of this world. Our spirit longs to be fed by the infinite within the finite. And so we search restlessly for God *above* all. Unless we know such a God, our life is too small, and death and evil too great.

I want now to turn to the third of Paul's prepositions: God *in* all. Robinson is right to this extent. If we think of God *only* as above, we will probably make some rather impressive theological and practical mistakes. It is not hard to see how. We all know religious people who get lost in the world beyond. They seem to lose touch, at least in their religious life, with the solidity of this world in which, for all our sense of transcendence, we have to live. They think of God as 'totally other'. God is where everything else is not. So religion becomes private: an inward, hidden relationship with the mystery of God beyond all the woes and banalities of this life. Or God is, at best, located in the Church, separated and untouched by the whirlwinds of society. And in the face of the suffering of the world which seems so devoid of the presence of God, all hope is transferred to an eternity beyond death. Reality then divides into two spheres: a holy sphere where God dwells and is approachable through religious and spiritual practices, and a profane sphere outside the rule of God where purely secular pursuits hold sway. The believing soul is faced with a dilemma: either to retreat into the sphere of the holy,

seeking God beyond the world, or to exist with a divided consciousness, now God-related, now world-related.[6]

In some ways it is an attractive option. It seems to account for the darkness of the world without surrendering all hold on the reality of God. Moreover it protects God from being responsible for the world's evil. Ultimately, however, it is unworkable. It shatters the divinity of God in the sense that God becomes a localized deity. Realities exist outside the realm of his lordship, which means outside the reach of his love. But God is the God of the *in* all as well as the *above* all. Just this is the meaning of the incarnation. God was *in* Christ. In Christ the reality of God-beyond breaks into the reality of our human history without reserve or favour, without special pleading or special protection.

The issues at stake here are central to the christological debates of the ancient Church, as illustrated in the classic struggle between Athanasius (*c.* 296–373) and Arius (*c.* 250–*c.* 336). The Arians argued that a realistic understanding of God as the absolutely transcendent source of all created being makes an incarnational Christology impossible. How can it be sensibly claimed that the uncreated source of all creation (God) is now a part of that creation (the man Jesus), a claim which any incarnational view of Christ must make? How is infinitude to be encumbered in and encompassed by finitude? How can eternal self-sufficiency be linked with temporal contingency? Worst of all, how can the immortal be embroiled in the crisis of mortality? How can God and the cross be thought together? So asked Arius. For him the questions were thoroughly rhetorical. Merely to state is already to answer them. There can be no possibility of the mingling of the 'uncreate' with the 'create'. God cannot be *in* Christ. Therefore Christ must be understood as the first-born of God's creation; the greatest and best of all that is made, infinitely superior to us, but firmly on this side of the creator/creature divide. It is a good argument. We can see its logic and feel its persuasive force. Indeed so strong is the case that Arian Christology remains to this day a powerful functional reality in the Church. The Arian Christ is the real Christ still for many who wish to stress the God above all.

Athanasius contested the point vigorously. *If* salvation comes from God alone, *if* we human beings are unable to save ourselves, i.e. overcome the sinful distortion that mars our personal and social existence, and conquer the suffering and death that consumes us all; and *if* salvation which can overcome these corruptions is found in Jesus Christ (both of which points were agreed by Arius), *then*, said Athanasius, the only solution to the question of the real Christ is that he must be one

with, indeed the very expression of, the reality and power of God. *God* is in Christ. Without this identity there is no God-grace in Christ but only the same human-grace which we all already share by virtue of our common humanity, but which we all already know, through suffering and death, is without ultimate redeeming power. A human Christ, no matter how great, cannot be the new creation we need. In other words, history, our human bit of the creation, is not and cannot be its own redeemer. On the other hand, the God-grace that is in Christ must be present and powerful *in* our human realm, because if not, it is not us, not our humanity, that is touched and transformed by that grace. Therefore Arius' view that he does Christ an honour by making him infinitely superior to us only undermines further the possibility of real salvation in him. God comes to us in Christ. It must be God, or no salvation; but it must be us, also, or no salvation. The presence of God is right in our history, not somehow separated from it. Not merely *above* it. Such is the essence of Christianity, according to Athanasius.

Athanasian Christology is crucial in the interpretation of the Johannine story of the feeding of the five thousand. It is a miracle, yes. The above breaks into this world. But the point of the miracle is the feeding—a real feeding of real people with real hunger. Therefore the interpretation I gave a moment ago of 'Jesus the ultimate bread of life', is at best partial. It is in danger of becoming ethereal, out of touch with real physical hunger. If Athanasius is right, that will not do. 'Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a multitude was coming to him, Jesus said to Philip, "How are we to buy bread, so that this people may eat?"' (Jn 6:5). It is an absolutely concrete economic question. How will we feed them? Not how point them to a great beyond? That *is* the God issue. The God who is *in* all. Without this *in* the *above* will never be seen, especially by those who are hungry.

Those of us who live in the more comfortable sections of our present world order often want to avoid this. We are happier with preposition *above* than preposition *in*. But today everyone knows, in a way that goes far beyond the biblical story, what a multitude is coming towards us that will need feeding. World population growth is frightening. Unless some radical political and economic decisions are made disaster awaits for millions. We are implicated in this cry for bread, for bread must be shared. If we claim to see God in the presence of Jesus there is no way we can avoid the demand of the *in*. 'As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me' (Mt 25:40). God is in all, especially in the hungry.

The eucharist confronts us with God the economist.[7] The feast is economics as well as transcendence, ethics as well as mystery. As we eat

the bread and drink the cup, the question of Jesus remains, stark, practical, down-to-earth: how are we to buy bread so that these others may eat? If we have not seen this as a question of our relationship with God, we have not yet come to terms with the theological preposition *in*.

This brings us finally to the middle preposition—*through*. God *through* all. This is the thread which ties the other two together. It is easy to get caught up and lost in one or the other: the *above* or the *in*. We see the struggle between the respective theologies of these prepositions everywhere in the Church. Karl Barth versus Friedrich Schleiermacher. The evangelicals versus the liberation theologians. Cardinal Ratzinger versus Leonardo Boff. The *through* tries to hold together these contrasting ways of understanding. Not God *above* the all only. Not God *in* the all only. But God *through* the all. The above is encountered in the world, the beyond in the midst. This is the theological *through*.

Traditionally it has been called the sacramental approach to God. The old school-book definition held that a sacrament is 'an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace'. A concrete thing, a part of 'the all'—water, wine, bread, another person—becomes a vehicle in which we meet the presence of God, a window through which the grace of God is made manifest and effective. God is not separate from the sacramental thing, somewhere way above it (a tendency in radical Protestant theories of sacrament). God is not identical with the sacramental thing, simply trapped within it (a tendency of radical Catholic theories of transubstantiation). The *in* does not swamp the *above*. The *above* does not overwhelm the *in*. Instead, God the *above* comes *in* to the world *through* the sacramental object.

It is possible, and I think theologically necessary, to see a radical extension of the idea of sacrament here. If we link sacramental thinking only to the Christ-events and to the recapitulation of those events in the liturgy of the Church, inevitably sacraments will be understood as simply this or that sacred object—bread, wine, oil, water—used in special ways within the life of the Church. This again locks God up within a particular ecclesiastical sphere. But the text speaks of God through *all*. Nothing is exempt from the possibility of becoming a medium of divine grace. A religious symbol (or sacrament) is, in the words of Langdon Gilkey, 'a finite medium, or creature, in which the divine power is active and transformative and so that manifests or reveals through its own intrinsic being or activity the creative presence of that divine power'.[8] The implication of this is not only that every being—people, plants, animals, the sky, the water, the air—the all—is shot through with the creating and redeeming love of God and is,

potentially at least, capable of being a channel of that love to the world, but even more, every being is only truly itself (in its 'intrinsic being or activity') as a sacrament of the divine. As a creature of God's creative power, each being comes to itself in its essential character precisely as it mirrors in its depth the divine ground on which it stands. The world is not God. But neither is the world profane, empty of God. Despite the darkness of our contemporary history, despite the threat of human technology to the realm of nature, God is present through all. The great poem of Gerard Manley Hopkins puts the idea of the theological *through* with splendid force.

> The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
> It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
> It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
> Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
> Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
> And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
> And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
> Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.
>
> And, for all this, nature is never spent;
> There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
> And though the last lights off the black West went
> Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastwards, springs—
> Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
> World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

Of course, our confidence that 'nature is never spent' is much more shaken these days. Yet Hopkins' vision remains true of any genuine sacramental imagination. 'Deep down things' shines the grandeur of God, not apart from nature bruised and bare, but within it. Through all the Holy Ghost—extraordinary phrase—broods and flames and oozes. This belonging together of God, ourselves and the world, the sacred quality of the ordinary, is what is emphasized by the preposition *through*.

It is not the God of special religious places and religious times, but the God of all places and all times, the God of all the world, who transcends, grounds and guides our entire life, that is celebrated in liturgy. Thus is worship Trinitarian. We come to the eucharist to acknowledge God the Father: the God who is *above* all, beyond all that we can ask or think. We come to the eucharist to acknowledge God the Son: God the economist who is *in* all, and who calls to us in the voice of the hungry. We come to the eucharist to acknowledge God the Spirit: the God who is *through* all, whose grandeur charges the heart of every last being, and calls it beyond

itself to its destiny in him. Here miracle, economy and sacrament meet. God present. Not some God of our own imagination. But true God. God above all and through all and in all.

NOTES

[1] I am aware that there is debate about whether the *all* of Eph 4:6 refers to 'all of us', meaning simply all the saints, or to 'all things', meaning a universal and cosmic inclusiveness. I follow the exegetical conclusion of Markus Barth, that the passage intends the presence of God to be understood as permeating and animating the whole world, not merely the ecclesiastical section of the world. However, the theological argument of the paper is independent of the validity or otherwise of this exegetical conclusion. See the discussion in Barth, Markus: *Ephesians 4–6* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1974), pp 470ff.

[2] See, for example, Acts 1:9–11; Jn 3:13; 6: 61f; Eph 4:9f.

[3] Robinson, John: *Honest to God* (London: SCM Press, 1963), pp 13–14.

[4] *Ibid.*, p 22. The quotation is from Tillich's sermon, 'The depth of existence' in Tillich, Paul: *The shaking of the foundations* (Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1962), p 63.

[5] Cf Jean Paul, 'Speech of the dead Christ from the universe, that there is no God', cited in Zahrnt, Heinz: *The question of God: Protestant theology in the twentieth century* (London: Collins, 1969), p 125.

[6] Cf Bonhoeffer, Dietrich: *Ethics* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965), pp 196ff.

[7] The phrase 'God the Economist' comes from the title of a recent work by Meeks, M. Douglas: *God the economist: the doctrine of God and political economy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989). A provocative interpretation of eucharist as an act of economic ethics is given by John H. Yoder in a paper entitled 'Sacrament as social process: Christ the transformer of culture' in *St Mark's Review* No 150 (Winter, 1992), pp 13–19, esp. pp 14–16.

[8] See Gilkey, Langdon: *Through the tempest: theological voyages in a pluralistic culture* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), p 55. The entire essay 'Symbols, meaning, and the divine presence', pp 49–65, is relevant to this section.