

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

The Divine Moment

Fr Herbert McCabe, a Dominican priest, and a smashing writer and speaker, died a couple of years ago. He wrote many good books. One of them hit me with an idea recently which I've been trying to understand. He was talking about time, which is very interesting: we have it, you see, and God doesn't. We can't imagine this, but if "one day" we're going to live like God we shall experience it for ourselves. (I say "one day", because it won't be *on a day*, because a day needs time, and there won't be any clocks ticking when we share God's life.)

"Christ Before Becoming Man"

We have problems talking about God. The word I just used, *before*, is a time-word; in time, one thing happens *before* another. (We humans can be glad of this!) *Becoming* is also a thing that can only happen in time: you need time to become something new. *New* is a time-word as well, because it has to come *after* what was *old*. *Man* is also a time-word: we only know people in time. But *Christ* is an eternal word, referring to the living God who is outside and beyond time. Herbert's point was that you shouldn't talk about Christ *existing before time began*; the words contradict each other, because you can't have a *before* if there isn't any time.

God As Managing Director

The Bible tells us: *From the heavens the Lord looks forth: he sees all the children of men*. What I'd like to be free of is the idea of Heaven as a control room with observation windows, from which God surveys our times and our history as we do - as it unfolds. For this to be true, God would have to be stuck in time like us, able to be shocked or offended or gratified by turns, like somebody watching *The Lord of the Rings*. But if God isn't like that, how can he look on his creation? How can he *see all the children of men*?

God Sees The Whole Picture

Jesus once said of God that *to him all men are, in fact, alive*. That gives us a clue to timelessness: God sees everything, but in its final form, in the form it will have when time is gone for good. What he sees is the happenings that took place in time in the form of their results, their final significance. This must include all griefs, all fears, all the perplexities and paralyses which have

afflicted his beloved children, and their struggles against evil and despair. All of this leaves marks on us, as the Crucifixion leaves marks on the hands and feet of the Risen Lord. We know that in eternity these time-scars become glorified, the signs of *the trials through which we triumph, by the power of him who loved us*. Many theologians have spoken of God's surveying things according to their eternal meaning (*sub specie aeternitatis*); and that is how he looks upon us with love, rather than interest. He loves the person you're going to be when you share divine life. He can see it, you can't! I also think this is how we should think of his forgiveness. Because in causing our creation he knew all the sins we would commit, they are forgiven on his part already (sorry, *already* is a time word!). We, by contrast, have to forge our way through repentance, sorrow, and willingness-to-change before that divine forgiveness comes home to us.

The Birth Of Jesus

What the Nativity did was to plunge the Son of God into the world of time. He poured out the glory of his eternal power, and became one of us: Jesus, subject to the laws of earthly life: able to learn, able to laugh and to weep, able to love a poor human being as a brother. God was born into the world of limitation, and especially the limitation of time. In that instant he became able to suffer, and die. He became subject to the human inability to see things by the light of eternity, and in the garden he looked into the heart of darkness, prostrated in an agony which wrings our hearts to this day. (We say he *became able* to do these things, as if the life of God was lacking in some way. In fact, in each of them, Christ was accepting a *limitation* on his divine life, not an increase of any kind. But this is not something we can understand, we who keep thinking *sin* has something to offer us!) By this entry into time, it is we who gained, not Christ. *He* put himself into a huge voluntary poverty, and his journey back to God made him rich once more. That we rejected, condemned, and robbed him of earthly life showed how little we understand this mystery to this day. But when he became what we are, he began a pilgrimage for us and for himself, our great return to the Father. That is why St John says: *he pitched his tent among us, and we saw his glory*. Fr Philip