

## Finding the God who is Love

By Fr Alvin Kimel

The love of God for human beings is unconditional. This fundamental truth of the gospel bears repeating. It bears repeating because we Christians, clergy and laity, seem to forget it so easily. Yes, we know all the words—"God is love," "Christ died for the ungodly," "This is my body which will be given up for you," "Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed"—and we can recite from heart the parables of the prodigal son, the shepherd and the lost sheep, the woman and the lost coin, as well as the story of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery—yet for whatever reasons we seem to prefer a different narrative. This narrative goes something like this:

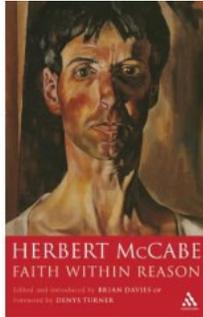
*God is angry with us, and he's been angry with us since the day we were born. But if we repent of our sins, he will change his mind, forgive us, and give us eternal life, as long as we continue to believe in him and avoid mortal sins. But we need to be careful, because if we trip up, God will turn on us at a moment's notice.*

Catholics and Protestants tell different versions of the story (Catholics will insert the sacraments of baptism and penance, and Protestants will downplay mortal sin and emphasize faith), but the essential narrative remains constant: God is a God of conditional love. If we fulfill the conditions he specifies, he will be to us loving and merciful; if we do not, he will be to us wrathful and punishing. God is Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. Which one we meet depends on our performance.

And so I repeat the fundamental truth of the gospel: **the love of God for human beings is unconditional**. God does not love us because of anything we have done. He does not love us because we are virtuous or obedient or kind, nor does he cease to love us when we fail to love as we should or when we disobey his commandments. He does not cease to love us even when we commit evil. God's love for us is unconditional, unmerited, unqualified, unreserved, absolute, immutable. We cannot earn it, no matter how hard we try; we cannot lose it, no matter how hard we try. God does not change his mind. He is eternally and hopelessly in love with the creatures he made in his image.



The Dominican theologian, Fr Herbert McCabe, rejoiced in the unconditional love of God and loved to preach and write on it. "It is very odd," McCabe writes, "that people should think that when we do good God will reward us and when we do evil he will punish us. I mean it is very odd that Christians should think this; that God deals out to us what we deserve. ... I don't believe in God if that's what he is, and it is very odd that any Christian should, since there is so much in the gospels to tell us differently. You could say that the main theme of the preaching of Jesus is that God isn't like that at all" (*God, Christ and Us*, p. 11).



Look at the parable of the prodigal son. The younger son takes his inheritance and squanders it in a far country. Eventually he finds himself impoverished and hungry. In despair he acknowledges how his sin has altered his relationship to his father: “I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.” But what precisely has changed? Has the father ceased to love his son? Has he become the angry patriarch the son now fears him to be? On the contrary, the father has

been waiting for his son to return, and upon seeing him in the distance, he jubilantly rushes to greet and welcome him home. No, what has changed is the son. Because of his sin, the prodigal is no longer capable of seeing the father as he really is. As McCabe explains: “Sin is something that changes God into a projection of our guilt, so that we don’t see the real God at all; all we see is some kind of judge. God (the whole meaning and purpose and point of our existence) has become a condemnation of us. God has been turned into Satan, the accuser of man, the paymaster, the one who weighs our deeds and condemns us” (*Faith Within Reason*, pp. 155-156).

The father does not need to be persuaded to forgive and welcome his son. He does not need to change his mind. He loves his son. That is his truth. All the son needs to do is to see his sin for what it is. He recognizes himself as a sinner, and at that moment he ceases to be one. His contrition *is* forgiveness. All the rest is celebration and feasting: “This is all the real God ever does, because God, the real God, is just helplessly and hopelessly in love with us. He is unconditionally in love with us” (p. 156).

God doesn’t change his mind about us, McCabe declares; “God changes our mind about him—again and again and again.” McCabe is direct and pointed:

“His love for us doesn’t depend on what we do or what we are like. He doesn’t care whether we are sinners or not. It makes no difference to him. He is just waiting to welcome us with joy and love. Sin doesn’t alter God’s attitude to us; it alters our attitude to him, so that we change him from the God who is simply love and nothing else, into this punitive ogre, this Satan. Sin matters enormously to us if we are sinners; it doesn’t matter at all to God. In a fairly literal sense he doesn’t give a damn about our sin. It is we who give the damns. We damn ourselves because we would rather justify ourselves, than be taken out of ourselves by the infinite love of God.” (p. 157)

I was a tad shocked when I first read these words. How can our sin not make a difference to God? If we could ask Fr Herbert this question, I think he would remind us precisely who and what God is. God is not a being within the universe; he is not a part of the world. He is the infinite mystery who utterly transcends the world he has made. The world makes no literal difference to God. This is what we mean when we say that God created the world *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. He did not have to create the universe, and if he had chosen not to, his glory and being would not have been diminished one whit. God plus

the world is not greater than God alone. The world does not add anything to God; it does not change or affect God. Ultimately it does not make a difference to God. God is God, in infinite glory, majesty, and love. Robert Sokolowski describes this as the “Christian distinction”:

“In the distinctions that occur normally within the setting of the world, each term distinguished is what it is precisely by not being that which it is distinguishable from. Its being is established partially by its otherness, and therefore its being depends on its distinction from others. But in the Christian distinction God is understood as “being” God entirely apart from any relation of otherness to the world or to the whole. God could and would be God even if there were no world. Thus the Christian distinction is appreciated as a distinction that did not have to be, even though it in fact is. The most fundamental thing we come to in Christianity, the distinction between the world and God, is appreciated as not being the most fundamental thing after all, because one of the terms of the distinction, God, is more fundamental than the distinction itself.” (*The God of Faith and Reason*, pp. 32-33).

Pagan philosophers did not and could not envision deity as utterly transcendent of a radically contingent creation. The *creatio ex nihilo* was incomprehensible to them. This understanding was forced upon the Church by divine revelation.

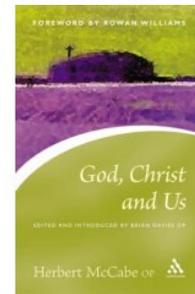
Once we understand the Christian distinction between God and the world, we are then positioned to discern the limitations and anthropomorphism of the stories we tell about God and his people. Stories we must tell if we are to proclaim the gospel, for God presents himself to us by story, as story; yet the metaphorical nature of these stories must be recognized, if the Christian distinction is to be respected.

Christians proclaim the forgiveness of God; but what precisely do we mean when we say that God forgives us? In human relations we forgive someone who has offended us. Offense is something deeper than injury. If someone injures us accidentally, we may deserve compensation but we do not require an apology. But if someone offends us, if someone attacks and harms us, then apology, and perhaps much much more than apology, is needed. Only forgiveness will suffice, if both parties are to be healed and relationship restored. It is necessary for the offender to abase himself and offer atonement; it is necessary for the offended to surrender his right to vengeance and to forgive. Only thus can both offender and offended be healed and recreated.

The language of offense, atonement, and forgiveness has been rightly transferred to the relations between God and man. “O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest all my sins, because I dread the loss of heaven, and the pains of hell; but most of all because they offend Thee, my God, Who are all good and deserving of all my love”—so begins a traditional form of the act of contrition. It is important for us to speak words like this to God; but it is also important to recognize the figurative nature of this language. McCabe elaborates:

God, of course, is not injured or insulted or threatened by our sin. So, when we speak of him forgiving, we are using the word “forgiving” in a rather stretched way, a rather far-fetched way. We speak of God forgiving not because he is really offended but accepts our apology or agrees to overlook the insult. What God is doing is like forgiveness not because of anything that happens in God, but because of what happens in us, because of the *re-creative* and *redemptive* side of forgiveness. All the insult and injury we do in sinning is to ourselves alone, not to God. We speak of God forgiving us because he comes to us to save us from ourselves, to restore us after we have injured ourselves, to redeem and re-create us.

We can forgive enemies even though they do not apologize and are not contrite. But such forgiveness ... does not help them, does not re-create them. In such forgiveness *we* are changed, we change from being vengeful to being forgiving, but our enemy does not change. When it comes to God, however, it would make no sense to say he forgives the sinner without the sinner being contrite. For God’s forgiveness just *means* the change he brings about in the sinner, the sorrow and repentance he gives to the sinner. God’s forgiveness does not mean that God changes from being vengeful to being forgiving, God’s forgiveness does not mean any change whatever in God. It just means the change in the sinner that God’s unwavering and eternal love brings about. ... Our repentance *is* God’s forgiveness of us. (*God, Christ and Us*, pp. 121-122)



The language of faith is filled with conflicting images of God—the image of the wrathful God who hates our sin, who requires propitiation and appeasement; the image of the God who endures our sins, who is long-suffering and abounding in mercy; the God who punishes the wicked, the God who forgives the penitent. These conflicting images are helpful, necessary, and unavoidable. But it is also necessary, says McCabe, for us to think clearly:

The initiative is always with God. When God forgives our sin, he is not changing *his* mind about us; he is changing *our* mind about him. He does not change; his mind is never anything but loving; he *is* love. The forgiveness of God is God’s creative and re-creative love making the desert bloom again, bringing us back from dry sterility to the rich luxuriant life bursting out all over the place. When God changes your mind in this way, when he pours out on you his Spirit of new life, it is exhilarating, but it is also fairly painful. There is a trauma of rebirth as perhaps there is of birth. The exhilaration and the pain that belong to being reborn is what we call contrition, and this is the forgiveness of sin. Contrition is not anxious guilt about sin; it is the continual recognition in hope that the Spirit has come to me *as healing my sin*.

So it is not literally true that because we are sorry God decides to forgive us. That is a perfectly good story, but it is only a story. The literal truth is that we are sorry because God forgives us. Our sorrow for sin just *is* the forgiveness

of God working within us. Contrition and forgiveness are just two names for the same thing, they are the gift of the Holy Spirit; the re-creative transforming act of God in us. God does not forgive us because of anything he finds in us; he forgives us out of his sheer delight, his exuberant joy in making the desert bloom. (pp. 16-17)

The God of the gospel is not the Jekyll and Hyde of our nightmares. He is not a God we need to appease. He is not a God we need to persuade to forgive. He is not a God who puts conditions on his mercy and care. He is, rather, the God who comes to us in love, only in love, relentlessly and passionately in love.

Here is a collection of Herbert McCabe's more popular spiritual writings. McCabe was highly regarded as a writer on philosophy and theology but in true Dominican tradition (the Order of Preachers) he was also a brilliant preacher. He always preached in a lively and witty way - his style has been compared to that of G.K. Chesterton. This collection of his sermons and spiritual addresses are never platitudinous or short of ideas, filled with questions, arguments and solid intellectual content. The major influence on McCabe was the Bible but he was also a devoted admirer of the thought of St Thomas Aquinas, whose ideas saturated his public speaking. From the Bible, McCabe derived the notion of God leading us to happiness through the work of grace and through the life and teachings of Jesus. From Aquinas, McCabe derived a hatred of idolatry, a powerful sense of the incomprehensibility of God and a recognition that we depend on God's gracious revelation of himself rather than what we can work out on the basis of our limited understanding. A presiding theme in this book is that we are saved because of the life of someone fully human. God, Christ and Us communicates the essence of the Gospel in an original and compelling way. It can therefore be mentioned in the same breath as works by Dean Inge, Donald Soper, H.A. Williams and Leslie Weatherhead.

Herbert McCabe was a Dominican Friar and theologian of outstanding originality who died in 2001. He was deeply influential on philosophers such as Anthony Kenny and Alasdair MacIntyre and poets and writers like Terry Eagleton and Seamus Heaney.