



King's College Library



Sunray Gardens, Herne Hill



Faculty of Divinity, Cambridge



Cambridge University Library

2006 in London and Cambridge

Dear Friends

We have been in Cambridge and London for another 12 months. The time seems to have sped by in some ways and yet, 'What is time?' The picture of the *Blue Globe*, over the page, by courtesy of the NASA web site, graphically illustrates our true context, spinning and floating in our part of the Milky Way under the common gravitational force. That perhaps gives one 'pause' (?Time) for thought. There are some people who seem to have no sense of 'time'. And listening to music or looking at a painting or immersed in a great book, time does not matter. So in respect of reality it is *actually* relative!

As you will see from the following two articles we are both engaged in thinking!

Thank you for your cards, letters, emails and greetings. We send you our best wishes and kindest thoughts for this new year.

With our greetings and prayer in Christ.

Aelred & Tim

Can God do *any* thing?

The studies that I have been undertaking in London have been going well. A new departure this year has been the opportunity to do a bit of teaching in the philosophy of religion. This involves taking small groups of undergraduates and discussing various topics.

One topic that has always intrigued me is the 'omnipotence' of God. When you start to reflect

on omnipotence, it turns out to be quite difficult to understand what it might mean. There seem to be many obvious things that God cannot do - such as go for a walk, or change the past. A well known paradox involves asking the question, Can an omnipotent God make a stone that God cannot lift? (On reflection this is a very puzzling question!).

But I find myself wondering whether these issues really get to the core of the problem. I can put a small stone in my hand: can God 'lift' that stone? All my intuitions say NO. There are two reasons for this. First the integrity of creation. If something has been 'created' by God, I would like to think that this means that it is given a reality which can, in a real sense, stand 'over against' God - this could be part of the meaning of creation. It is a real and costly gift which can not be crudely manipulated by some outside being. This also fits the gospel narratives: whilst Jesus transforms those around him, in the end he cannot manipulate the world. And secondly, I would hope that the sort of involvement that God has in the world is of a far greater nature than just moving things around. Quite often debate about what an 'omnipotent god' can or cannot do treats this being merely as a 'super-being', with little or no sensitivity to the question of what is commensurate with an understanding of 'God'.

Part of the problem may be our tendency to think of 'power' in terms of crude physical forces. Some have suggested that a much greater sort of power is that found in personal relationships - not a 'force' but an influence that can transform people. This seems to be a far richer way of understanding the power of God.

Tim

Does God respond to us?

It would follow, that if God is omnipotent, he is also omniscient, being aware of all happenings everywhere in the universe and in the world and so remembers all finite happenings in the past as well as in the present. In other words, God is always up-to-date on everything! While this essential knowledge of God must be considered a necessity if he is the creator and sustainer of all that is, there are here also other factors to be taken into account if such a God is not to be considered as having the 'evil eye'. For unless he is also personal, compassionate, loving, concerned with all that happens, he is none other than a despotic emperor playing an indescribably callous game with his creation as mere pawns. And there is more: unless God can be considered as susceptible to 'change' in relation to ourselves, and is also active within our experience of 'time' then he is still to be perceived as a deity who is impassively tucked away in some 'eternal' state of incomprehension of all that happens to us creatures, similar to Aristotle's Unmoved Mover.

It is quite clear that a God who is creator of all that is, and is of such a nature that he can sustain what he has begun in the universe, he must be at least as distinct from the nature of the continuing creation as we are from the rockets we fire into outer space. Yes, he is infinite and transcendent at the 'moment', and in the continuing process, of the creation. Yet even in that event he must also have had a vision of the beauty, the possibilities of creative replication in that extraordinary extension of the life of his own Being. The Genesis creation narratives envisage for us something of the poetry and even music of what it might have been like to have been God in those first moments of determination. Such a God is not a wholly other, mechanistic designer. We might say that he deserves our worship in the sense that we are motivated to respond in wonder and joy.

But is God capable of responding to us? There is a reasonable certainty that we can trust one who is intentionally and actively engaged in our sphere of life. If he is personal there is every chance that he wills what is good in all the changing circum-

stances of human life and the world. There have been many occasions throughout history when people have claimed that God has spoken to them, that they have understood the will of God for them and that life has changed as a result of the 'leading' of God. Pascal is one of them. He wrote: *'The year of grace 1654 ...*

'God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob', not of philosophers and scholars.'

Pascal had this personal revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ on the night of 23rd November, 1654 which secured a permanent conversion and changed the course of his life. From the meeting Paul had on the road to Damascus, one can point to a certain reality of communication. But in reality all is veiled between ourselves and the divine. In other words we must admit that there is, in God, as far as we can give an account of his relationship with us, an element of mystery in his relation to the individual human being. Perhaps that is not a bad thing to say, for the mystery is not of the awesome and fascinating kind, but the intimacy of mind (or self, or thought) with Mind. It has the recognizable lineaments of human friendship or meeting, but that does not necessarily imply 'conversation', as many people have pointed out.

Aelred



Globe:west side.

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