

Jesus - Word of God

*Twas God the Word that spake it;
He took the bread and brake it;
and what the Word did make it
that I believe, and take it.*

Thus wrote that exemplary Anglican, Queen Elizabeth the first. It was brave of her to make such a statement in the midst of the Eucharistic controversies that reverberated around her land. Her words appeal because they are so down-to-earth and sensible - a fine, and, I hope, persistent Anglican trait. Her words speak of the sufficiency of faith without any need of fanciful philosophical elaboration. No need to call it transubstantiation, consubstantiation or anything else - its just about Jesus, bread and us.

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Of course the one thing we won't be doing this evening is 'taking it.' Much of the criticism of Eucharistic devotion, as enshrined in the 39 Articles, is that this bread is for eating, not for looking at, let alone waving about. But there is certainly room, in Elizabeth's words, for the kind of objective presence of Jesus Christ in the sacrament of the altar that we celebrate tonight in our looking and in our waving-about; an objective presence that many of the Queen's subjects, and many Christians today would at best question, and at worst, utterly reject.

Twas God the Word that spake it

The title for Jesus that we have been given to consider this evening, the one that appears most strikingly in the prologue of Saint John's gospel, is 'Word of God' - "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God..." It is one of those passages of Scripture that is well worth committing to memory.

The crux of this prologue, the point that it, and the whole of John's gospel, is trying to communicate comes in the fourteenth verse, "and the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory." The aim of the gospel of Saint John, indeed the aim of all four evangelists, the aim of the Church in making these texts canonical and passing them on to us, is that we, centuries later, may see what they saw - that "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us" - that we might see his glory.

This Word, the evangelist persuades us is the principle of all creation - all things were created through him and without him (to emphasise the point) was not one thing made that was made.

When scientists explore the world, they rely on two assumptions. One, that everything in the universe is, at least potentially, knowable. Without this assumption it would be hard to justify spending money on any scientific research. Two, that the human intellect is, at least potentially, capable of, apt for the knowing of this knowable universe - that the human intellect really can perceive things as they are. Without this, science could not, indeed should not be trusted.

Theology addresses the kind of questions upon which these assumptions are made. What is the basis for this knowability, for the way things in this universe generally behave in re-

peatable, predictable and reliable ways, from atoms to asteroids? How is it that these things are knowable to a knowing human mind?

Ancient philosophers used the language of mind and intellect to point to whatever it is that both lends that intellectual capacity to humankind and that causes rationality, knowability within the cosmos. Sometimes they have called it God, but not so as to describe it, or to give it a proper name - just to make it plain that they are not talking about any particular thing.

Within both ancient philosophical and theological thought, notions of rationality and knowability were always linked with the business of language - for what better tool is there for articulating and rendering knowableness - how else can knowledge be shared? The ideas of God (intellect, mind) and language (word) had a natural coherence.

So to speak of the Word of God, is to speak of whatever it is that lends the cosmos its rationality, its knowability. The Word of God is the basis upon which scientists can assume that there is a better than evens chance that they can discover something true about whatever it is they are investigating.

“and the Word was made flesh”

The astonishing claim, made explicitly in John’s gospel, is that the source of the whole cosmos, the basis of its very rationality and knowability was made human; revealed as a person. “We have seen his glory” says John on behalf of all the eye-witnesses of Christ.

This was the man who took the bread and brake it; the one through whom the bread itself received its rational, knowable breadiness.

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If the Word makes bread his body, his flesh, then we have to acknowledge that we have reached the limits of our reason. No subtle philosophical distinction of substance and accidents can really help us - it remains, importantly, beyond our understanding. For some this is simply a leap into irrationality, and that would make us fools to kneel here and adore. But if it is the Word that spake it, that took the bread and brake it, then there is, at least the possibility that as we gaze upon this bread we are gazing into a reason and a knowledge that is beyond us, upon which we and this whole knowable universe depend - a greater reason which for no good reason that we can imagine, wants to be seen and known by us.

What we do here this evening may well be pretty eccentric, and deeply questioned by many of our fellow Christians (Queen Elizabeth included) - but the only good reason not to do it, is if it was not the Word of God that spake and brake it. If we are not deceived, if we are not fools, then it could be that here, this evening, we will behold his glory - the glory as of a Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth.