

A Bit of Theology

Here are some sentences to for you to look at.

God does not think as we think.

God does not “think”, as we think.

The first sentence implies that there is a single world of thought shared by God and us, in which statements (like the ones in Scripture) can be simply passed from God to us or from us to God. It is just that God sometimes *disagrees* with us, as we often do with each other.

The second sentence differentiates God-thoughts from human thoughts. Our thinking is a process in *time*, from which God does not suffer. (“*God doesn’t have time to think.*”) Our thinking unfolds previously unrecognised truths and consequences: we come to understand slowly, we “realise” things, we explore with our senses and our imagination. God’s eternity is not a very very long time, but a timeless mode of being which already possesses all possible changes and fulfilments, which can therefore never be further enriched and never lessened or robbed. Having no limits, God never falls short.

The Loch Ness Monster exists.

God exists.

The first sentence means that, trawling within the body of water that is the Loch, suddenly we should find that part of the volume ceases to be water and starts to be a creature of debatable shape and size, but which is definitely not part of the Loch. The drawing of its boundaries we would call *definition*. By defining something, we separate it from the things next door to it, thus identifying it as existing amongst other creatures and objects.

The second sentence uses the same verb, but quite differently. Our knowledge of things that exist is through the senses: we smell burning toast, we touch velvet, we taste peppermint, we hear trumpets, we see a skyrocket. We can make a list of all these things. But God fits into no list: there are no other Gods. God doesn’t exist in space, so cannot be defined or profiled or imagined. God does not have a temporal history, so cannot have his biography written. Having no physical body, his actions are not actions as we conceive of them. Even though Michelangelo wonderfully painted God creating the world, we cannot think of him as acting appropriately in so doing, or see the tremendously dignified old man with a beard that he painted as other than a travesty of the ultimate truth. Finally, we know by our senses of no being whose existence isn’t dependent on something else, so our knowledge of being itself is fatally flawed when it comes to imagining a Being who simply independently exists. We cannot even say he *always has existed*, since that would imply that he existed in time, which he doesn’t. But because of his total self-sufficiency, we can say that God exists in a sense that nothing else does. Therefore “exist” is a word which means something quite different, when God does it, from what it means when we do it. It almost deserves the coining of a separate word.

See what you think of the following statements:

God speaks.

God has spoken.

God has spoken to me.

God is angry.

We have offended God.

Perhaps God will relent.

God sent fiery serpents.

God arranged that a castor-oil plant should spring up.

God said: “I shall go down to see whether their actions are as the outcry reaching me would suggest. I am determined to know.”

Scripture in the Liturgy

The aim of this little course is to reflect on what exactly is happening when we read the Scriptures in Church. If we are better aware of what we are doing, we will probably be able to do it better.

The first talk is designed to think about the complex happening we call revelation, which is the religious heading under which Scripture fits. So we are going to be talking about what words are, and what (little) we can say about God, and how words relate to God.

- 1 The Shape of the Liturgy**
 - how it is divided into two halves.

- 2 The Liturgy of the Word**
 - hearing the Title of the reading
 - the value of studying the Scriptural authors
 - how the Scriptural word relates to the time of its making
 - how the Word of God is eternal, therefore not fixed in time
 - the hardship of bridging the time-gap

- 3 The Trials of Translating**
 - no human language is a perfect instrument for translating
 - words and ideas can sometimes defy translation
 - so how far can we trust our Bibles?
 - Jesus' own words are already translated (into Greek)
 - therefore we are not a religion of the book but of the spoken word.
 - Jesus could write, but didn't produce Scriptures.
 - what Humpty Dumpty said

- 4 How do Words relate to God?**
 - Divine and human in Scriptures
 - how God does not talk or think
 - how God does not use sentences
 - next week's subject: the rôle of the reader