

God As Father

“I believe in God the Father Almighty...” or do I? Well – at least as “scientific man” – I think I may at least believe in “God ... as Almighty”, can’t I? Does the academy object to that? No, not really. The rationalist may indulge himself this much deity, surely. Awed before the great universe’s infinite intricacies of absolute interdependence, demanding perfect and perpetual functioning to make life as we know it possible on this spinning bit of dust we proudly call “our earth”, any sensible and sensitive person cannot but say, “God Almighty!”. Even a jolly pagan if he is intelligent enough has his misgivings about paganism before the mystery of the universe... As for our scootings about in space, they are no more remarkable to the honest scholar than the flight of a fly from the ground to the top of a sunflower. That little fly may be very proud of his flight, but there lies the great world forever beyond him – unconquered and unconquerable. So man may pride himself on achieving the sun, little suns we now energize, thermonuclear flowers (poof – poof – big poof!) – yet the heart of reality ever eludes us, eliciting from even the most agnostic a feeling at least equivalent to the ancient Psalmist’s cry, “O Lord our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!... When I consider thy heavens,...” (Ps. 8: 1,3).

So the mystery of the macrocosmic universe all but makes us say, “God... Almighty!” The universe will always be too much for man’s mind alone.

And seldom does one find an honest skeptic not pushed toward faith – pushed, pushed, pushed – by the infinite perplexities of “the little world” – the microcosmos even of his own body, each cell of which turns into yet another universe of proportions awesome in the thought. Before the unfathomable “little world”, unconquered and unconquerable, even the best trained atheist is tempted, sorely tempted to what for him must be the great sin of believing in God ... as Almighty. Almost, almost, before the life force, even the geneticist will say with the Psalmist, “I (too) will praise thee (O Lord); for I am fearfully and wonderfully made...” (Ps. 129: 14).

Well, what I am trying (rather lamely to say is: before the challenge of creation, with which one cannot adequately grapple without some God concept, all sensible and sensitive persons hear, somewhere deep within their souls, a voice, like unto the voice of the Lord, speaking to Abraham, and saying, “I am the Almighty God; walk before me...” (Gen. 17:1). So, “scientific man” walks in proper humility before the “Almighty”.

So far – so fair. This much I may safely believe as 20th century man. But educated in the schools, may I dare, and keep my place in respectable intellectual society, believe in “God the Father Almighty”? That, surely, is a deity of a different hue.

Yes, it is. Yes, it is. One need not be a Christian to confront “God Almighty”. Anyone with his mind wide open may do that. It is almost a matter of common sense -- or at least this sense of God is quite common to intelligent persons. But God as Father -- ? that is another matter altogether.

There are, indeed, “... tongues in trees, books in running brooks, sermons in stones...”, but they do rather keep their mouth shut about the nature of the God whose being they certainly do proclaim.

Mr. Huxley, the English biologist, was quite right when he taught his disciples to say, “I cannot see one shadow or tittle of scientific evidence that the great unknown underlying the phenomena of the universe, stands to us in the relation of a father – loves us and cares for us as Christianity asserts.” The answer to Mr. Huxley is, “Of course not!” No analytical study in any scientific laboratory on earth can come up with a rational synthesis anywhere near resembling the Judaic Christian experience of God as Father. Tornado and tapeworm and the terror of man’s ever recurring tantrums do not well lend themselves to such an interpretation of reality.

And yet we Christians believe that Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, was also quite right, when he taught his disciples to speak directly to God as “our Father who are in heaven...” – quite right – “heaven” being, not a description of God’s location (that he is “over there” or “up yonder” in a place called “heaven”), but rather a description of his fatherhood, that he is a “perfect” Father, indeed, the only perfect Father there is.

(I remember a child in the 9th St. Mission in Richmond who could not call God “Father” for her own father was a cursing, raging drunk – so I’m confident the Almighty didn’t object when she just called Him “Friend” – for she had some good friends – even if she had no good father.)

Well – the point is – how dare we call “the great unknown underlying the phenomena of the universe”, how dare we call “it”, “Him” or “Her” – and how do we manage, with a straight face, or a straight mind, the double dare of calling Him “good Friend” or “our Father in heaven”, “Perfect Father”?!

That's quite a leap from just God Almighty. Yes, it is. A leap of faith. And we dare to take it because Christ dared to take it – and won!

From his first recorded sentence, as a little lad, "I must be about my Father's business", to what were his dying words, "Father, into thy hands, I commend my spirit", he based his whole life, not on the assumption, but on the experience of God as his very own Father. In this, out of his perspective, doom became resurrection, defeat victory.

No Aristotelian architectonic structure of reason gave him God as his Father – he was no philosopher scientist – rather this was for him a revealed fact upon which he acted in faith and did not regret it. "All things have been delivered unto me of my Father; and not one knoweth the Son, save the Father; neither doth any know the Father save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son willeth to reveal him". (Therefore) "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

You see the point? God Almighty, Creator, yes, can come to us by simplest reason, but God as Father? Comes to us only through Christian revelation, through Jesus Christ. But if we dare this faith, that is to say, if we base our lives upon this different sort of fact, this divine fact, of God as Father, we shall not live to regret it or die in vain. With this faith fact to build on, out of such an encounter with personal reality, out of the knowledge that the heart of the universe beats with a father's love, out of such communion with a God as none other than "our Father" comes as Christ said a lifting, a lightening of the always heavy life load, a holy companionship that shares the burden of error by forgiveness and helps to carry the weight of truth by grace.

How to apply this briefly: What (a) delight and what (b) discipline there is in this life for the Christian who lifts hands in holy symbol up to the Almighty God and cries, "O, my Father, my Father!" Or better yet, knowing his solidarity with the whole community of the believers – the Church – bows his head, his heart, with the multitude and prays the better prayer, "Our Father who art in heaven" – what need for more?, except to explain and amplify the delight and discipline in those 6 words that say it all.

Life is a delight when under the care and keeping of "our Father". How good to know with Christ that when a sparrow falls it is not just "natural attrition" but known and missed by our Father God. Or again, how good to look with our Lord at the lilies of the field and know that they are robed in splendor surpassing Solomon, not alone by cross-fertilization and chance

mutation, but under the beauty of a good father's providence. Or best yet, how good to see with fresh eyes a prodigal come to his senses, pick himself up, dust himself off, and give credit, not just to the Presbyterian Church, or psychiatric clinic, but to his memory of his soul's true home and of a Father God who loves him and longs for him to act like a true and manly son.

Don't you see how this sort of faith lifts life, lifts it out of the dreary level of natural law, restores its poetry and its peace. It's a resurrected perspective! When life is lived out under a Father God the yoke is easy and the burden is light – life is a delight.

And (b) there is discipline here too, for “Our Father” means divine authority over us all – no exceptions. When “God Almighty” becomes “our Father” in Christ, we are to live, we must live, as one family to claim kin to Him. “Be ye therefore perfect as you heavenly Father is perfect” – which means we are to achieve the goals God sets for us as he achieves the goals he sets for himself. So I am not to live by my own lights; they are too dim – if I am to live with my human relations as one family – especially with those I am not like and do not like and who do not like me – then I need the very light of God in the life of Jesus Christ. Only when I am fully, even painfully aware of the discipline of God as my Father can I become everyman's brother. Otherwise, there is many a man to whom I would just as soon claim no kin.

So God as Father in Christ means discipline in life as well as delight. And at the end, if we have tried – tried hard – to be loyal children of His, about our Father's business, then in complete trust, we too can say to Him in death, as our Lord said, “Father into thy hands I commend my Spirit” (Lk. 23: 46) and die in peace.

November 26, 1961