

# THE GOD BEYOND GOD

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For many of our contemporaries God is dead. That is the phrase Nietzsche used. Nietzsche was right. The God of religious belief in his day was dead. The God that many atheists of today reject is as dead as they claim him to be. To them I want to say there is a God beyond the God you have rejected. And to the Christians I want to say there is a God beyond the God you have accepted. Many who call themselves Christians are making atheists of their colleagues because they have not discovered the message of the God beyond God. The chief enemies of Christianity today are not the communists, nor the atheists, nor anyone like that. They are those within the ranks of the church who know the last word that has to be known about God, who have stopped questioning what they think they know. The serious rivals to true religion are the pseudo-religions to which the name of God is attached. Atheism rejects all this. So do I. Perhaps you are now saying to yourself but why bring this up at St. Stephen's Church? Because we are all guilty; some more, some less. We

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should all be shocked to know how little our spiritual world is deeper than the surface. We should all be shocked to know how many are being kept out of the churches because of what Christians say.

To many of our contemporaries, religion is at best meaningless and at worst nonsense. For this Christians are largely to blame. We have taken the great symbols of faith and given them a superficial meaning that has lost all depth of meaning that is all that matters. I am not talking about the complexities of meaning. We can leave that to others. I am talking about the profundities of meaning. Nothing that is of real importance is too profound for anyone. Religion always becomes absurd when its great symbols of faith are taken literally. The same is true of the words of Jesus. Professor Paul Tillich is one of the great Christian thinkers of our age. He is greatly concerned that the message is not getting across to the man in the street. He had this to say about our efforts. "The first step toward non-religion of the western world was made by religion itself. This was when it defended its great symbols, which were its means of interpreting the world and life, not as symbols, but as literal stories. When it did this it had already lost the battle. The symbols of creation, the fall, even of salvation and of the saviour lost their meaning because they lost the dimension of depth. So reduced in meaning they became easy prey to physical and biological and historical attack." Tillich was speaking of religion here and now. We have turned creation into a magician's act by a celestial engineer. We talk of God's acts as interferences in the normal course of events. For most of the time the world gets on pretty well on its own as a gigantic contrivance grinding on its way. All that God is supposed to do is to have made the machine and then left it save for occasional visitations from

outer space. He is absent most of the time. Much of contemporary Christianity has a legalistic view of salvation. God in this mechanical scheme becomes a legal judge. Law replaces love. Coercive power replaces the only power that matters on heaven and earth and that is the power of love. But we do not take love seriously as the only power that can transform the world. Retribution replaces compassion. Providence becomes pre-ordained design decreed before the creation of the world. Even the tragedies of human life are attributed to a divine contriving. So there is no room left for any real freedom. We have set Jesus apart. He is high and lifted up out of the humanity of which he was a part. And in doing all this we have made atheists of our colleagues. The modern world became of age, said Bonhoeffer from his prison cell, when as a result of science and other movements it abandoned false conceptions of God. "Now that it has come of age, the world is more godless, and perhaps for that very reason nearer to God than ever before," nearer that is to the God beyond the false views of God. The chief enemy of religion today is, as it was in the time of Jesus, within our ranks. It is conservative religion; religion that would preserve conceptions of God that the world has already seen through as false. "Not everyone who says Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of God." How many of our Lord Lord's are turning men against God? "Your vision," said William Blake 'is my vision's dearest enemy."

The most urgent task confronting the church today, as I see it, is that every word and every doctrine that it proclaims be challenged and wrestled with until the surface is penetrated to the depths of meaning beneath. Real meaning never lies on the surface. The atheists are absolutely right when they condemn so much of what

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passes for Christianity. Because we have stayed so much on the surface we have betrayed the faith. I want now to illustrate what I mean by challenge to depth in three examples. The first is how we get to know people. The second is how we get to know science. The third is the lesson we read from the New Testament about the meeting of Jesus with the woman by the well.

"Getting to know you" is the first line of a popular song which then goes on "getting to know all about you." That would be all very nice but who here this morning knows all about anybody? I may rather casually say that I know a thousand students. I know their faces. That is not to know them. To some of these faces I can attach examination results. You would agree that this is still a pretty superficial knowledge. I certainly would not like to write a reference based on that alone. There are a few, yes very few, whom I know more than superficially. They have chosen to spend six or more years studying in my field of biology. As each year passes I know a little more about each one. There are always surprises which make me realise how little I even yet really know about them. Early expectations of this one fail to eventuate, or in another it may take years to dig out the real talents that lie buried beneath the surface. We may say we know all about so and so. But how little we really know. There is always someone beyond the someone we think we know on the surface. It is very significant that the word know in the Old Testament is reserved for the sort of knowledge that husband and wife have of each other. You do not really know until you possess. Possess is an active verb. To continue to know is to continue to possess to further depths. You can never retain friendships simply by staying where you are. Friendship

that fails to penetrate beneath the new surfaces that friendship ever reveals, is friendship that dies. Religion also dies when the new depths that scepticism opens up are no longer penetrated.

My second example is science. Everybody was sure that the sun went around the world, that was until Copernicus came on the scene. He doubted what was obvious, on the surface that is, to everybody else. The genius in science always questions what seems to be true to everybody else. When his doubts are proved to be true there is an earthquake in science that shakes it to its very depths. The depths are opened up once more to a deeper knowledge. Such an earthquake occurred when Darwin questioned the accepted view about the origin of the species. Everybody knew, or they thought they knew, how species had come into existence, that was until Darwin came on the scene. Then Darwin doubted the simple story that he had been brought up to believe. It took him 25 years to prove his doubts to be true. The depths of knowledge that Darwin opened up have made possible the science of biology of today. What I now long for as a teacher of biology is the student who will be another Darwin. This will be a student who questions what we have taught him and whose questioning will lead to an earthquake in modern biology or at least a tremor in the foundations. But he will have to ask the right questions. These are always much harder to find than the solutions. That is almost a quotation from Darwin. To question is to dig beneath the surface. One of the leaders in my own field of biology said to me that he was digging and digging but had yet to find the coal seam. He was a leader because he was digging while the rest of us were fossicking around on the surface. Digging a well is a symbol for science. We shall see in

a moment that it is the symbol that Jesus used in religion. And just before I leave all this symbolism let me point out that I used the symbol of earthquake quite deliberately. You will find it quite a lot in the Bible. In fact earthquakes seemed often to be associated with events in which great new spiritual depths were penetrated.

Science lives by discovery that there is ever a science beyond the science we think we know today. Our knowledge of God is the same. Science dies when the depths of meaning are no longer penetrated. Science did die once because of this. We tend to think of science as having been born in the 16th century but that was its second birth. Science had its first birth more than a millenium and a half earlier. But for a thousand years there was a dark age for science. Science died because people no longer asked questions about what they thought they knew. No new depths of knowledge were opened up for science until its rebirth after a thousand years.

Religion dies in the world and it dies in your life and mine when we stop asking questions about what we think we know. It dies as friendship dies and as science dies when the knowledge we have is a surface that is no longer penetrated to greater, unsuspected depths.

I want now to gather up and recapture these truths about God through the profound conversation that Jesus had with the woman at the well. When we read this story this morning did you think of her as the harlot, the outcast of society, the unfortunate woman whose religion no longer meant anything much to her and whose life had no guiding principle? All that would have been true of her. But did you stop to think of her as you and as me? Unless you did you

missed the point of the story. That story is about Jesus and us. It is a wonderful story because it is about Jesus getting to know someone, not just in casual acquaintance, as might have been the case with any other visitor to the well, but deep down below the surface. It is also the story about someone getting to know herself, not just a surface knowledge but deep down in depths that she had never been game to penetrate before. Thirdly, it is a story about someone getting to know Jesus. And fourthly it is a story of someone getting to know the God beyond the God she thought she knew; that is its climax. Every bit of it concerns us. If we could this morning take its message with all seriousness, then for each one of us it could bring a new depth to God which we have missed by living on the surface.

I suppose it is always difficult to begin a conversation with a complete stranger. Jesus began with a common interest, in this case the well and the water. They had both come to draw water in the heat of the noon day sun. I do not know how much Jesus knew about the woman. I suspect very little. He did notice that she came alone. He did know that the other women of the village would have drawn their water in the cool of the morning. It was very unusual to come at midday. In getting to know her Jesus dug a deep well into her life. No, it would be truer to say he helped her to dig this well. Her well was dry. She had come alone because she was an outcast. She was a common harlot. So Jesus speaks to her of another quality of life, a quality of life that has an eternal spring. He spoke of the life that was like a well with a bottomless resource of running water. He tells her that if she only knew about that sort of life and that sort of resource; if she only knew him as he is learning to know her, she would



have asked him to give her this living water. Now notice her reply. "But you do not have a bucket!" Ridiculous we say. Yes, absolutely ridiculous. This is just what we do with the symbols of depth when we take them at the surface, take them literally. She would never come to know what Jesus was talking about until she could see through the surface of what he said to the depths of meaning behind what he said.

But she must first see herself for what she is, a well that is parched. The miracle happens. In the presence of strong pure manhood her whole life opens before her. Stabbingly it all becomes plain when Jesus says to her "Go home and get your husband." She had no husband, but many. Then things begin to happen. They always do when we come to see the words of Jesus as speaking to our deepest needs. The depths of the woman's life which was empty meets the depths of his life that was full. She knows now there is a difference. It was the same with the thief on the cross. Bonhoeffer reminds us that Jesus did not try to convert the dying thief, one of them turned to him. To see Jesus is to see also the emptiness of our own lives. We see ourselves for what we are in contrast to what we could be. And what we are is, to use a new word in theology today, estranged. We are estranged or separated from what we could be, are meant to be, as men and women. We know that as innermost experience when we recognise in Jesus the fulfilment of human life. We can begin to know then something of the source of that life. But even then religion may get in the way. It was an obstacle for the woman who talked with Jesus that day. The God she thought she knew was an obstacle in the way of discovering the God Jesus would show her, the God beyond the God she knew. Her heart cries out, but what am I to do? And in her attempt to answer

her question in terms of the religion she knows she shows how remote it is from meeting the depths of her need. According to our religious leaders she says, God is to be found in Mount Gerizim. According to the Jews he is to be found in Jerusalem. But where can I find God? The answer Jesus gives is—no place, neither in Mount Gerizim nor in Mount Zion. Your concept of God is getting in the way of God. The name of the infinite and inexhaustible depth of life that is the eternal spring of life that is lived to the full is God. That depth is what the word God is all about. And if the word God has not much meaning to someone here this morning, and this is true of many people today, then translate it until it speaks to the depths of need in your own life. Perhaps in order to do so you must forget everything traditional that you have learned about God, perhaps even the word itself. It is authentic living that counts now, not words. The full story has just been published of Jacques Lusseyran. His autobiography is called "And there was light." It is about what I am talking about now. He mentions the word God only once. He was eight when he was accidentally blinded. He returned to school and completed his schooling without his sight. He went to the University in Paris. It was wartime. There he formed about himself a group of youths who ran an underground newspaper, *Defense de la France*. By 1943 they were 600 strong. On July 14th of that year they distributed a quarter of a million copies. A week later at the age of 17 he was arrested by the Gestapo. For six weeks he was in prison in France. Then followed the death train journey to Buchenwald. For the rest of the war he endured the concentration camp. He tells us that twice in his life he became aware of a source of strength on which he could draw at will. In his first blindness it took the form of some-

thing which he calls 'light.' "I could feel light rising, spreading in my life . . . I let it rise in me like water in a well." Much later when he was dying in Buchenwald of dysentery, pleurisy, erysipelas and starvation, without medicines, it became 'life.' "Life broke into my cage . . . it came towards me like a shimmering wave . . . I did not try to analyse it . . . this was no time for metaphysics . . . I drew strength from the spring. I kept on drinking." I say in all his story he mentions the "grace of God" just once. But his whole story is the grace of God.

Jesus was leading the woman at the well to these depths. She seems to say, now I am beginning to understand. One day I suppose someone will come who knows God just like that. And Jesus answers. "I am he, I who am speaking to you now." That day is now. The life that I speak of is in me, it can be in you also. The divine resources of life are fully manifest in him. And just because of this we can say that Jesus is the most human man who has ever lived. He is the most human because he is the most divine. Can you accept that definition of manhood? To be fully man is to be filled with God. Getting to know Jesus is getting to know the divine resources of all humanity. Getting to know Jesus is the beginning and the end of the gospel. Now many students say to me that there are lots of other people they can know much better than Jesus. After all in terms of historical documentation we know many people better than Jesus. But this is to read the phrase "knowing Jesus" on the surface and not in depth. In terms of personal participation in his being we cannot know anyone better because his life is the fulfilment of human life and that is valid for everybody. Think back to the metaphor of the well. Our lives are wells. But they are not wells each sunk into its private

little pool. Each can be sunk into the common sea beneath the surface, the common resource from which all humanity can draw. A child beside the ocean on a rainy day, seeing the water in the bay rise, cries that the rain is filling the sea. A mature man knows that no rain could do that. It is the tide coming in from the deep. So too a man grown mature in mind and spirit knows that all the raining he can do will not fill his empty bay, that only when the tide comes in from the depths beyond his making can his need be met. God is that sea. God is the rising tide.

So getting to know Jesus involves getting to the water level that he drew from. We shall only be persuaded to do that as we are persuaded that his life as it was meant to be, that his is the truth about our lives. Jesus did not say that he taught the truth about life. He was much more concrete than that. He said **I am** the truth. The truth about life is not a theory about life but a life.

Come back now to where I began. To know someone is to know there is always someone beyond the someone we know. To know anything about science has demanded a constant penetration beyond the science we know; this was the genius of Copernicus and of Darwin. There is always a science beyond science. Our knowledge of God is the same. There is always a God beyond the God we think we know, or the God we have rejected.

Formal religion did not mean anything to the woman at the well, nor I suspect to the dying thief, it did not mean very much to Jacques Lusseyran. It does not mean a thing to many young men and women whom I know who have rejected it. But I find that these same young people have an insatiable thirst for the sort of



life that Jesus called the water of life. They have a great emphasis and yearning for the richness of life that Jesus spoke about at the well. Many of them would sit by that well hour after hour and speak with Jesus. They want to know who they are, why they fail, what they should reach toward. They want, as one said to me recently, a sense of hope in life, a sense of hope moreover that is bigger than themselves. That precisely is what the water of life and the eternal spring are about.

My message this morning involves a gospel as new as some youth here who, in need of adequate spiritual resource to carry on, has found it available this day and day after day.

There may be someone who has come into this place this morning unsure of his own life and of any inner resource with which to face the morrow. Perhaps you have rejected the religion you were brought up in. You have rejected the God you know. But you have come searching desperately for any crumbs of meaning, crumbs of hope that may perchance fall from the table. To you I want to say, your seriousness and concern are witness of the God beyond the God you have rejected. That God is now disturbing you. He comes to all men, as he came to the woman at the well, as he came to Jacques, who open their lives to the divine influence.

Jesus does not call men to a new religion but to life. This is life to know God not the God of formal religion that the atheists have rejected and that the world is now rejecting but the God beyond God.

Thou of life the fountain art  
Freely let me take of thee.  
Spring thou up within my heart  
Rise to all eternity.