

Beyond Words

Canon Robert S. S. Whitman

Pinnacle Press

Copyright © 2008 by Robert Shaw Sturgis Whitman

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review.

ISBN: 978-0-615-25196-7

Contact e-mail: beyondwords@rootofsite.com

Online at: <http://www.rootofsite.com/beyondwords/>

Beyond Words Book
2 Weston Road
Westport, CT 06880

Back Lane Books
An imprint of Pinnacle

Contents

Forward

Introduction. Dr. Wolfe and His Son 5

Part I: A Way of Understanding

One. Jericho: A Miracle Considered 15

Two. A Way to Understand 27

Three. How GOD Speaks to Us 36

Four. Everyday Miracles 51

Five. How GOD Spoke to Moses 76

Part II: Jesus and the Church

Six. The Purpose of the Commandments 94

Seven. The Book of Life 108

Eight. The Eucharist 126

Nine. Decoding Doctrine 143

Ten. The Yardstick of Measure 166

Conclusion. Outside Ourselves 180

Forward

At the heart of our faith is the relationship of the storied miracles of Christ to the deeper mystery of the Universe. No man has thought through these enigmas more deeply than Canon Robert S.S. Whitman.

Canon Whitman is himself a belated New Testament miracle, somehow tossed up on the shores of our Trinitarian Galilee in Lenox, Massachusetts. To Whitman, the real is the true and the good. His mission was to lure his flock away from the seductive fantasies and superstitions of secular life into this deeper reality of beauty and faith far beyond the bounds of time and space in the Berkshires. Commuting between time and eternity, he sanctified Sunday in Lenox over some four decades, preaching the Gospel both to throngs of dubious townfolk and to callow bodies and souls from Lenox School for Boys and Foxhollow school.

I was one of those callow youths, coming to Trinity chiefly to see the Foxhollow girls across the

aisle. But I stayed to follow Canon Whitman from catechism to confirmation and to preparation for marriage in a lifetime pilgrimage in the faith.

Now for the many who missed his Berkshire pastorate or who long for his return, Canon Whitman has transcended his previous incarnation of preaching the faith from the pulpit, and is performing his own miracle in this wise and original book. In these pages, Canon Whitman probes behind the temporal "magic" of the calendrical Jesus to uncover the deeper and more consoling and redemptive reality of eternity beyond.

Whitman understands that Scripture, prayer and Liturgy are in part metaphorical. We resort to metaphor and parable because of our inability to designate in scientific words and formulas the unfathomable mystery of the Creator and his creation. We use metaphor and parable to point to a reality too immense and elusive to be pinned down in names and numbers in the cramped confines of scientific and sensory data. Whitman is a master of the symbolic and liturgical language that points beyond the diurnal to the divine and evokes

Beyond Words

the ineffable in our hearts and lives. Thus he pulls us away from the pits of futility and death toward the peaks of meaning and redemption.

Through his own intimate mastery of the things of the spirit, he came to speak in tones so wise and resonant that they became for all of us in our Anglican walk the very voice and Word of the sacred, which echoes herewith uncanny immediacy in this book of miraculous insights.

*George Gilder
December 16, 2007
Tyringham, Massachusetts*

Introduction

Dr. Wolfe and His Son

“Father...I no longer believe in God.”

When my mother called to tell me the story of the Reverend Dr. Wolfe and his son, I had already begun my own lifetime commitment to GOD and helping people understand what this word represents—and what this proper understanding means for us all.

Dr. Wolfe, at the time, was the pastor of the Brick Presbyterian Church on York Street, in Manhattan, the same church my mother had taken me to when I was a boy.

As the story went, the Reverend Dr. Wolfe’s son had reached young adulthood and, as many young adults will do, he started examining things for himself; he started evaluating his beliefs independently of his father’s influence. One day, he decided it was time he made a confession to his father. So, he summoned the courage he could, and went to see him in his office and

said, “Father, I’m sorry to tell you that I no longer believe in God.”

There was a serious pause. Then his father smiled and said, “Well, I’m so glad you told me. Now let’s go out and grab a beer and you can tell me exactly what it is you don’t believe in.” So they did, and over a pint father and son sat down for a little chat. The son told his father everything he found inconceivable, inconsistent and just plain silly within the Bible and the Christian faith. His father said nothing while he spoke and after his son had said it all there was another serious pause; then his father smiled again and said, “Well, you know? I don’t believe in any of that stuff either!”

I’m not exactly sure what the Reverend Dr. Wolfe said next, but I can imagine. In fact, the beliefs and ways of thinking that I share in this book could very well be the continuation of this conversation between father and son. You see, I believe that many of us are just like this young man. We reach a certain age and a certain level of intellectual maturity and we decide we can no longer accept the magical tales of the Bi-

Beyond Words

ble; we become turned-off by the great inconsistencies of the religion we, most likely, inherited from our parents. So, we put it behind us, thinking of it only as the childish beliefs we held during our uncritical youth.

The tragedy is that most of us don't have someone to talk to like the Reverend Dr. Wolfe. In most cases, the church cannot bring us clarity, nor can our pastors. In fact, many times they make us more confused and more turned off from the whole enterprise of organized religion and the existence of GOD. So, we turn away from it all, frustrated—maybe even angry!

There *is* another way though; a different way to understand it all, which I believe is the right way. Actually, I believe it's the only way; the only way we can make sense of it all. In this way, there is no great inconsistency. So this is a book for non-believers. But this is also a book that intends to bring clarity to believers. The message communicated in this book is geared towards everyone: the young and the old, and to Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, polytheists,

atheists, agnostics and everyone in between.

This book communicates the following message: the reasons you have for not believing in GOD and the Bible may not be reasons at all when you think about GOD and the Bible in the right way, with the right attitude. I will try to explain this attitude and what I mean by this in the forthcoming chapters using many of my personal experiences to illustrate what I believe to be the only adequate means of interpreting the Bible and maintaining a relationship with GOD.

You see, I don't believe in most of the things you don't believe in. Still, however, I believe in GOD and I believe in religion as being the sole need for us to know how to find meaning in our lives. I believe in the great power of religion and its capacity not to indenture us to an ascetic life of servitude, but to an abundant, full and exciting life of mystery and miracle! Finally, as a minister of the Anglican Church, I believe in the vital importance of the sacred writings of the Bible and the teachings of Jesus Christ.

I believe in these things, and not merely on

Beyond Words

blind faith. As you will read, I do not believe in divine intervention in the magical sense. In fact, I don't believe in magic at all! The Bible is filled with miracles of great proportions: the falling of the walls of Jericho, the parting of the Red Sea and the healings of Jesus, to name a few. I believe these things occurred, but no natural laws were broken in the process. The miracles, in all cases, took place in the hearts and minds of the great men who willed these events to occur. And even more importantly, I believe that miracles of this caliber continue today. We need only recognize them for what they are by opening our minds to the Truth.

2. The Word GOD in this Book, and Beyond

The language used when talking about GOD often belies the true nature of GOD. GOD is unlike anything else we know of. It is for this reason I have set this name in capital letters for the entire book, as a reminder that the way this word is defined is different from every other word on the page; to remind you that I use this word merely as a convention, but it means something other than the rest of the words. And it

means something other than what you might take it to mean if I do not explain myself clearly. So, use the following explanation as a frame of reference and carry this understanding with you throughout this work as a means for you to look beyond the convention of the word GOD, and at what the word truly represents!

* * *

GOD is discussed in a very human-like way and, as a result, many of us often develop a very human-like conception of GOD. Even if we don't intend to, sometimes it becomes difficult for our minds to not reflect our own nature on our understanding of the nature of GOD. It almost seems a part of our nature to want to maintain a false idea of GOD. This is what we must be aware of, and work to overcome.

You see, when I was a boy I would ask the same questions many young boys and girls ask at a certain age: What's out there? What's beyond that star? Or that star? And what's beyond that? I never found an answer. What I learned, however, is that there are some things I will never understand, which humans cannot

Beyond Words

understand. There are some things which exist beyond our grasp, beyond our explanation—*beyond words*.

Infinity is one of these things. Sure, we understand the idea in the abstract; that something goes on forever and ever, but we will never be able to see it. As finite creatures we will never wrap our minds around the in-finite or eternal.

The same thing applies when we talk about what we mean by GOD. We will never be able to wrap our minds around GOD, or understand GOD completely in any satisfactory way. Infinity and eternity are only parts of GOD. But just as we can understand the concept of infinity in the abstract, so too can we maintain an understanding of GOD in the abstract. When reading this book, I urge you think about this word, GOD, as meaning ultimate reality; ultimate truth. I propose that when we understand GOD like this much more begins to make sense. GOD now exists in everything and everyone. GOD is within us and beyond us, beside us and among us all.

The word GOD has no satisfactory definition

because the ultimate nature of the thing it describes is beyond our understanding. Still, there is a better way. We can reach a better understanding. I believe we can know GOD through our own experience. In the following chapters, I would like to share my beliefs with you in an effort to help you look *beyond words* towards the one Truth, GOD, as He is revealed in the Bible, through Jesus and in our lives. So, stay tuned! I hope it proves to be an edifying ride.

Part One

A Way of Understanding

Jericho: A Miracle Considered

“When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things” (I Corinthians 13:11).

"Sir, what made the walls fall down?" a young boy in a Church School class asked me one morning when we were discussing the great biblical story of the Battle of Jericho. The answer is, of course, GOD did it—at least that's what most of us are taught in Church School. So there is the end of the matter and the boy is made to feel his question is improper. The other boys in the class may have also been thinking this but thought that asking such a question shows a lack of faith. But in the backs of all minds such questions linger.

In reality, the question the boy asked is an excellent one and ought to be asked. The answer—that GOD did it—is actually no real answer at all when you

think about it. How many people have asked such questions, received such answers and gone away sure that there is no real answer, or that, if there is, the church doesn't know it. More than likely many young people dismiss such answers as "church stuff," which their parents make them listen to but which they, the parents, don't pay much attention to themselves.

Eventually, something tragic occurs. This boy grows up, as did Dr. Wolfe's son and as he matures he too starts to think about things on his own and since he never received a satisfactory answer when he was young, he decides to answer the questions he is grappling with himself. Finally, he decides that the walls didn't really fall down and that the whole thing is a silly, religious fairy-story.

This is tragic because I believe the walls did fall down in Jericho long ago, just not in the way the boy is thinking. He has been taught the wrong thing since he was young and, as a result, he is now turned off by the whole business of religion. So, it seems that in an effort to teach the "Faith," faith is really under-

Beyond Words

mined because religion has been equated with legends and fairy tales. Is it any wonder that many people may say with St. Paul that, having grown up, they have “put away childish things” (I Corinthians 13:11)? But, unlike Paul, it is religion they grow out of and regard as a childish thing because the church has almost taught them that religion and magic are much the same thing!

I believe that the walls did fall down and that it was a miracle, but I cannot believe that there was any magic or breaking of GOD'S laws involved. I don't, of course, know what happened but the members of the class and I, thinking about the boy's question, came to a very possible answer which, I think, may be the right one.

You see, when this boy asked the question I had no more idea of an answer than he did. But I did suggest to him and to the other members of the class that we might get some ideas on the subject; I suggested to them that we might put ourselves into the story. So now, if you'll indulge me, imagine yourself,

as we did then in church school, as a citizen of Jericho on the day when the siege began.

1. What really happened in Jericho that Day?

The Bible story states that "Jericho was straightly shut up because of the children of Israel [...]" (Joshua 6:1). Nobody was able to come in or go out. Joshua, who had succeeded Moses as leader of the host of Israel knew that there was an atmosphere of superstitious dread in the town. He had sent spies ahead into Jericho and they had returned with the report that: "Truly the LORD has delivered into our hands all the land; for even all the inhabitants of the land do faint because of us" (Joshua 2:24). Having received this report from the spies, Joshua meditated and prayed and then devised an extraordinary strategy for conducting a siege of the city.

At the time, the people of Jericho were accustomed to sieges. So, they more or less knew what to expect—just as people in stockades in the western regions of the U.S. knew what to expect during expansionary periods when there was an Indian attack. Yes,

Beyond Words

denizens of Jericho expected the attack, but still, they dreaded it—and the waiting for it.

Gradually the people of Jericho realized that in this case something very different was happening. The Israelites have arrived but they have no apparatus for attacking the city nor are they building any. They are simply encamped a safe distance from the walls and are doing nothing. They're not even making any noise. Strange! Stranger still is what happened the next morning: while the sun is just rising on the horizon a raucous noise made by some Israelites who appear to be priests blowing on ram's horns and carrying a gorgeous golden box on their shoulders are leading the soldiers and all the people in a procession around the town in total silence! When they completely circle the town they go back to their camp and nothing further is heard from them all day.

None of the people of Jericho expected this occurrence and they are now all very frightened. Boys now begin to try to climb on the walls to see what is going on, even though it is against the rules to do so. In

the pubs and bars, the drawing rooms and gathering places of Jericho nothing else is talked about. What is the meaning of it all? Strange stories have come to their ears about these people, their miraculous escape from Egypt and their victories over neighboring kings. What is their secret? What is the meaning of the sound of the ram's horns and, above all, WHAT IS IN THAT CHEST? Perhaps they have the equivalent of an atom bomb in it! When the same thing happens on the next day and the day after, and for six days running, curiosity becomes stronger than fear. Their fear has been subdued by the familiarity of the procession. Besides, if there is to be an earthquake or some other fearsome thing they would be just as safe—and perhaps safer—on the walls of Jericho than in the cellar at home. Rules have become unenforceable too so that each day more and more people get on the walls to see what is happening.

The seventh day begins as usual except on this day the sound of the ram's horns begin earlier than usual. The reason for this soon becomes apparent: on

Beyond Words

this day the procession is circling the city more than once! The procession goes around again, and yet again. Seven times the procession goes around the walls, the horns blowing and the chest being carried. But apart from the sound of the horns, the oppressive silence continues. Surely some remarkable thing is going to happen. Whatever the danger, it can be no worse on the walls than at home. Besides, who would be content to stay at home if a place can be found on the walls to see what is going on? Some of the elders—what we might call the selectmen of the town—would try to enforce the rules, pointing out that if there were to be a battle the soldiers ought to have the walls to themselves, unhampered by a crowd of civilians. Probably some might fear for the walls with so great a weight of people on them, especially at the places where the brick was rather weak. The city council may have wanted to repair the walls the previous year but the people wanted a swimming pool and there wasn't enough money for both. But anyway, caution is disregarded and more and more people climb the walls. The tension

and curiosity is too great for wisdom to prevail.

So there they are, every toehold occupied, crowded upon the parapets. Eyes and nerves are strained as they wait to see what will happen. But they wait in vain for there is nothing to see. The chest is never opened and nothing comes out. Instead, on a signal from a long blast on the horns the whole multitude of people—who have hitherto been so silent that one wondered if they had the power of speech—suddenly ROAR with a great and prolonged SHOUT. Of course the reflex of the whole crowd on the walls makes them give a great jump. That reflex alone might have been enough to knock some of the walls down but then panic turns the crowd into a frightened mob. Jumping and trampling on one another in the energy of terrified confusion they proceed to knock down their own walls. All the Israelites have to do is to move in and, as they say today, mop up!

Now I cannot say, of course, that this is what really happened but what I can say is that this is a reasonable construction of what *might* have happened. It

Beyond Words

fits with the details of the story—the sending of spies and the unheard procession around the walls for a week. That something did happen and that the story in the Bible is substantially true, I have no doubt. Remember that reports tend to be exaggerated as time goes by and also that even legend is a form of history.

2. Was Jericho a Miracle?

Assuming that the explanation we came upon in that Church School class is correct, does this mean that it was not a miracle? Of course not. It does mean that there was nothing magical about it; no breaking of GOD'S natural laws. It was the kind of miracle that happens commonly today.

Joshua was a great general and he had an efficient, intelligence corps. He sent spies into Jericho who brought back tales of the fear the people felt for the Israelites. Meditating and praying on the problem, GOD led him to the strategy which worked so well.

The miracle did not take place in the walls of Jericho; it took place in the mind of Joshua who believed that GOD would give him a plan and a strategy

that would work—and it did! If Joshua believed that GOD would knock the walls down for him using magic why did he send the spies and why the whole elaborate set-up if he could have called upon magic to achieve his end in a shorter time. The whole conquest of Canaan might have been easily and safely carried out by using a “magical plan” and it probably would have strengthened the faith of the people in GOD. But since they knew that Joshua was using his GOD-given knowledge of psychology and human nature to accomplish their victory, they did not see the hand of GOD in it all but the cleverness of their leader, and so their faith in him might have been strengthened, but not in GOD.

This type of miracle happens elsewhere in the Bible. The Book of Judges tells of the conquest of Midian by a later general, Gideon. The story is different because it is not thought of as a miracle today since Gideon's plan worked perfectly and the way that he made it worked is fully explained. But this story, and the previous story of Joshua are very similar. In this

Beyond Words

case, Gideon reconnoitered by going himself to the camp of Midian. When he did, he found that the people were consumed by fear. Seeing this, Gideon thought and prayed about what he should do and again GOD led him to a simple and amazing strategy: he chose three hundred reliable men and, giving each one a trumpet and a hooded light, he stationed them around the camp of Midian at night. At a given signal, each man displayed his light, blew his trumpet and shouted the battle-cry: “The sword of the LORD and of Gideon!” The Midianites, thrown into confusion, panicked and attacked and killed each other while Gideon and his men simply continued to blow their trumpets, brandish their torches and shout their battle-cry!

* * *

In both of the stories we have discussed in this chapter the heroes, Joshua and Gideon, had jobs to do and problems to solve. Because of this, they opened their minds in prayer to the Source of all wisdom and so came to wonderful solutions—miraculous solutions! To see things this way is very exciting because we real-

ize that our problems, which seem so great to us, *can* be solved. This may be what our LORD meant when He said: "...If ye have faith...ye shall say to a mountain...‘Be thou removed’ and it shall be done" (Matthew 21:21). The thing is, we all have problems which seem insurmountable until we truly turn to GOD in prayer.

GOD did not inspire the writers of the books in the Bible to show us what we cannot do. By telling us what others have done, GOD inspires us to do likewise. There is no hidden message in the Bible that can only be understood by the initiated. The message is there for all of us, if only we wish to receive it, and know how.

**A Way to Understand: GOD, Religion
and Real Miracles**

... there is no conflict between religion and science...rather... real science is a part of real religion. If there is any apparent conflict ... it is because the understanding of one or the other is wrong.

There was something miraculous about the stories of Joshua and Gideon, but there was nothing magical about them. The belief that these events did occur magically is, in fact, the pagan view of the gods and it is the opposite of the faith of Israel and the church. In the primitive, pagan, groping-for-meaning-and-security-in-life manner, one can dimly see a response to the love of GOD. Even after the realization that GOD is One had been revealed to Israel, the idea that GOD can be propitiated and have favorites persisted. It was even thought that if people used the name of GOD in vain it would bring his wrath upon them. As protection against this, the proper pronunciation of the

sacred Name of GOD was kept a secret and known only to the High Priest who whispered it once a year on the Day of Atonement in the temple.

We should have put away this childish idea of GOD having favorites and magically bringing down his wrath on the world if we use his name in vain, but we have not. Many of us still have thoughts similar to these even if we don't know it. We have been taught the wrong way for so long that we have a hard time escaping it. At the worst, most childish extreme, there are no doubt still those who think of GOD as some dignified, wise old gentleman, looking rather like us at our best, sitting somewhere up high in the sky and running things. Even if this doesn't apply to you, there are still subtle ways in which we often let ourselves think of GOD in a similarly nonsensical way. It almost seems in our very nature to want to create an idea of GOD as something magical, as if we prefer this notion. The idea that GOD has favorites and knows our destiny from birth is comforting because it allows us to think that we needn't worry as much; that GOD will take

Beyond Words

care of it; that we can just “put it in GOD’s hands” and do nothing about it ourselves.

Thoughts like these are so deep-rooted that they are often equated with religion. It is because of this association that people grow up and, rightfully, decide that these ideas are all a bunch of rubbish and also decide that GOD is a bunch of rubbish as well.

What we need is a better way—the right way—to understand; we need a practical way that doesn’t contradict our experience. We need to really know what is meant—and not meant—by the words GOD and religion.

When we understand in this new way, we really begin to allow ourselves to have a meaningful relationship with GOD. It is only when we have this relationship that we will know there is nothing comforting about “putting it in GOD’s hands” and making no effort ourselves. We can only have GOD’s help if we take it upon ourselves; if we take it into our own hands—the hands GOD has given us—and ask for GOD’s help and guidance, just as Joshua and Gideon

did.

1. Religion, Not Magic

It should be clear by now that what most concerns me is the very subtle way in which religion and magic have become entangled in the minds of so many people. Of course there is a sort of poetic magic in many things in life which contributes to their beauty, but this is not the magic I am attacking. The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines magic as "The pretended art of influencing the course of events by occult control of nature or of spirits, witchcraft." The obscure and occult atmosphere which, in the minds of many, is thought to be inseparable from religion, is the thing I do attack. If we are to find any meaning in religion, it must be stripped away. This belief in magic is the opposite of the fresh, clean, open, real and effective atmosphere of the Truth which GOD seeks to share with us through the life of His Son. The church is intended to be, and is, His living earthly body extended into history and into the lives of all people. And magic is the opposite of all of this. It is the dreadful thought that magic demon-

Beyond Words

strates the superior power and existence of GOD and the Bible speaks on the danger of this type of thing very plainly: “an evil and adulterous generation seek after a sign; and there shall no sign be given” (Matthew 12:39).

The perversion of religion as magic has expressed itself in many subtle ways, which we are not always cognizant of. Ironically, those who preserve this notion think that they are defending the faith whereas, in fact, they are showing their faith to be so fragile a thing that it must be defended from scrutiny and hedged about and protected from questioning lest it collapse altogether. Religion is thought to be so personal, so subjective a thing that its discussion is considered to be taboo. More or less aware of all this, many people in this “space-age” with its legitimate reliance on science and technology tend to throw out the faith and its biblical foundation altogether. Ancient doctrine is ridiculed and religion itself, faith in GOD, is thought to be outmoded. But this is not real religion.

2. GOD: A Creation of Man to Suit his Needs?

Real religion sees the universe as a meaningful whole. The infinite Reality and Personality, the infinite Truth and the infinite Love, which is the origin of the same qualities when they exist in us is, perhaps, the nearest we can come to a useful, but still very inadequate, definition of GOD.

This definition is inadequate because, truly, the meaning of GOD is beyond all limits; GOD is that which has no beginning and no end and every bit of knowledge of truth which man has acquired in any branch of learning is a small part of the knowledge of the meaning of GOD. We understand what is meant by GOD more clearly when we are able to see that which is *not* GOD, namely: our own creations and magical conceptions of him.

People often cite as reason for not believing that GOD is only a silly idea which we, humans, have thought up to meet our needs. But this is really the ultimate form of misunderstanding and blasphemy. Think about it: how absurd it is to think of praying to our own idea! Perhaps this is one reason we have difficulty

Beyond Words

looking critically at our own faith; we are afraid that we will see how silly it is! This reason for not believing is based on a magical understanding of GOD. It never seems to occur to us that these silly, childish ideas have nothing to do with the awesome Reality which is GOD.

3. GOD, Science and the Modern World

How many times have you marveled at creation; at the beauty, magnitude or inventiveness all around us every day? It's all quite amazing, miraculous and unbelievable. But we must believe it; it's right here in front of us. It's something we experience and there is nothing magical about it at all! Sometimes, however, it seems as if it defies explanation because it is all so amazing. This is the mystery of GOD, but not the magic. It is a mystery because we have a very limited understanding of it all. With our limited understanding, however, we are still able to understand its greatness. The nineteenth Psalm states: "The heavens declare the glory of GOD and the firmament shows His handiwork." I take this to mean that the great distance of the heavens, of the universe and our wonderment and awe

over its scale and greatness is evidence of the glory and the majesty and the greatness of GOD.

When we see GOD in this way much more makes sense. We see that there is no conflict between religion and science but rather that real science is a part of real religion. If there is any apparent conflict between religion and science it is because the understanding of one or the other is wrong.

No matter how sophisticated we become, we still tend to link religion and magic together. We have difficulty seeing, no matter how consistently Jesus Christ and the writers of the Bible try to teach us, that Reality, GOD, is consistent and uncomplicated. We assume consistency in the sciences, which are branches of Reality, and we base our discoveries on the practice of the discipline which this assumption requires, but we refuse to apply the same discipline to that which is most important to us: our life.

We treat electricity, for example, with great respect, even with fear, because we know that it has the power to kill us if it is misused. The power of GOD,

Beyond Words

however, of which electricity is but a pale shadow, is regarded as of little or no importance. We therefore think that the efficacy of prayer is that it may be able to change the mind of GOD. This is magic, but it is not religion.

Gideon and Joshua knew this and were successful only because they knew they could only achieve their objectives if they asked for the help of GOD and asked Him to speak to them and reveal to them a practical strategy which would work. We too will achieve great things if we open ourselves up to GOD in this way, but we must know more about how GOD speaks to us.

Three

How GOD Speaks to Us

*"[...] but the LORD was not in the wind, and after the wind an earthquake but the LORD was not in the earthquake, and after the earthquake a fire but the LORD was not in the fire, and after the fire a still small voice"
(1 Kings 19:11-12).*

When the boy asked what made the walls of Jericho fall down, I should have realized that GOD was speaking to me through him, prodding my mind. "What *did* make the walls fall down?" I thought. I knew at that moment that I couldn't turn this good question away with a simply traditional answer. Maybe if I seriously heard this boy, and this helped him find the answer he was looking for, I too would learn a great lesson. And this was, as we know, what actually occurred! During this moment I was shown a way of understanding, a way of interpretation.

1. The Age of Prophecy Continues

When I saw that GOD had spoken to me in the

Beyond Words

inner recesses of my mind, I came to see how it is that GOD has spoken in every age, not only to the prophets and sages but to everyone who will listen. There is nothing new in this. It is as old as consciousness and memory. It has never been quite forgotten. I guess we would like to think that GOD only spoke to some enlightened people over a kind of hot-line in the deep tones of Charlton Heston. We would like to think that when it says in the Bible that GOD spoke to Moses or Abraham or the prophets it means He spoke in the same way that one speaks today over the telephone. And since this type of thing never happens to us, we are off the hook! Clearly, with this way of thinking we are convinced that the age of prophecy, if it ever existed, is now over.

But if we see that GOD speaks to us in exactly the same way He always has we are forced to see that the age of prophecy is not over, and it never will be. We can't get off the hook after all. We are responsible. GOD speaks and we must reply; it is impossible not to. We may refuse to listen, but that will be our response.

If we are apprehensive about a telephone call we may refuse to pick up the receiver when it rings. We answer by refusing to answer. Our refusal does not change the message, but it does keep us from doing anything about it while there is still time.

An old preacher once said: "GOD moves in a mischievous way His blunders to perform." This is actually not very funny because it expresses an attitude toward religion which is very widely accepted. If we look at the Bible stories through the eyes of magical "religion", there appear to have been many blunders and therefore GOD seems to have been very "mischievous." But through the eyes of rational faith one sees that the blunders have been ours and the wonders GOD'S. There is no mischief in the working of GOD but there is subtlety; there is mystery.

Do you remember the dramatic story of how GOD spoke to the prophet Elijah? The prophet, having incurred the wrath of the infamous king Ahab and Queen Jezebel, hid himself in a cave. There the LORD spoke to him: "And behold the LORD passed by and a

Beyond Words

great and strong wind rent the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind, and after the wind an earthquake but the LORD was not in the earthquake, and after the earthquake a fire but the LORD was not in the fire, and after the fire a still small voice" (I Kings 19:11-12). GOD did not speak to Elijah in the dreadful and majestic way one might expect of the Almighty, but in the "still small voice" in his mind. The Holy Spirit directed the prophet's mind into the correct channels from which it had been diverted by fear. This is the way GOD spoke to Elijah and all the prophets and this is the way GOD speaks to us today.

2. A Language We Can Understand

GOD speaks to us in a language we can understand: the language of our personal experience. With this understanding we are able to explain many of the apparent contradictions found in the Bible. GOD meets me where I am and helps me take the next step forward. A human parent speaks to his different children in the different ways which are appropriate for

their ages and their abilities. If a parent thinks he can speak to each of his children in the same way he is very much mistaken. The message may be the same, but he must put it in different terms for each of his children so they can understand it. So we should expect it to be with GOD.

Take the prophets for example. Each of the prophets grasped a different aspect of the Truth, and so they expressed it differently. But gradually, we see that the apparently different messages, delivered in different styles, can be seen to fit properly into the whole. We can see that some of the commands received by different persons at different times seem to be wildly inconsistent with the true nature of GOD as it is revealed in Jesus Christ. Yet, looked at from the point of view of the persons and times involved, they are seen to be revelations of some aspect of GOD and of His will. Often times, when looked at this way, we can find something admirable and fine in even the most apparently dreadful tales.

For instance, the famous "Lex Talionis" or

Beyond Words

law of retaliation: "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" comes from the ancient law of the Babylonian king, Hammurabi. It certainly seems cruel to us today. Surely, there is nothing in it of the love of GOD. But if this is as far as we are able to evaluate, we end up missing out. Why? Well, while it may seem strange that we should find it, or something like it, in the Bible, it's in there, in a number of instances and different forms.¹

It *seems* quite cruel, yes, but actually it is quite the opposite if we look at it in the context of its times. In the times of Babylonia, this law of retaliation was a great step forward toward a better understanding of the mercy and justice of GOD. Before this, there was no limit to the revenge a man might take for an offense committed against him. If you were to knock out his tooth, and he were able, he might kill you—and all your family! This law assured that the severity of the punishment should not exceed the severity of the

¹ Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24: 19-21, Deuteronomy 19:21, etc..

crime. In primitive times this was a great step toward a fuller understanding of the nature of GOD.

GOD did, indeed, say these things for those times. He does not say it for our times, as Jesus made clear when, in the Sermon on the Mount, He said: “Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Matthew 5:38-39). In this instance, Jesus cites the ancient law and carries it to its logical conclusion, that we must avoid evil and violence altogether. If vengeance must be limited it is because vengeance itself is dangerous when administered by a man to his fellows. The principle of love was evidenced by the fact that vengeance had to be limited by law.

There is no inconsistency in GOD but man, in his understanding of GOD, is very inconsistent. Jesus stated that it was not His intention to destroy the Law but to help fulfill it (Matthew 5:17), to carry it to its logical conclusion, to adapt it for our times and speak

Beyond Words

to us in a way which we can understand.

3. Wisdom and Progress: Learning from the Past

There was a man named Abram who lived in a place called Ur of the Chaldees who meditated, thought and prayed, opening himself to GOD, and the more he did this the more restless he became. GOD led him, at last, to the conviction that he must not stay where he was and simply be a link in the chain of his father's family. His impulse was so strong that he became convinced he must go and settle elsewhere. He came to believe that if he did so a great good would be accomplished for all the world through the new family he would establish in his new place. Abram was the man who, having such a conviction, would carry it to fulfillment. So, he took his wife, Sarai, his possessions and all his household and family and, following his dream, moved to the land of Canaan.

Everything went well and Abram prospered in his new land, but there was a great and vital lack: Abram and Sarai were childless and they were growing old. To solve this problem Sarai suggests to Abram that

he have intercourse with her maid, Hagar, and by her have a son. When this takes place Sarai becomes, naturally, very jealous of Hagar and makes Abram's life miserable, as well as Hagar's. But then a strange thing happens: some men who seem to be messengers of GOD appear and predict that Sarai, herself, shall have a son. This seems so ridiculous to Sarai that, when she hears it, it makes her laugh. The laughter is commemorated because when, in fact, she does have a son they name him Isaac which, in Hebrew, means laughter!

Now that Isaac, his own son, is born, Abram is fulfilled. He will have descendants and they, indeed, may become a great tribe or nation. Filled with great love and gratitude to GOD, Abram wonders what he can do to show that gratitude. As he meditates on this problem a horrible conviction grows in his mind. He must sacrifice all his hopes to GOD. He becomes convinced that his only son, Isaac, the apple of his eye, his hope of immortality and fulfillment, the great gift to him from GOD, must be offered back to GOD as a sacrifice! How else can he show the depth of his grati-

Beyond Words

tude? The conviction is as strong in him as was the conviction that he must leave his home and go to a strange land. He has no doubt that this is what GOD wants him to do.

Dreadful as this idea is to us, it was not unusual in the time of Abram. Child sacrifice was not at all unusual. Later, the descendants of Abram—or Abraham, as he came to be called—saw human sacrifice for the abominable thing it is: abhorrent to GOD. But at the time Abraham had not progressed far enough to realize this. The more he loved Isaac, the more sure he became convinced that he must offer him to GOD. So Abraham set out, with Isaac carrying the wood for the burnt offering, and together they came to the place of sacrifice. There, together, they built an altar to GOD—although Isaac was mystified as to what should be used for the offering. At last, when all was ready, Abraham bound his son and laid him on the wood. He raised his hand with the knife to kill not only his son but all his hopes as well. But before the knife came down into the flesh of Isaac GOD spoke to Abraham

again. In a flash Abraham realized that what he was doing was wrong. GOD had given him the boy and could not want him to be killed. The love was enough. The fact that he was willing to do this, was willing to offer his son, his only son, in whom was the only possible fulfillment of his commission, was evidence enough of his love for GOD. So Isaac is released and a ram is caught and offered instead by father and son together who came home rejoicing in the new knowledge that GOD had given them.

Looked at this way there is no inconsistency in the story and one is aware of the watchful and loving eye of GOD throughout it all. Taken at face value it appears that GOD is cruel and whimsical. He seems to change His mind from day to day. One day He requires human sacrifice and the next He does not. Looking through the words of the story to try to come at its possible meaning we can see that, at first, Abraham thought GOD would be pleased with the sacrifice of Isaac and next he knew He would not. GOD led Abraham, that great and loving man, and as a result, the

Beyond Words

entire human race, a great step closer to the truth that day!

4. The Voice of GOD, as Heard During Different Times

We must always attempt to see the stories in the Bible this way, remembering that we are reading a report of real people and real events in another age doing what they *thought* they had to do. The tale comes to us in the words in which it was crystallized during that time after being handed down by word of mouth for many generations. The report comes to us through the minds and beliefs and prejudices of many reporters. By understanding something of their minds and of their faith we can see through them to what really may have happened. If the story of Abraham and his son did, in fact, happen like this it was majestic indeed. We do not need to approve of human sacrifice to be inspired by the love and faith of Abraham. As horrible as human sacrifice is, we can sympathize and even be inspired by the spirit of this good man whose love for his son was almost as great as his love for GOD and who wrestled with his problem until GOD led him to find its solu-

tion.

5. Sinners Prosper?

If you were to read on about Isaac and his sons, Jacob and Esau, you would probably be shocked at the crafty duplicity of Jacob, the liar and the cheat, who, nevertheless takes his place as the third of the patriarchs, rather than his older brother Esau. Again, we ask ourselves, against the background of the times would honest, easy-going Esau—who cared more for his supper than his birthright—really have been of much use in bringing the purpose of GOD to fruition? It is true: Jacob was a liar and a cheat, but the reality is that he cared and Esau did not. It's a hard thing to accept, perhaps, but history shows that GOD is not puritanical. Man needs perfection in those whom he looks up to and, in our times, we should aspire to nothing less; but GOD, being perfect, is not so choosy and can use the good qualities in a person in spite of those which are not so good.

It's really an astonishing story about an astonishing family that became a tribe, and then a nation.

Beyond Words

And from it we see how the promise made to Abraham that "[...]in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 12:3) began to be fulfilled.

And while the story is astonishing, it's also a very human story. One can sympathize with the jealousy that the sons of Jacob felt toward their young brother Joseph. They thought he had delusions of grandeur. Of course, they were not delusions in his case because his dreams came to reality in Egypt. It must have been very difficult for the older brothers to live with a person of such sensitivity and ambition as Joseph. One can hardly blame his brothers for hating him. Joseph understood this and he didn't blame them. He saw how GOD was using even their hatred and jealousy for the furtherance of His aim. So when Joseph became the second ruler of Egypt, under Pharaoh, his brothers, his father and all his family came, under his protection, to Egypt. As he had dreamed that they would, they all bowed down to him.

Little by little, one step at a time, the purpose of GOD is developed and worked out through men and

women who are sensitive to His Word. So the children of Israel, the seed of Abraham, multiplied in Egypt and became a powerful and dangerous minority. The stage was now set for the appearance of Moses and the events through which he would come to a deeper and truer understanding of GOD'S Nature.

GOD does work in mysterious ways to bring His wonders to pass. Of course, we cannot fit Him into the pattern of our expectations, much as we would like to—or think that we would like to—and His consistency may not seem to us to be consistent at all but as we open our eyes and look at the ancient records in a different way we can see the steady unfolding and development of GOD's plan. There is no magic in the way GOD spoke to the patriarchs and prophets, to Joseph and Moses, but there is mystery. It is this mystery which each of us can experience in our own way, as the ancients did in theirs.

Four

Everyday Miracles

The simple faith that the answer can be found if, with the help of GOD, we look for it, is what Jesus was talking about. The other kind of "faith" is nonsense and we know it, and Jesus would be the first to tell us so.

One day the rector of a parish in a large city went to call on one of his parishioners whom he had never met. To him, she was just a name on the address list. At the address, he found a very run-down tenement and when, at last, he found the person he was looking for she turned out to be even more run-down than the building. Dirty and despairing and living in a hole of a room was a woman. Surprised to receive a call, she let the rector in and they had a talk. What had brought her to such a state of dereliction I cannot say but it turned out that she was a trained nurse and a college graduate. When the rector returned to the church he told a member of the women's group of his experience with the

woman, but then the pressure of other things drove it from his mind.

A month or so later the women of the parish put on a fair at the church, and while the rector was wandering about and trying his best to look appreciative a woman came up and spoke to him. He was polite but it was clear to both of them that he didn't know who she was. When she told him she was the nurse he had called on some time before he was aghast. It was impossible to recognize her as the same person. He thought to himself, "This is a miracle. I am witnessing a resurrection from death." He thought of the words from the parable of the prodigal son: "[...]He was dead and is alive again[...]" (Luke 15:24).

The women of the parish had gone to see that woman, made friends with her, and had loved her and restored her faith in GOD and in herself. Using some perfectly ordinary Episcopalian women in a rather fashionable parish, GOD had expressed His love to one of His children who had gone very far astray and had brought her back from a living death, worse than death

Beyond Words

itself, to life! There is nothing magical about what had happened. It was perfectly understandable. But it truly was a miracle and such things do happen sometimes. They could happen all the time if we practiced our faith more effectively and allowed GOD to use us to make His church the instrument of His love that He intends it to be. The fact that you understand how it happened makes it no less a miracle.

The problems which faced this woman were mountainous to her. They had to be dealt with; they had to be removed. Our LORD said mountains could be removed by faith (Matthew 21:21). But did He mean the Rocky Mountains or the Alps? Their removal might be a disaster! Surely, He meant the mountainous problems which threaten us every day. If we do not believe that a problem in our life can be solved, then we will never take the steps necessary to solve it. It may not be the kind of solution that we hoped for, but it could turn out to be better one. If researchers in the medical profession did not believe that a cure for cancer exists, and can be found, they would not waste time

looking for it. The simple faith that the answer can be found if, with the help of GOD, we look for it, is what Jesus was talking about. The other kind of "faith" is nonsense and we know it, and Jesus would be the first to tell us so.

1. Looking for A Miracle

Life is not easy. It certainly wasn't easy for Jesus but He kept at it and in the end He triumphed. But many people don't like to make any great effort so they replace the good sense of GOD with the nonsense of magic. It doesn't work, but neither does it make demands on them.

Have you ever known anyone who has had smallpox? Edward Jenner, noticing the harmless disease called cowpox, which was contracted by milkmaids, discovered a vaccination that he first tried out on James Phipps, an eight-year-old boy! If he had not had the faith to do that you might not be alive to read these words, nor I to write them! Dr. Jenner (he was given an honorary degree of Doctor of Medicine by Oxford University) was the son of a country clergy-

Beyond Words

man. He lived in the seventeenth century. I have no doubt that the training he received from his father and his observance of nature with which he grew up led to the miraculous discovery of the vaccination which has saved countless lives. The mountain of disease was being, and still is, capable of being moved away by faith!

* * *

Don't believe in miracles? We are surrounded by them and experience them every day. In fact, we take miracles so for granted that we have lost our sense of wonder before them. We need, as Jesus made clear, to recapture the sense of curiosity and faith that we were born with. We need to regain the character of a little child who is so absorbed with asking questions, discovering new things and investigating how they work (Mark 10:15).

I am not thinking about amazing technological achievements like computers or cellular phones. Yes, these things are miraculous, but what I am thinking of are the homely little day-to-day miracles that bring

beauty and meaning into our lives. What is the good of being able to go to the moon or of having your life prolonged if life itself, for you, is not really worthwhile? In these times of material miracles, it seems we are having it much more and enjoying it much less. Yes, television and the Internet are quite miraculous but the 1,000 channels and billions Web pages we have to choose from are filled mostly with things that are not really worth our time. We travel in jet planes but what do we do with the time we save? Jesus said: "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?[...]" (Matthew 16:26).

2. Miracles of Humble Beginnings

Let me tell you of another miracle which is illustrative of what I am saying. Again, this miracle starts humbly enough with another group of women—this time women in my parish—who met together and "made things" and had fellowship. I know this sort of group activity is frowned on these days—"busy work" is not considered important enough to occupy the time and energy of the church. Perhaps not, but when there

Beyond Words

is another purpose behind the making of things it *can* become very important work. You see, this group's *real* purpose was to give love and support to a lonely old lady who was a part of the group and who needed to belong to something. The group made things for their annual Christmas Tea and Sale and the elderly lady was happy, feeling that she was doing something useful. It turned out that she was actually a person of very strong will and when some friends of hers in the Red Cross told her that they needed one hundred "ditty bags" to send as Christmas presents to men and women in Vietnam, she told them that her group would make them! When she told her group about this they weren't pleased, but they didn't dare refuse to do what she had promised. So, the bags were made and filled with the kind of things they believed soldiers in Vietnam would like. The Red Cross sent them off and put a little card in each one with the best Christmas wishes from the group who had made them.

A few months later, the rector of the parish received letters from some men in Vietnam who had

written to say how touched and happy they were to know that someone at home cared enough to try to give them a good Christmas. When the rector read these letters to the congregation from the pulpit many parishioners, including some girls from a Sunday School class got the names and addresses of the soldiers and wrote back to them. Then, replies came back from those letters and one man even came much later and visited one of the letter-writers.

Love, which began as "busy work" and concern for a lonely woman, reached into the lives of people half way around the world and back again in the tragic conflict in Vietnam. Can we not see that this was a miracle and that GOD can use His church in this way if we will only let Him?

Perhaps we don't let GOD use us this way because we still have difficulty getting outside the old idea of magic. Perhaps we think that a miracle must be the kind of dramatic thing we have grown up thinking the miracles in the Bible to be. But if the things which we take for granted today and fail to see as miracles

Beyond Words

were handed down over the centuries, the reports of them might be so embellished that we would scarcely recognize them. The ways of GOD today are essentially simple because they are consistent and we are used to them.

I have had many dramatic instances of the quiet, but truly miraculous working of GOD in my life. We all have them but fail to recognize them for what they are. We have a "hunch" and act upon it and something extraordinary happens which we dismiss as a coincidence. Look back over your life and you will probably see that some things which seemed at the time to be, and perhaps were, tragic turned out in the end to be very good. In fact, what St. Paul wrote almost always turns out to be true: "All things work together for good to those who love GOD..." (Romans 8:28).

3. Not Always Common Sense: The Mysterious Voice

One of my first experiences of this sort happened shortly after I was ordained. A remarkable family of two boys, two girls and the mother and father were in my small parish. The mother, Ruth, in spite of

having an incurable, progressive and paralyzing disease had remained at home and been increasingly cared for by her family. She was a mother to her children and wife to her husband in the very best sense of these words. When I came to know them, Ruth had been ill for eight years and was totally paralyzed.

She told me she had never been confirmed so I arranged with the bishop to come to the house and confirm her in her bed on the same day her girls were confirmed in the church. A few days later I was called because Ruth seemed rather low and was anxious to receive Holy Communion. It was a Saturday and I had the celebration in the morning at the house. All the family members except Ed, the oldest son, were there and they all received the sacrament together. Although this took place almost fifty years ago, I can recount all the events of the day which led me there; to the house of a family who had a large number of children and was, therefore, a gathering place for the youth of the parish.

Ed—the son who was not at the service in the

Beyond Words

morning—was there when I arrived later. I was rather young at the time, and unmarried, and it was more or less the custom to tease the vicar and give him a rough time in a friendly way. That evening, however, there was an edge to Ed's teasing. In fact, he was rather rude. So much so that I became irritated and, realizing that I should be at home working on my sermon for the following day, I left in something of a private huff.

I lived in the bachelor quarters pretty far away on the other side of town and it was raining hard that night, so it took me some time to get home. All the way home I was nagged by the thought: "What's the matter with Ed? He is a Server of the Church and we have always been friends and he has never behaved like this before." When I was within a half a block of home, the answer came to me. He was worried about his mother and felt excluded and frightened, since he had not been at the service in the morning. I made up my mind to talk with him about this in the morning when he would be the server at the early Eucharist. But the Holy Spirit told me that I *must* see him right away. The conviction

was so strong that I turned the car around and went back to his house on the other side of town through the heavy rain.

Ed had just come in when I got there and I told him that I would like to talk to him so he came and sat in my car. I asked him what the matter was and he said, "Nothing is the matter," in a very brash, sixteen-year-old sort of way. I replied that something *was* the matter and I thought I knew what it was. I said that he was afraid that his mother was going to die and he had not been at the service in the morning. At that, he burst into tears and told me I was right. I reminded him that we were Christians and that we knew the only thing about his mother that could die was her body—her body, which had become a dreadful nuisance and burden to her in every way. Since we loved her, we should pray for her speedy release from the prison of her body.

Ed stopped crying and said "Gosh, that's true, isn't it? I never thought of that before." At that moment, his father appeared in the rain at the door of the car and told us that Ruth had just, at that moment, died! We

Beyond Words

went in and had the prayers for the dying with all the family there and I told them that they and Ruth would be closest together tomorrow morning at the altar and that I hoped that they would all be there. They all came, and what would have been an occasion of terrible sadness was, in fact, one of great joy. Thank GOD I didn't act on the basis of what I thought was common sense but obeyed the prompting of the Holy Spirit!

Thinking about this afterwards, I reflected that this was not necessarily the work of GOD but of ESP—extra-sensory perception. The devil, or whatever it is, often tries to destroy our faith by such silly thoughts. Then I realized that, of course, I was not responsible for ESP, GOD was. I didn't even understand what ESP is or how it works. The word "angel" really means "messenger." It is because experiences such as mine are not really very rare and so, what we call ESP, the ancients called angels. One word really is as good as the other.

Life is full of miracles. Life itself is a miracle, as are our bodies and our brains! Here is another mira-

cle—simpler, yes, but nonetheless a miracle. At a seminar in a Unitarian Church, I was once asked to speak on Anglicanism. I began with the simple statement: “GOD is!” Ten years later, I received a letter from a woman who was present that evening. She told me that, although she had thought of herself as an atheist at that time, the two words of my premise had stuck in her mind. She hoped I would be glad to learn that her “spiritual wanderings” were over and she was to be baptized tomorrow as a Christian in the Roman Catholic Church. She was right, I was glad to know it, and I thank GOD that the sowing of that small seed brought forth such excellent fruit of faith. I hope the process of growth never stopped in her.

4. The Peace of the Lord which “Passeth All Understanding”

A chaplain on his way home from active service decided to ask the men on board his ship during World War II if it was true that there are no atheists in foxholes. In general he received the answers the men thought a chaplain wanted to hear. One man he interviewed, however, told him the following remarkable

Beyond Words

story.

"Having been under heavy fire, I was in a foxhole with my buddy. I was so frightened I could hardly move my body. My buddy had completely lost his nerve and was screaming for help; help that I was too frightened to give. It occurred to me that this might be a good time to pray. But I hadn't been to Church for years and the only prayers I knew were the LORD'S Prayer and "Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep," neither of which seemed to me to be very appropriate. So, I said the more appropriate of the two prayers and then asked GOD to get me and my buddy the hell out of this mess! But it soon came to me that I had never done anything for GOD in my life and it was not right to ask Him to do anything for me, so I stopped praying."

But this man had set up a train of thought, or so it seemed to him. You see, when you begin to pray, you open up a dialogue with GOD no matter how halting and inadequate your side of it may be. GOD takes it from there. It seemed to this soldier more and more that war is a rotten thing, that here were people whom

he had never met who were trying to kill him and that he, if he had the chance, would kill them, as well. It suddenly came to him that he should be praying, not only for himself but for everyone, especially the leaders of the world, including the enemy. So he very simply began praying again, but this time for his enemies, as well as his friends—including his buddy in the fox-hole with him. He prayed that GOD would show us all the way to love rather than to hate, the way to solve our problems by some way other than violence.

Then, he said, a miracle took place. He knew he was in just as much danger as he had been a moment before but it didn't seem to matter because he was suddenly calm with a great sense of inner peace. This was so real that he was able to crawl over to his buddy, quiet him down and finally get them both back to safety.

Not for a moment did he think that GOD was stopping any bullets or that his life was no longer in danger. He just felt that strange inner peace. While he was helping his friend some words came into his mind

Beyond Words

that he remembered from his childhood when he was taken to Church: "The peace of GOD, which passes all understanding." "My GOD," he thought, "that is what this is! There is no excuse for it, no understanding of it, and yet it is real and the most wonderful experience I have ever known." As far as he was concerned, he told the chaplain, he had found GOD, or been found by Him, in a foxhole, and his life would never be the same again. He was going home to offer himself to the Church and if they set him to scrubbing floors that would be okay with him. There was no magical protection as he very well knew, no breaking of natural law, no stopping of a bullet but his life and his buddy's, were saved anyway. He was saved because at that moment when he reached out to GOD, the truth about prayer came to him. The truth was that he should be praying for everyone, not just himself. Everyone was in this mess. Everyone wanted to be out of it. This is what he should be praying for. The result of this moment of enlightenment was a great, profound sense of peace. It was the peace of enlightenment; the peace of GOD,

which many of us have experienced before even if we didn't recognize it for what it is. This inner peace was the true miracle. It is real, we feel it, but we cannot explain it.

I wonder whatever became of this soldier, and if he lived to fulfill his intention. I hope so.

5. The Dialogue of Prayer

A schoolgirl once approached me quite upset because she said she couldn't seem to keep her mind on the prayers in Church. She asked me what she could do about this. I asked her what sort of things her mind wandered to and before she could answer I said I could probably tell her some of the things. I suggested that she ought to be working harder at her studies and that she ought to call home more often to her mother. Surprised, she said that these were, indeed, the kind of things which took her mind off her prayers. I reminded her that prayer is not a monologue. Prayer is a dialogue with GOD. She should listen to what He is saying to her on His side. Perhaps it would go rather like this: "Now, my dear girl, don't worry so much about the

Beyond Words

Prayer Book but listen to Me. You can't run away from Me into the Prayer Book, you know. It is all very well for you to look pious here on your knees but you know that your mother wants to hear from you and you should apply yourself more effectively to your work. I will help you, you know, if you will really try to do your part. So go back to school now and do something about it today. Amen." I don't know if GOD says "Amen" at the end of His part in prayer but I don't see why He shouldn't and while GOD's answer in prayer is sometimes "No," most of the time His answer comes by guiding our thoughts in the minds which He has given us.

6. More Simple Miracles

A very vivid experience of the intervention of the Holy Spirit occurred when I was an Army chaplain stationed at a replacement depot in the Philippines at the end of World War II. A great many men and women who had been prisoners of the Japanese went through our depot for processing and to await transportation for home. A Dutch coffee-planter had been a

prisoner for five years, as had his wife and little daughter both of whom he had not heard from in all that time. He was terribly worried and he used to come see me every day to talk. I dreaded his coming because he always wept uncontrollably and there was nothing I could do except listen, sympathize and show interest and concern. One day, he came in, looking like a new man and I told him so. "I *am* a new man," he said. He told me that something I had said the day before had changed his whole way of thinking. When he told me what I had said I had no recollection of having said anything of the sort! That didn't matter, because he had heard what he needed to hear. Perhaps some remark of mine, tone of voice or expression of my face, had opened his heart and mind to the Holy Spirit and a miracle had taken place. The result of this was that, if not a happy man, he was at least a confident one. I heard later that the family had been re-united. I hope that things went well with them in the end.

Another miracle took place after I had left the Army and was Associate Rector of Burton Parish

Beyond Words

Church in Williamsburg, Virginia. An old lady told me of an experience she had during the war. She had been a lifelong churchgoer. One Sunday she woke up not feeling well; since it was raining, she decided that she would not go to church that day. But the habit of a lifetime was too much for her and at the beginning of the service she was in her usual place in church. A young sailor who was clearly unfamiliar with the service sat down next to her and she helped him with the Prayer Book and the Hymnal. They chatted on the way out at the end of the service. At the door, she had what she thought was a crazy impulse and she asked him if he would like to come home with her for lunch. He said that he would love to, so they went together to her house where she lived alone. After a very pleasant meal, he helped her with the dishes and they spent the afternoon together. They got on like a grandson and grandmother and had a lovely time. As he was leaving, he said, "Ma'am, I must tell you something. Today is my birthday and I have never before been away from home on this day. I am going to ship out soon and

when I woke up this morning I was so lonely that I couldn't decide whether to go out and get drunk or go to church. Thank GOD I went to church, for you have made this one of the nicest birthdays of my life." The old lady died a long time ago and I wonder if the sailor ever got home to have other birthdays. If not, the Holy Spirit, using a lonely old lady in church, saw to it that his last one on earth was happy.

Here is one more miracle I'd like to share with you because it is personal. It was my turn to preach the sermon at the traditional ecumenical Thanksgiving Day Service in my parish. I looked forward to the Service every year because it was held in the lovely old Congregational Church, which was the original parish church. I had no fear that I would be able to construct a suitable sermon because I have never had difficulties in that way. To my horror, though, on this occasion, I found that I was at a complete loss. Everything I thought of was wrong. If we thank GOD that we have plenty to eat and live in warm houses then maybe we ought to thank Him that other people do not have these

Beyond Words

things. It was late in the evening before Thanksgiving Day and I could think of nothing to say and I was becoming very frightened.

Then, a miracle occurred. I remembered that the desk I was sitting at belonged, at one time, to my great grandfather. He had carved and constructed it with his own two hands and had stored his sermons in one of the drawers, where they remained. He was a bishop and he wrote all his sermons out in a beautiful hand. I got out the sermons and there, on the top of the pile was one called, "The Grass of the Wilderness, a Thanksgiving Sermon." His text was from the story of the feeding of the five thousand, the tenth verse of the sixth chapter of the Gospel according to St. John: "...Now there was much grass in the place," it began. As I began to read, I can remember thinking, "if this is no good, I am sunk," because it was late at night and the sermon was a hundred years old and might be hopelessly out of date. His theme was that while our attention is held by the miracle of feeding thousands of people, this verse about grass seems totally unimpor-

tant. We thank GOD for the big things but take the little things for granted. In this, we are wrong. Grass is given to all of us by GOD and may, like other things in the same category, seem very unimportant. The sermon was so splendid that I read it the next day and on many Thanksgiving days thereafter.

My finding this sermon and my inability to preach another was surely a miracle. The Holy Spirit was saying to me that, while most of my sermons were going to be okay, my great-grandfather had composed one which was wonderful and there it was, right in front of me. All I had to do was pick it up and read it to the congregation.

7. Your Own Miracles

GOD speaks to us in the very same way He spoke to Abraham, Moses, Elijah, Ezekiel and all the rest. I believe this is an important part of what our LORD was expressing in the Gospel when He said: "...the works that I do shall ye do; also and greater works than these shall ye do because I go unto the Father" (John 14:12). I am sure that each of you can fin-

Beyond Words

ish this chapter with your own ex our pride, for our
lives.

Five

How God Spoke to Moses

I AM THAT I AM—Reality, Being, the ever present eternal and infinite Truth, has sent you to your people for their deliverance and, at last, for the salvation of the world!

I am always astonished when an intelligent person claims not to believe in GOD. What is it he does not believe in? It reminds me of the man who is supposed to have said: "I am an atheist, thank God!" As I have pointed out, the trouble is that so many of us have a very silly notion of what the word GOD means.

GOD is the person of the universe, always seeking to help and encourage His children wherever they are: on earth, in our solar system or elsewhere. There has never been a moment since the

The magical view of religion prevents us from appreciating the true greatness of many of the Biblical figures. The problem is that the great figures of Biblical history are thought to be persons of unique powers. Without looking beyond the words, Moses appears as a

Beyond Words

great magician, similar to Merlin in the Arthurian legend. To suggest that his powers were really no greater than those of any highly perceptive person is unthinkable. But is it really?

Moses is shown as receiving the revelation of monotheism directly from GOD. This is why I was shocked when I first read that Moses may have been led to this conclusion after finding some preserved manuscript or hymn of the monotheistic pharaoh Ikhnaton. If this was the case, it seems Moses received no direct revelation from GOD at all. Ikhnaton, whose original name was Amenhotep IV, had adopted the new one, which means "Man of the Sun," because he came to believe that the sun, being the source of all energy, was the only god. This new doctrine was anathema to the priests of the old religion, because it threatened to put them out of a job. So, after Ikhnahton's death, they did their best to destroy all evidence that he had ever even existed. A number of hymns that the Pharaoh had written to the sun, however, survived, and it is possible that Moses—who was actually raised in the palace of

Pharaoh as his grandson—was hunting about one day, as boys will do, and he found some of them in the palace. I was shocked even to think that this was how Moses’ “revelation” might have occurred, but in reacting this way, I showed myself to be fascinated with magic—not with real religion.

1. A Great Man, But Still Just a Man

Moses was a real man and a very great one, one of the greatest in all history. He stands head and shoulders above all his contemporaries, but he was still not more than a man. He was the man for his times as others have been for their times, but he still had the same limitations as the rest of us. He was a genius, single-minded as all such men are, and his preoccupation was with GOD. He was very perceptive in his outreach toward GOD, wherever it might lead him and however it might come to him. So, does it matter how he became aware that GOD is One? I don’t believe it does. The fact that he did, and that GOD was able to communicate this realization to him, no matter how, is the important thing.

Beyond Words

Pharaoh Ikhnaton was a sensitive, poetic and highly intelligent man and was far ahead of his time. He came to see the absurdity of the idea of a hierarchy of gods, which was held by virtually all the cultures of his day. Ammon, for whom he was originally named, was thought to be the king or chief of the gods but still, like Zeus in Greece or Jupiter in Rome, one of the many who were modeled on the character of humanity. To the Egyptians, as in other pagan cultures, the gods were thought to have passions and failings and organization like themselves. Surely Ikhnaton was a prophet and takes his place in the long process of the self-revelation of GOD to humanity. His downfall and the eradication of his views was a major setback in the cause of religion.

The proponents of magic and superstition had succeeded, as they often have before and since, in stifling the ongoing revelation of truth. But truth is real and cannot long be stifled or withstood. In all its many aspects it is always there to be discovered. GOD is always seeking to open channels of response in the

hearts and minds of those whom He calls to be His mouthpieces.

Such a one was Ikhnaton and such a one was Moses. The descendants of the patriarchs have always had a peculiar sense of chosenness, of destiny. This sense of destiny was strong in the boy who was found, as if by chance, by the daughter of Pharaoh in the reeds of the Nile. The princess raised the boy as her own son in the royal palace. Wandering and exploring, as boys will, in the great house, it is not surprising that he stumbled on the hymns of Ikhnaton.

We needn't try to follow Moses' conjectured development. The only point I wish to make is that if, indeed, Moses' original inspiration, or at least the strengthening of that inspiration, came from Ikhnaton, it in no way diminishes the grandeur of Moses or suggests that he was any less inspired by GOD. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews opens his great letter with this statement: "GOD, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in times past to the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by His

Beyond Words

Son..." (Hebrews 1 & 2). "At sundry times and in divers manners": is it really strange that GOD should use an inspired pharaoh of Egypt as His agent and then lead Moses to pick up the unfinished work and carry it on?

If GOD dealt with men and women in times past as He deals with us today, then we can assume that His voice came to Moses as it came to Elijah and as it comes to us today, in the still small voice in the inner recesses of our minds. If this voice is nurtured and helped on it becomes clearer until it is recognized for what it is.

When Moses tried to take the part of his people against their Egyptian masters he killed an Egyptian and fled the country to the land of Midian. There he took a wife whose father was a priest in that country and a very wise man. Moses and his father-in-law must have had many talks about religion and other things. One day, when he was tending the sheep of his father-in-law, the attention of Moses was riveted on a bush which seemed to be on fire but it did not burn. The

conviction came to Moses at that moment that he was aware of the voice of GOD. At this moment, his growing conviction suddenly crystallized that GOD is One and that He is the true reality and that He was calling on him to be His agent. His destiny suddenly became clear: he was to bring his people, the descendants of the patriarchs, out of Egypt where they were being corrupted by cruel servitude and by the Egyptian paganism which surrounded them. It was he, Moses, who was to bring his people into their own land. There they would grow and develop and produce great men and women through whom the realization of the true GOD would be expressed. What an exciting and heightening realization for a man! It must have been like the bursting consciousness of His Messiahship which came to Jesus at His baptism at the hands of John the Baptist.

But wait a second, what credentials did Moses have? How could he say to the people that they must follow him and trust him because GOD had sent him? They did not know GOD, and how was he to describe Him to them? What name could he use? What name

Beyond Words

can be applied to Reality itself? A name is used within a class of persons or things to differentiate one from another. What name can a mere man give to the wonderful, awful and Unique Truth? There was no name given to Moses but rather a statement. "Tell them," The Holy Spirit instructed him, "that I AM has sent you"; I AM THAT I AM—Reality, Being, the ever present eternal and infinite Truth—has sent you to your people for their deliverance and, at last, for the salvation of the world!

The fascinating story goes on further in the Book of Genesis, but my point, again, is simply that there is no magic involved. If Moses' inspiration was helped along by his father-in-law, it in no way detracts from the inspiration itself or suggests that its source was other than GOD. As I see things this way, everything becomes more credible and more exciting. It removes Moses from the ranks of the unbelievable magicians. Moses is seen as a human being through whom GOD speaks in his day and age in the same way that He speaks to us today in ours.

2. The Need for Law

The next great event in the story is the giving of the Law—or the Ten Commandments—to Moses on Mount Sinai. Again, once we rid ourselves of the notion of magical intervention the account emerges as intensely real and human! In spite of terrible hardships, Moses succeeded in bringing Israel out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. He escaped pursuit and managed to sustain the people in their trek. He now finds that there is much more to it than that. His mission was not only to bring them out of physical slavery but, more importantly, out of the spiritual slavery of a superstitious faith in magic. This is not an easy job so he turns again to His wise father-in-law, the priest of Midian (who, by the way, seems to appear under two names!) for help and advice. The dreadful burden of trying to keep peace among the people is wearing him out. The people are having constant disputes and murmuring against him and his brother, Aaron, whom he has appointed to be their priest. The hardships and uncertainties of their journey are such that they even say

Beyond Words

that they would rather have stayed in Egypt. They figured in Egypt they were ill-treated and forced to work agonizingly hard, but at least they had food and shelter. But then his father-in-law urges him to organize the people and appoint lieutenants or judges with whom he will be able to share the leadership responsibilities. So judges were appointed. another very serious problem arose: the judges had no common law they could administer. Without this, confusion would become worse confounded. As long as Moses was the sole judge, there was no problem because the essence of the law was clear in his mind and his word was generally accepted, but many judges needed a common code if they wished to maintain unity. This required much thought, meditation and prayer, while the people encamp at the base of a great mountain in the Sinai Peninsula, Moses and Joshua go up on the mountain and make a retreat, waiting for inspiration from GOD.

But no sooner were they out of sight than the people fell away from the vision and rule of Moses and persuaded Aaron to make them an idol, a golden calf,

to be their god and express their animal nature. Now they have a god like other people, one they can see and touch and which makes no demands on them. They begin excitedly "worshiping" it in the rites they are familiar with and which express the animality of their nature. Meanwhile, Moses remains on the mountain deep in thought and prayer while the outline of the Law is revealed to him. The Holy Torah, the rule under which the people will grow toward GOD, begins to take shape.

It is important to note that, negative as they are, the commandments are expressive in different fields of the two great commandments of love by which Jesus summed up all the law and the prophets. The first of these commandments, the foundation of Hebrew Law, called the "Shema," which means "Hear," and which is read in every service in every synagogue, relates to one's duty to GOD: "Hear, O Israel, the LORD our GOD, is one LORD and "...thou shalt love the LORD thy GOD with all thine heart and with all thy soul and with all thy might." (Deuteronomy

Beyond Words

6:4). The second commandment relates to our duty to our neighbor: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." (Leviticus 19:18). Here is the great and essentially simple summary of the Law which came to Moses on the mountain. These principles were developed into the Ten Commandments which, in turn, became the symbol of the Law.

3. "Has GOD any need for fingers?"

We are told the commandments were written on the tablets of stone by the finger of GOD. But is it possible that the "tables of stone" were clay tablets and the writing similar to ancient cuneiform? Whether the tablets were of stone or clay, the form of the characters and by whose hand they were written is really not very important. What is very important and unquestionably true is that they were inspired, "written," if you will, by GOD. One might almost say that Moses was so open to the inspiration of GOD that they were dictated by Him. Again, the details are not important but the message is! It is ridiculous to suggest that nothing really happened on Mount Sinai. What happened there profoundly af-

fecting the subsequent history of the world. If GOD wrote on the tablets with His finger (has GOD any need for fingers?) what need had He of Moses? If the tablets had fallen out of heaven with glory would it not have been more effective in getting the people to accept and obey?

But this is not the way GOD acts. If things had happened that way they would have smacked more of magic than religion. GOD always uses men and women as his agents in communicating with their fellows. We need not choose between believing in the accuracy of the story as we read it on the one hand, and rejecting it altogether on the other. It might be that in later years when people were astonished at the grandeur and wisdom of the Law and Moses told the story to his hearers that he may have said something like, "You know, it all came to me that time when Joshua and I were on the mountain. In the earthquake and storm I was very aware of the presence and guidance of GOD. It was as if He [were] writing on the tablets with His own hand!"

Beyond Words

As time went on the story, if Moses indeed told it this way, might have become crystallized, as stories will in time, until it took the form which we read now. But we must not confuse the form with the message. I AM THAT I AM, the Reality of the entire universe and all that is in it of which we and all our works are but pale shadows has spoken! GOD is! GOD is not "our God", an idea in the minds of men and women. Quite the opposite, we are ideas in the mind of GOD. This is not to say that we are not real because the ideas of GOD are very real. This is wonderfully expressed in the story of creation in the Book of Genesis. "And GOD said, Let there be light: and there was light." It might have been translated that GOD thought, "Let there be light." In other words, a word or a thought uttered by GOD is real.

So reality expresses Himself to the realities which are extensions of Him. GOD expresses Himself to men and women in real ways, not in magical shows. Getting rid of magic lets the truth shine through more clearly. In the course of time GOD uses a perceptive

Egyptian pharaoh to advance His cause. But the time is not ripe, nor the stage set, for the Truth to be so presented that it may bring forth fruit. But the seed has been sown and the tree begins to grow and put forth branches that will in time bear fruit for the healing of the nations. We will talk about this later. For now, I'd like to look more closely at the Law revealed through Moses.

Part Two

Jesus and the Church

The Purpose of the Commandments

We would be better off to think of them as we think of the user's manual that a manufacturer sends to a buyer with a new product. It is good business to have buyers obey the rules in the instruction booklet, so the product will work well. The fact that oil is messy and slimy stuff that we don't like is no excuse for our failure to put it in the crankcases of our cars.

The Ten Commandments are widely thought to be the very heart of the Bible. Many think that obedience to them is the whole duty of human life. How often have you heard someone say, "I did a lot of going to church when I was young. I don't do it now, but I do try to obey the ten commandments." This is the disposition of many. In fact, the ten commandments have been so imposed on the minds of Christians that they regard them as the sum and substance of Christianity, in spite of the fact that they were in existence hundreds of years before the birth of Christ! In addition, no matter what we *say*, it's clear that the majority of us fail to

Beyond Words

live up to the standards set by these great ordinances.

Taken at face value, with very little of the insight I am urging, there is very little in the commandments which can be called Christian at all. They feel negative and they seem to breathe an atmosphere of terror and revenge which is at complete variance with the *Good News* of our LORD as reported in the gospels. However, GOD, as presented in the Ten Commandments, can hardly be thought of as especially loving or as, "our Father." In the second commandment, for example, are these words: ". . .for I, the LORD thy GOD, am a jealous GOD, visiting the iniquities of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate Me ..." (Exodus 20:4). What a dreadful and apparently unjust statement that is! Punishing children for the sins of their fathers! Taken at face value we may accept it as fact, but how can we learn to love GOD if He made this a fact?

We must bear in mind, though, that with the commandments we are dealing with Reality, with real people and the Real GOD Who never changes. We

should look beyond the words of these early precepts and see the Nature of GOD as He revealed Himself later through the prophets and, above all, in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Jesus said some strange things about the Law which may seem contradictory. He said that He had not come to destroy the Law but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17). He also said that no small detail of the Law should be changed. There must, therefore, be a consistency to be found between His teaching and that of the Law. We must remember that, though the principle of the Truth is unchanging, the expression of that Truth must be changed in every generation so that it can be understood. When we look at the commandments closely in this way we see that they are, in fact, inspired by love.

1. The Great Puppeteer

If we understand GOD as Reality, and understand that Moses and his people were real men and women, we are able to understand that they had the same limitations in their outlook as do you and I. We are products of our times and have been conditioned by

Beyond Words

our upbringing to think in the terms that we do. In the time of Moses, He was trying to lead his people out of the magical and fatalistic view of life they clung to. I don't believe much has changed since—we still cling to these ideas because no one has ever told us any different.

How much easier it is to hold on to magical views. For instance, how much easier is it to think that everything that happens is already foreordained to happen as it does. Thinking in this way we can say things like, "Don't blame me for the mess things are in. It's not my fault. GOD planned it this way!" In some measure, it seems, we *want* GOD to be the great puppeteers pulling all the strings and controlling our lives. But this thought of how things work is not a thought at all; it is an emotion, a feeling, a wish. No real Christian can think this way because it makes nonsense out of religion. If GOD is really the cause of everything that happens, why should there be any Law at all? Why any prophets? Why Moses and, above all, why Jesus?

The inspired prophets communicated their

inspiration through teaching. Why try to teach people who have no will of their own? The psalms, the prophets and the other writings record the successes and failures of the past and the wisdom acquired from them so that it can be passed on to future generations. If we have no will of our own, what good to us is the wisdom of the past? If this is true, then Jesus gave us a rather ridiculous prayer when He taught us to pray, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Of course, the fact is that GOD'S will is not done on earth. If the sorry state of the history of mankind is the picture of the will of GOD in operation, then He has made an incredible mess of things and I would take my chances against such a fate. There was some excuse for this sort of belief in the days of Moses, but there is no excuse for it now.

Moses, in response to the inspiration of GOD, took a great step forward, but still it was only a step. Moses tried to destroy people's belief in many gods but he was not perfect. He was inspired by GOD in writing the law but he didn't know the nature of GOD com-

Beyond Words

pletely. He was not able to get beyond the belief that, since GOD is all-powerful, all things must take place not only in accordance with His will, but by it.

Let us examine this great code and try to see how it is consistent with the facts of life and the love of GOD. St. Paul wrote that it is the spirit of the Law and not the letter which is important (II Corinthians 3:6). When Jesus said that He came not to destroy the Law but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17), He meant that He was bringing out its true meaning, making explicit that which had always been implicit, explaining what had always been implied.

The Spirit which shapes the commandments is Love. GOD is Love and He is always seeking to bring us to the realization, experience and practice of that Love. Even though they are commandments, perhaps it's too bad we must think of them in such a strict, confining sense. We would be better served to think of them rather as GOD eagerly trying to explain to us which forms of behavior lead to our well-being and which to our destruction. We would be better off to

think of them as we think of the user's manual a manufacturer sends to a buyer with a new product. It is good business to have buyers obey the rules in the instruction booklet so the product will work well. For instance, the fact that oil is messy and slimy stuff that we don't like is no excuse for our failure to put it in the crankcases of our cars. If we refuse to use oil our car will not run, and the resulting ruin will not be the fault of the manufacturer. It will be our own fault. This is how we should think of the Commandments. GOD is the manufacturer and the Commandments are the user's booklet. We have been given free will and we don't have to obey the Commandments if we don't want to. But if we refuse to obey the law, we must not blame the resulting ruin on GOD.

I believe that the ruin of one's life is what is meant by hell. It is frustration, utter loneliness, the hopeless realization when it is too late to do anything about it of the opportunity of life itself being thrown away. GOD is Love and it is inconceivable that He would condemn us to the eternal punishment of hell.

Beyond Words

Though we often pass sentence upon ourselves we are also very apt to put the blame on GOD. The result of this is that we often see little distinction in practice between GOD and the devil. But GOD is always urging us to make the right choices and it is through the Ten Commandments that we might have a way of knowing what these choices are. But let us not be confused as to the purpose of these important commandments.

2. Beyond The Commandments

I. “I am the LORD, your GOD,” the Commandments begin (Exodus 20: I), “You shall have no other gods besides me.” In other words: I am the Truth; there is no other. There is nothing but the Truth. Anything else is false. To worship anything other than the Truth is to worship a lie, to aim for that which does not exist, for emptiness, for nothingness, for hell.

II. “You shall not make for yourself any graven image...” means that you should not worship something that you have made—an idea of your own. It is, as the 115th Psalm puts it, to worship what is literally a

blockhead, and the worshipper is a blockhead as well. To worship an idol is to worship yourself and this is the opposite of worshipping GOD. However, it is something we do. We may have no idol of wood or stone but this doesn't matter. We do it in subtler ways.

III. "You shall not take the name of the LORD your GOD in vain..." is a commandment that is also often misunderstood. It is not GOD who condemns us for profaning sacred things or words but we ourselves who have so misused them that, for us, they have lost all their power for good. To lose respect for that which is true is to lose our ability to distinguish between good and evil. To keep our respect for the name of GOD, the quality of truth, is to protect ourselves from this danger.

IV. "Remember that you keep holy the Sabbath Day" is a very important principle: the importance of rest. "All work and no play make Jack a dull boy" is quite true! To work continuously with no time off for recreation and family gathering destroys personality—and life!—and is one of the besetting sins of our soci-

Beyond Words

ety which we overlook. It may make money but it makes nothing else, and it often destroys families and, life and love.

V. "Honor your father and your mother that your days may be long . . ." does not mean that you will live to a ripe old age if you look up to your parents. It does mean that your effective life will be long. If you respect your parents, you will learn to live in such a way that your children will respect you. But the principle goes further than that. It means that we need to respect age and experience. We all need to have someone and some things to look up to and try to emulate.

VI. "You shall not kill" means "you shall not murder." We must kill to live. To murder is generally so abhorred by society that we try as hard as we can to keep the urge to murder under control. Animals kill to eat but it seems that man alone murders. The root of murder is hatred and anger, the opposites of love. Man is a very peculiar animal; his memory and emotions work on him and sometimes produce murder. If we spread love and root out anger and hatred, we will not

need to worry about murder.

VII. “You shall not commit adultery” is a commandment which is hardly noticed in these permissive times. Instead of having respect for sex, which does and is intended to produce life, we treat it as our favorite indoor sport. GOD made sex exciting and enjoyable so that we would obey His command to "...be fruitful and multiply..." (Genesis 1:22), but it was never intended that we should treat it lightly and regard it as necessary to well-being as we seem to do today. To commit adultery is to stain or corrupt our relationships, and it leads to much trouble. A lifelong vow is required by the Church to preserve the integrity of the family and also because, very simply put: love only flowers in such a secure relationship.

VIII. Stealing and lying (XI) are such obvious sins they hardly need comment. It needs to be pointed out that stealing and lying are sins against society, in addition to sins against ourselves. The person who steals and lies, having no faith in himself, has no faith in others. He becomes paranoid, having no faith in anything

Beyond Words

or anybody and expects to be stolen from and lied to. In the end, he becomes such a callous shell that his humanity is in danger of drying up altogether!

X. You shall not covet means that we should not envy someone else's condition or possessions. The envious person is a lazy person. He spends so much time and energy envying someone else that he hasn't the energy to earn it himself! Covetousness, envy, and jealousy are all expressions of self-centeredness. The worship of self is, as we have seen, the opposite of the worship of GOD. There is a very amusing English comedy on television called "Keeping up Appearances," which could be called, "Keeping Up With the Joneses." While it is amusing, one quickly realizes the truth of it is very far from funny as one sees the sad effect of the envious attitude of the central character and those she comes in contact with.

I have attempted to explain to you what I take to be the proper way of understanding the ten commandments. I have attempted to show that negative and restrictive as they seem to be, the ten commandments are,

in fact, expressions of the consistent and boundless love of GOD—of GOD's desire to see us live full lives free from the problems we create when we worship ourselves worship ourselves.

It seems as though GOD threatens to punish us if we break these commandments, but this is not so. As I have explained, sin carries within itself its own punishment. There is a price for everything and GOD is trying to protect us from having to pay the price. So it is that the Law—and all religion—is aimed at protecting us from ourselves.

GOD revealed the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai and it has stood the test of time because the Commandments have shown themselves over the centuries to be valid. The Law is not true because the Bible says it is. Rather, it is in the Bible because it has been found in experience to be true.

"Experience," said Benjamin Franklin, "keeps a dear school and fools will learn at no other." Experience certainly does keep a highly expensive school. The experiences of the past, however, increase the

Beyond Words

availability of wisdom for us all in the present. The Ten Commandments are a kind of précis of the whole Law—a brief statement of the wisdom of the past—gained through experience and passed on to us to help us live well in the present.

Seven

The Book of Life

Truth may be difficult but it is real and, if difficult, very exciting. It is exciting because it brings success and we know that magic never does

The way we think about the Bible as a whole is another stumbling block for many of us on the path to taking religion seriously. It seems that it's as natural for us to want to weave magic into the events recorded in the Bible as it is for us to maintain the belief that the Bible is magic. The logic is as follows: if it is the Word of GOD then it must also be the words of GOD, as well. Right? This view suggests, I presume, that the minds of the individual writers were taken over by GOD Who then used them as computers or dictating machines, or something of the sort. According to this view every word of the English Bible must be equally true and the whole contain a hidden prophetic message through which initiates are able to accurately predict the future.

Beyond Words

While this would all be quite amazing, the truth is it's completely contrary to our experience. This view infers that, again, all things are either controlled or known by GOD ahead of time. But assuming this, what possible good could it do for us to know what they are and when they will happen? What would you do if you knew, for a fact, that the world was going to come to an end tomorrow afternoon at 5 o'clock? I read somewhere of a wise man who, when asked that question, replied that he would try to finish the good book he was reading in time! If you were so overcome by fear that you spent the entire intervening time in prayer, do you think that would change the destiny which you had been building for yourself all your life?

Many religious groups who were shown that the Bible predicted the end of the world at a certain time have put on white robes, given away all that they had and gone up on a mountain to await the event. Later they had to come down from the mountain and admit that they had made a mistake in their calcula-

tions. Unfortunately, the poor souls never learned a lesson from this for they set to work with their Bibles right away to see where they made a mistake.

The mistake was in thinking that the information they sought was to be found in the Bible at all, or anywhere else for that matter. It never occurs to them that their whole approach to GOD is based on human assumptions, on magic and even a form of idolatry, but not on the religion of GOD. The Prophet Isaiah, speaking for GOD, wrote "For my thoughts are not your thoughts neither are my ways your ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8). But why do we think GOD must think and act like us? Made in the image of GOD, we are like GOD in some ways, but that is not to say that GOD is like us. The strange reasoning of many religionists is that, whether a thing exists or not, it must be known to GOD. To suggest that He does not know when the world will no longer be habitable or will explode is thought to be blasphemy. But really it is only

Beyond Words

blasphemy to the nonsensical ideas of religion which we persist in clinging to.

Throw away the magic and accept that GOD is love and that the message of love, which is the gospel, is valid. If GOD knows all the events in your life and mine before they happen, and of all history before it happens as well, why did He make us at all? If everything is predestined there can be no development, no growth. Why then the Law, the prophets and our LORD Himself?

Questions like these are invalid and, of course, have no answers. The older and more mature we grow, the less we want to ask them. They are based on a false understanding of the Bible and a dishonest use of it. Those who profess to maintain this view of the Bible never take it as a whole. They take it in bits and pieces. They accept what they like, what fits in with their own preconceived ideas, and ignore or reject what does not. A friend of mine who was a chaplain in the Army considered himself a fundamentalist who accepted everything in the Bible at face value as being practically

dictated by GOD. He was a sincere and fine man. The fact that the Bible was mainly written in two ancient languages did not seem to bother him at all. He seemed to think that GOD spoke in the English of the time of King James I. One day I went to a Bible Class that he was conducting. He spent the best part of an hour explaining that when it says that Jesus turned water into wine at the wedding at Cana that it really meant grape juice! You see, my friend was a teetotaler.

At the other extreme, the Bible is thought to be a very edifying and spiritual book. One reads it for inspiration and to catch a message of spiritual uplift for the day. People who use the Bible in this way are not looking for a hidden message from GOD; they are looking for a clear passage which they like—one that cheers them up. They use much the same method as the others: they pick and choose. They have their favorite passages that they read over and over again. One favorite passage that is high on the list is the twenty-third Psalm. What is said is not really important. It is the comforting sound of the passage that matters.

Beyond Words

"Why can't they leave the Bible alone?" I was asked by an irate page thirty-six parishioner one Sunday when we had read Psalm twenty-three from the Episcopal prayer book in the service. The version in the prayer book is not the same as that from the King James Bible, which she was accustomed to. It did no good to point out that the prayer book version was much older than that of the King James Bible.

Another favorite passage is the verse known as "Mispah" (Genesis 31:49): "...The LORD watch between me and thee while we are absent one from the other." Anyone who bothers to read the context of this verse can see it is not a blessing as everyone thinks it is. In fact, it's more like a curse. In the story neither Jacob nor Laban trusted one another and since, when they were separated from one another, they couldn't keep one another under constant surveillance, they called upon GOD to see to it that each stayed on his own land and did not trespass on the other's. So, it's not exactly a blessing, but it sounds so nice that it can be used for one! This sweet, sentimental and inaccurate

use of religion has done a great deal of harm to our understanding of real religion. Those who feel (not think) this way pay no attention to the real meaning of the Bible or to the words which are used in worship in Church. It never occurs to them to take the Bible seriously. Favorite hymns are sung, regardless of what we say when we sing them because we like the tune. The better-loved a hymn or a prayer, the less chance there is that one knows what is said. As a result, religion is often undermined in the very act of worship.

1. Media Bias. Bible Bias.

The Bible is, in fact, a library of books written at very different times under very different circumstances and by very different people. When we read an account of some event in the newspaper, we take it for granted that it is colored by the personal bias of the reporter. It could not be otherwise. Nobody can jump out of his own skin and be coldly objective in reporting facts. A reporter must report things as he sees them. The very words that he uses will betray his own belief about what he reports. No two reporters can tell of the

Beyond Words

same event in the same way. So it is and so it has always been. It is important to bear this in mind.

The events in the Bible were reported just as events are today. If you believe that GOD causes and controls everything, you will see His hand in everything that happens and you will explain and report things in this way. If there has been an earthquake or a flood, GOD must have caused it. Then, if you further believe that GOD is good and wise, then everything has a good reason and is part of the divine plan.

Evidence of a great flood of universal proportions is found which would appear to have drowned all life. Since you assume that all things are caused by GOD, you are faced with a problem. Why would He have done such a thing? The only possible answer would be that it was a punishment for the wickedness of mankind. The cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by an earthquake. The reason that GOD must have done this was that these towns were more wicked than any others. What a convenient explanation. The fact that Jesus condemned this line of reasoning seems

to make no difference. The point I am making is that the explanation given by the reporter is the one which we have always taken as the only possible one. If this explanation is unacceptable to us, we not only reject it but the event it is attached to as well. This is a mistake. We must search for a better way to understand.

Even legend is a form of history. If we look at such legends, like that of the flood, we often find they are based on some fact. The thing really happened, but the report and the explanation of it may be biased. Of course there are passages in the Bible, such as the dreadful curses in the 109 Psalm, from which one cannot seem to derive any benefit. But evidence of cruelty and revenge have their place in the Bible, the record of the growing understanding of GOD which has its fulfillment in our LORD, Jesus Christ. Try then to see things, not only in the Bible but anywhere through the eye of the beholder. If you do not agree with the details of a story, don't worry.

2. Biased? Maybe. Glossed over? No.

Despite the probable bias, the Bible has been

Beyond Words

called the Book of Life, which is what it is because it presents the reality of every aspect of life seen through the lives of real people.

An important part of the fascination of the Bible is its honesty; its profound respect for truth. It does not claim to have any easy answers for all the problems it records. In fact, sometimes the answers that it appears to give are clearly wrong! And often it simply states facts and events. Since most of the Old Testament writers believed that everything was controlled by GOD they wrote a divine purpose into everything. For example, Saul, the first king of Israel, ended his reign a dismal failure. He was melancholic and went to pieces. He vacillated and was unable to make up his mind. He was consumed by jealousy of David, who ultimately conquered and succeeded him. It is easy to see that the reason for this was that the prophet Samuel chose and anointed him as king because of his imposing size and physique "...From his shoulders and upward he was higher than any of the people." (I Samuel 9:2). He was also "...a choice young man and a

goodly..." But tall and handsome as he was, he was spiritually and mentally small and was given a job too big for him. But his failure had to be explained in divine, rather than psychological terms. So, the reason given for his collapse and defeat was that he had disobeyed the "command of the LORD," given through Samuel, by sparing Agag, the king of Amalek (I Samuel 15:8), when he had been ordered to kill him and all his army! Saul performed what we would call an act of mercy and spared Agag. For that he was said to be punished. My point is that Saul, who was one of the early heroes of Israel, is presented as he was with none of the facts glossed over. Things are not glossed over in our own lives; we struggle and experience tremendous hardships at times. The stories of the Bible reflect this and show us how to best deal with these things.

David, the second king, is the hero of Israel who really established the kingdom and founded the dynasty which Solomon, his son, brought to such glory that it was considered one of the wonders of the world. David was the inspired poet and singer of Israel to

Beyond Words

whom most of the psalms are ascribed. But David is described as an intensely human person. He not only committed adultery with Bath Sheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, one of his most loyal soldiers, but when she became pregnant he arranged for the death of Uriah in battle and then he marries his widow. Quite a story! Since its central character was the great hero of Israel one would expect that his shortcomings would be glossed over. Not so in the Bible. To be sure, the prophet Nathan informed David that what he had done displeased the LORD but this did not affect his popularity and nothing very bad happened to him as a result (II Samuel 1:1).

You see, the Bible is neither occult nor sentimental. It presents things as they are and not as we might expect or wish them to be. Nobody can honestly read the Bible and continue to look at life through rose-colored glasses. There is too much of life in the Bible which is sordid and ugly. On the other hand, nobody can read the Bible and see only the sordid and ugly. There is too much in it of incomparable wisdom and

beauty. The truth, in our lives and in the Bible, has much beauty and ugliness in it.

Despite the ugliness, I would not change a word in the Bible. I would not remove the cursing psalms or any of the stories of horror in the Book of Judges nor any of the accounts of the Kings. It is all part of the Word. When kings forsook the truth and went a-whoring after their own inventions the result was inevitable, and it still is today. When things went wrong with the people they complained and their complaints are echoed in the psalms which they sang as they called down curses upon their enemies. We are still apt to react in the same way. I do not like to read in the psalms about babies being thrown upon the rocks but I like even less to read in the newspapers of the same kind of thing, or worse, happening today. Perhaps if we read the Psalms with greater insight and appreciate the distinction they constantly draw between the godly and the ungodly man we might learn something and find the way, at least, to cut down the horror and cruelty of our own times.

Beyond Words

The Book of Judges tells of the depths to which the nation sank in its darkest days. I have often thought that the book might effectively have been set to music by Richard Wagner. The final verse of the book gives the reason for the horror. It is a verse which seems to apply effectively to the troubles of our own times. "In those days there was no king in Israel. Every man did that which was right in his own eyes." (Judges 21:25). The substance of that verse appears a number of times in the final chapters of the book like a musical theme which comes to a crashing finale at the end. There was no rule in those days. Everyone did as he pleased. Have we learned much in the time since these things took place?

3. No Divine Dictation, Just Reality

The prophets received no magical divine dictation. These men were sensitive and highly intelligent and they were inspired by GOD to see themselves, and the times in which they lived, as they really were and to see the direction in which things were pointing. Today the prophets and their messages would not have

been accepted nor understood. The time had not yet come. The writers of the Psalms and the great book of Proverbs faced themselves squarely. They knew GOD so well that they were able to argue with Him and even complain to Him. They were cruel and vindictive. So are we. The writer of the Book of Job faced the problem of evil and unjust suffering but he never came to a satisfactory conclusion. But that didn't keep the compilers of the canon of the sacred Scriptures from including the honest searching and great poetry of this book in the Bible.

The books of the Bible were written by people like us. The difference between us lies in the fact that they, knowing GOD, would not refuse to face the reality around them and they refused to doctor that reality up, or to gloss it over.

The Bible is the Book of Life because in it we can see the development of real men and women with the real GOD. The Bible shows us, on the one hand, GOD eagerly and lovingly reaching out to His children and, on the other hand, His children stumblingly reach-

Beyond Words

ing out to Him. The record of the Bible also shows how we either respond to His love and guidance or else refuse to do so. The result is great joy on the one hand or the hell of failure on the other.

The foundation of true religion is experience. Chiefly, the Bible is the record of experience, honestly reported. If people had real experiences of GOD many years ago, there is no reason why we should not have them today. In fact, we do have them but we do not recognize them. We may call them coincidences and let them go at that. We take stories in the Bible at face value and, because they do not fit in with our experience, we assume that they are not true. The trouble is that we start with the assumption that the fact that the Bible is called “holy” separates it from reality. But “holy” means something entirely different than magic and we have seen that if we really want to understand the stories of the Bible we must work towards a better solution, based on our understanding of the Truth and the, sometimes, very different understandings of the Truth that those who wrote, or were written about, in

the Bible held.

Once we rid ourselves of the notion that religion and magic are the same, we can begin to read the Bible as the true record of the experience of GOD by other people in other times. Thus we will be encouraged to believe that we can experience the same things in our times ourselves.

There is an attitude which we can all use in our attempt to understand the Bible which may bring us closer to the truth than we had thought possible. Truth may be difficult but it is real and, if difficult, very exciting. It is exciting because it brings success and we know that magic never does. There is nothing so satisfying, in the long run, as reality. Careful examination and re-thinking will not endanger the faith but can make its meaning plainer. The sacraments of the church and, indeed, its whole life are far more important than we realize, but often for different reasons. So let's start again but with a fresh approach, not a new one but the ancient one; the approach of honesty and experience. To experience a thing is, of course, to be-

Beyond Words

lieve in it. "The proof of the pudding is in the eating" or, as the Psalmist put it (Psalm 34:8), "O taste and see how gracious the LORD is..." Unless we taste, unless we experience for ourselves, we may try very hard to believe but the chances are that we really do not.

When we begin to read the Bible with this new attitude, to read virtually all of it, we will be struck by its beauty and really miraculous power. There is nothing that would do more toward strengthening our society and ourselves than the intelligent restoration of the message of the Bible as the prime foundation of our culture. I hope I've been able to share with you what I take to be an intelligent restoration requires of us all. is paid by GOD, to us, for the overcoming of our pride, for our lives.

Eight

The Eucharist

*So there they were...sharing the bread...
For that moment they are one, and it is wonderful!
their love for Jesus is far greater than their petty hostility*

I have suggested that the miracle of the loaves and the fishes foreshadows the central service of the Church, the Eucharist. So now, let's consider this service using our new way of understanding. From this, hopefully, we will be able to get rid of the magical ideas which have grown up around it. Perhaps then we will see through to the true miracle of it, and see the way this miracle is meant to affect our lives.

The Eucharist is, in short, the service that was instituted by our LORD to be the means above all others whereby we come into intimate relationship with GOD and with one another. The Service has been given many names which, to some extent, express the various attitudes towards it: the Divine Liturgy, the Mass, the LORD'S Supper, the Holy Communion and

Beyond Words

the Eucharist or Thanksgiving are a few of them. Whatever its name and whatever attitudes are taken toward it, it is clear that it was meant to be the binding force, the center of unity in the Church. But alas, something went very wrong. What was intended to bind us all together in so close a union that we would be, as we are intended to be, the Body of Christ on earth, became one of the greatest sources of discord. The stone of salvation became the stone of stumbling.

How could such a thing happen? Again we find the answer in the magical view that was quickly taken of it when the Church was no longer persecuted but became fashionable. Our LORD said, "This is my body...this is my blood." If you take these words literally, there certainly seems to be something magical here. Our LORD takes bread and says it is His body and does the same with a cup of wine. Here is the miracle, the sure sign of our union with GOD, which has taken place at countless altars every day for the past 2,000 years. I don't pretend to know what happens in the Eucharist, probably far more happens than I can

possibly know or understand. But what I do know is that a miracle really does take place; I have experienced it. I also know that whatever GOD does in this great service is His business, not ours. This is because what He does in the service is as varied as are the needs of the countless worshipers who participate in it. It is pointless to argue about what GOD does in the Eucharist and it is presumptuous for us to even attempt to define His activity in it. In each meeting with GOD, as in each meeting between human beings, the experience is unique because the persons and the situations involved are always unique. We cannot predict or describe what will happen in any real encounter beyond stating that a meeting does take place. What we can and must know is what *our* part is in it and about this we must be very clear.

1. The Visible and the Invisible

A good definition of a sacrament is found in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer which says that it is "the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace." Or, in other words, the sacrament in-

Beyond Words

volves something we can see and something we cannot see. So, there are two parts to the transaction: GOD'S part and our part. What GOD does is real and effective but it can neither be seen nor defined. What we do opens the way for the action of GOD.

To recognize our responsibility and the need for our action can seem to us to be very irksome. What GOD does is beyond our understanding and it is in this area that most of the controversy arises. It is in this area of disagreement over the fine points of the theology of the Eucharist the trouble arises and we have become divided.

Queen Elizabeth I, when asked what she believed about the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, replied with this profound little poem which I often reflect on because I think it sums up the truth of what's going on:

*Twas GOD, the Word, that spake it.
He took the bread and brake it,
And what the Word doth make it,
That I believe and take it.*

Let us stop worrying about what happens or how it

happens. For each of us, the experience is different. The outward and visible sign is the same but the inward and spiritual grace comes to us in experiences as varied as we and our needs at the moment are varied.

2. At the Last Supper

But let us delve even further in a way that, perhaps, makes things more accessible for us all. Let us use the "we are there" method, which we have, perhaps, used successfully so far with other matters and see where it may lead us when trying to reach a deeper, more satisfying understanding of the Eucharist. If we look at the Eucharist honestly and freshly we may see into, and even experience, the reality of Christian worship and find abundant grace for our own living.

We can start with the two great commandments in which our LORD tells us that all the law and the teachings of the Prophets are summed up. The basis of these commandments is love. "Hear, O Israel, the LORD our GOD The Lord of One. Thou shalt love the LORD thy GOD with all thy mind and with all thy heart and with all thy strength." That is the first and

Beyond Words

greatest commandment and the second is like it and flows from it—"Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Jesus, the Christ, is indeed that prophet which the world needs, for He has shown us that love, the overcoming of sin, is the answer to the problems of the world. The sacrament which He ordained not only perpetuates the memory of His life, death and resurrection but, through our obedience to these commandments, we actually experience Him in it.

3. Holy

There is so much that can be said about this sacrament and its tremendous and mysterious meaning that it cannot be condensed into words. One must almost redefine every word which is used to avoid an expression which would be misunderstood. What, for example, does "holy communion" mean? What is meant by the word "holy"? We have largely forgotten. When we use the word "holy" we are apt to think of rather effeminate beings, "saints," depicted in stained glass windows with various symbols which identify them and with halos floating above their heads. These

pictures of "holiness" have so little appeal to us today that we are sure we don't want to be holy!

Actually, when we understand the real meaning of the word, we see that we all want to be holy! The word comes from the Greek root which means "whole, hale and hearty." A holy person, therefore, is really just a whole, healthy and well-integrated person. The Holy Church is the one, complete and totally integrated Church. Applied to us as individuals, many of us spend large sums of money going to doctors to be "put together," to become whole, to become, although we don't know it, holy! When the word is properly understood, though, one can see that we all want to be holy.

4. Communion

"Communion" means the same thing as communication. To be united with someone is to be in Communion or "in union with" that person. We all seek communion of one sort or another all the time to overcome the feeling of loneliness in our lives. Most of us want desperately to be approved of by others; to be in communion with them. We also want to be at one with

Beyond Words

our environment, with our surroundings, with reality, with GOD. To be in communion, then, with GOD and one another, is the fulfilling of both of the great commandments.

Holy communion, then, means entire, whole and healthy at-one-ness with GOD and with those around us. communion with GOD and our fellow human beings produces unity, health and wholeness: holiness.

5. Action

This holiness is not an automatic, magical thing. We have to open ourselves up in order for this to work. We cannot go to Church and hear a priest read a service and expect that the well-being that we seek will automatically envelop us. There is nothing magic about it at all. GOD, Himself, can do nothing effective in our lives if we are unwilling to open ourselves to Him. He can create the atmosphere in which conversion becomes more possible but the conversion itself must take place in us. The decision must be ours. Jesus could do no great things for the people of Capernaum be-

cause of the people's lack of faith (Mark 6:5). It doesn't say that He wouldn't, but that He couldn't. GOD has limited Himself by giving us free will, and He cannot bring us to Him without our willingness to come.

6. The Action of Sharing Bread

What really happened in that upper room in Jerusalem at the Last Supper? It is difficult, in this instance, to put us in the group in the room because to do so we must be identified with one of the disciples. The number of the disciples is small. We know something about most of them and history has clothed all of them, except Judas Iscariot, with the title of "saint." But we must make a real effort to see through the stained-glass pictures we have always had of them and see them as they were: real human beings.

Remembering what "holy" really means; these men were not saints at all. They were not really healthy and well-integrated and, forsaking their Master at His moment of greatest need, they were all cowards. They were not, on that night, saints in any sense of the word. Potentially yes, like all of us, but actually, no. They

Beyond Words

were not even very intelligent. They did not understand the parable of the sower, which is surely one of the simplest of Jesus' illustrative stories. They failed to understand the whole meaning of our LORD'S ministry. They thought He was going to lead a rebellion which would free Israel from the power of Rome, re-establishing the kingdom of David and that He would be king! They expected to be members of His cabinet, and were jealous of one another, each wanting a more important post than the others! James and John had their mother come to Jesus asking Him for the most important positions for her sons in His Kingdom. They were rebuked for this by Jesus but, still, they didn't understand. Simon Peter cursed and swore and denied three times that He even knew Jesus. The further one might go in a character analysis of the disciples, the worse they would appear. In comparison with you and me, well, they were very like us. We would probably feel quite at home in their company unless we were snobs. No, there were no "gentlemen" among them. It was a company of rough workmen. So we are not tak-

ing too much upon ourselves if we identify ourselves with one of them. It doesn't really matter which you choose to be. We are really one of them anyway because they represent all humanity. Jesus chose them for that purpose. But, in spite of their shortcomings, they did have one thing in common with one another: each, in his own limited and befuddled way, did love the LORD.

Jesus knew them all very well. They had not chosen to be His followers; he had called them. He loved them even as GOD loves each of us in spite of *our* shortcomings. He saw in them both their weaknesses and their strengths. More than that, He saw them as children of GOD, His children, and so He loved them and agonized over them. So, knowing that He was going to leave them, He also knew he could not leave these children of His alone and comfortless.

So there they were on the eve of the fateful day, celebrating the Passover together; sharing the bread over which they had said the Kiddush and, in the same way, drinking wine from the same cup with the

Beyond Words

Master and with one another. They feel an extraordinary unity, wholeness and love binding them to their Master, to one another and to GOD. For that moment they are one, and it is wonderful!

They have been made one because their love for Jesus is far greater than their petty hostility to each other. Their jealousy, their cowardice and even the clouds of their lack of understanding have been broken through and for the moment they are gone. They are experiencing the inner life of the LORD, however dimly, in themselves!

Jesus knows all this. It is toward this experience that He has been leading them. So, in this moment of ecstasy at the last supper, He promises that He will never leave them but will be with them whenever and wherever. It is because of Him that they will "do this." Do what? Do what they are doing at this moment, putting aside the human qualities which divide and separate them and giving thanks to GOD, blessing bread and wine and sharing it amongst themselves.

Jesus said, "Not everyone that say unto me

LORD shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he that does the will of My Father which is in heaven" (Matthew 7:21). Doing the will of GOD is the important thing. Doing love is what binds us into the holy body of Christ, the Church, and makes us one with Him, with one another and with GOD.

At the very least, the disciples were obedient. When all their hopes were shattered at the cross they remembered the command and obeyed. In obedience to Him, they found that His promise was real and true, that He was truly with them. Thus they came to know that He could not be killed on the Cross. He was alive and was able to express His living reality to them in many wonderful ways. When they gathered together and obediently performed the act of love in sharing the bread and wine they found that it was not just that they remembered Him but that they knew Him to be there, in their midst, in person. They participated with Him in His life just as they had on the first occasion in the upper room, only now even more intimately.

It is this obedience which has led the members

Beyond Words

of His body, the church, to experience Him in the Eucharist from that day to this and will forever. This is the life of the Church. It is the miracle, often repeated yet always miraculous, but there is nothing magical about it. There is no "hocus-pocus." If the words are hastened through by a poor priest who has forgotten the great solemnity of what he is doing and has little love left in him, it doesn't matter. He is a neighbor and has need of prayer. If a worshiper, honestly and sincerely, does what his LORD commanded him to do and comes to the table in love and charity with his neighbors and loving GOD with all the love he can muster it doesn't matter who the priest is or how miserably he mumbles or in what language, the miracle takes place just the same. If a worshiper comes to the table and kneels next to a neighbor whom he neither understands nor likes, and because of the love of GOD in Christ, prays for that neighbor and tries to love him, offering the greatest gift, the gift of self, then the LORD is met and experienced doing the same thing for him or her, offering Himself.

This is what I believe the disciples experienced and what innumerable Christians have experienced every time they have come to the table of the LORD to receive Him in Holy Communion. We should not worry about how it happens since we know that it does happen. Many have died torturous deaths rather than deny its reality or give up taking part in it. Each communicant, if he tried, would give a different description of the experience, but the powerful reality is the same because GOD never changes. Since each worshiper's account of how Christ is received is different from all the rest, the telling of it should enrich the experience of the whole company.

It is tragic that debate about this miracle divides us. Love requires an effort and I guess we are not fond of making efforts. To think and talk about what we are doing in the sacrament and leave GOD's part to Him requires faith, commitment and forgetfulness of self.

"If you come to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, go your

Beyond Words

way, leave your gift before the altar. First be reconciled with your brother, then come and offer your gift." (Matthew 5:23-24). It is all so clear, yet so demanding. Again, "If a man says that he loves GOD but hates his brother, he is a liar. How can he love GOD Whom he has not seen if he hates his brother whom he has seen?" (I John 4:20). St. John, who wrote this, and participated in the first Eucharist along with St. Matthew, experienced the risen LORD in many Eucharists until His death. Obedience to the LORD prepared the disciples and the early Christians for what was the greatest miracle of their lives. Continuing quietly and obediently in the breaking of bread and prayer, another promise of the LORD was fulfilled. On the Day of Pentecost they were endued with power from on high. The Holy Spirit took possession of them and turned these simple, weak men and women into the pillars and heroes of the Church. So it is meant to be and so it can be and will be when we too take Christ at His word and are faithfully obedient, offering and re-offering ourselves to our neighbors and through them to GOD. is paid by GOD,

to us, for the overcoming of our pride, for our lives.

Nine

Decoding Doctrine

*But if GOD is reality how will this comfort us?
Sometimes it is reality that makes us
lonely...Wouldn't it better to say we will never
be lonely if we know the truth? If we under-
stand happiness and how to achieve it.*

The doctrine of the incarnation is the central doctrine of the Christian faith. The word comes from the Latin and means the "coming into flesh." Christians believe that GOD, infinite and unimaginable, always seeking to express Himself effectively to human beings, assumed human flesh and came into the world as one of us, Jesus Christ. This incarnation of GOD for our salvation is the culmination of His gradual revelation of Himself through the prophets and history of Israel. What a stupendous belief that is! No wonder that it has been a stumbling block on the way to faith for many people. It is especially difficult when it is presented not as an idea but as a fact. The central fact of history!

It is impossible not to believe in the power of the universe not only operating in our solar system but in countless stars and, possibly, their solar systems as well. Anyone who has contemplated the "stars in their courses," the universe—and who has not?—is struck by the smallness and apparent insignificance of mankind. The Psalmist put this so well when they sang, "What is man, that thou art mindful of him? And the son of man, that thou visitest him?" (Psalm 8:4). How can it be that little mankind is important enough to engage the attention of GOD let alone be the object of His love? Is it even possible to think of GOD not only loving us, but that we are the object of His love? The Force, yes. Personality? Hardly. To recognize that is not to say that one must believe that GOD is controlling everything in the universe. At least in human affairs one has only to look at the daily newspaper to conclude that if He is, He is not doing a very good job of it.

But it is this amazing statement which is the very heart of the Christian Faith. Christianity asserts

Beyond Words

that GOD is, in fact, love itself. Our ability to love is, at its best, a pale reflection of the love of GOD.

1. An Idea in the Mind of GOD

The trouble with our thinking about all these things is really the same old trouble. We are thinking of GOD in our own terms, trying to bend Him into our own image. We are still looking for and expecting magic. We seem to be unable or unwilling to conceive that GOD, the infinite and eternal Reality, is not bound by the limitation or logic of the minds that He has made. When you get away from believing that GOD is an idea in the human mind and see, instead, that mankind is an idea in the mind of GOD, you have taken the first necessary step in the right direction. It is GOD Who is real and it is mankind which is a pale shadow of that Reality. Our ability to think is a small reflection of the "thought" of GOD. We are bound by His laws, but He is not bound by ours. What appears to us to be logical and necessary may not be so at all.

We perceive with our senses, and they are wonderful gifts, but we know they are limited. There

are "colors" we cannot see, tones we cannot hear and truths, such as eternity and infinity, which our minds cannot fathom. Scientists today imagine that they have something of a hold on these things but really they are as mysterious and incomprehensible as ever.

The difficulty of believing that the infinite GOD can infinitely love all His creatures is a product of our limited understanding. We may find it impossible to love more than a few persons in our lifetime and so cannot imagine GOD loving us all. When we stop thinking of GOD in our terms and are willing to open our minds to His, we will not find it so difficult to accept the Christian gospel.

When we see this, we realize that many of the questions we ask are really absurd. For example: How can GOD incarnate Himself in the person of Jesus Christ and, at the same time, continue to be GOD? How can the nature of man and the Nature of GOD be combined in the person of Christ? Was there anything of which Jesus could be ignorant? Questions like these have been asked since time immemorial and have gen-

Beyond Words

erated much heat and division. GOD is infinite and eternal. How silly these questions are! The reality of the incarnation is the important thing and so the time of its happening, the place and other details are beside the point and, if they have any importance, they should be left up to GOD.

The future doesn't exist until it becomes the present so it is not blasphemous to suggest that GOD has not planned what is going to happen in the future. It is nice to think that GOD has planned everything in advance. It relieves us of all responsibility but it is inconsistent with the free will which GOD has given us. We can and will deal with whatever comes and accept whatever help GOD gives us. If everything that happens is the result of the plan and foreknowledge of GOD, then nothing really makes sense. There would be, if this were so, no need for the church, the Bible, the preaching of the prophets, or the coming of Christ. The fact that these things are real shows that, having free will, we can, as St. Paul wrote, "...grow into the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph-

sians 4:13). There is no conflict between the nature of humanity and the nature of GOD for the former was created for the purpose of sharing in the latter.

Every parent knows that a real relationship with a child can only be established when the parent finds a way to come down to the level of the child. A father who would insist that he and his child can only be friends if the child is able to discuss philosophy, or play chess or be strong enough to play baseball could never have a real relationship with his child at all. He would not be fit to be a parent. Worse still is when the parent tries to force the child into the pattern of life that he has in mind for him or her! How tragic it is that we often behave this way.

We, imperfect as we are, must come down to our children's level so that we can help them come up to ours or, at least, to grow up as they should. Is it then surprising to discover that this is what GOD does with us? We cannot get up to His level but He can and does come down to ours. This is what He has done throughout history and, supremely, in His Incarnation in the

Beyond Words

person of Jesus Christ. The details of how it is accomplished are not our concern. That must be left up to GOD. The fact that it does happen is the foundation of the faith.

2. Problems With our Understanding of Doctrine

The incarnation is not easy to believe in unless our faith in GOD is real and sincere. Once we have rid ourselves of the childish and magical notion of GOD and have come to see Him as He is, rather than as we would have Him be, the incarnation becomes just what we would expect. Since “GOD is”—and *is* love—then it is inconceivable that there would not be the incarnation.

As we follow the events of the life of Christ on earth we can see in Him the quality of the life GOD has prepared for each of us. In Christ we can see ourselves as we ought to be and as, with His help, to some extent, we can be. We can never be perfect but perfection should be our goal so that we can never be really satisfied with ourselves. "Be ye therefore perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48), is the

goal which Jesus set for us. Nothing less than perfection, unattainable as it is, should be our aim, for an attainable aim is no aim at all! An attainable aim is simply an extension of the self. Society is tragically full of individuals who have set attainable goals for themselves, achieved them, and have nothing left to do except play a rather indifferent game of golf every day. Perfection, and nothing less than perfection, must be our aim, always.

Our LORD not only demonstrates life to us but teaches us how to live it and promises us His help. Why is it that we, who have accepted Him as LORD don't seem to want to follow Him? "... and why call ye me LORD, LORD, and do not the things which I say?" (Luke 6:46) is a very poignant question. How can we go to church, pray and worship the LORD in the most holy sacrament of the altar or in some other way and then pay no attention to Him? It is so comforting to worship GOD in a lovely service with beautiful music, especially when one does not feel the necessity of taking any of it seriously. We can go away with a warm

Beyond Words

glowing feeling knowing we are among the "in" ones. Perhaps we rationalize it all by saying that GOD gives us an ethic of perfection which nobody can live up to anyway, so why bother? It is better to think of ourselves as Christians and continue on what we call the "practical" way.

How can we regard the sorry picture of human behavior as practical and reject the beautiful way GOD Himself has given us in Christ as impractical? Of course the one way is easy and the other hard, but the easy way leads to misery, frustration and death, while the other leads to love, beauty and life. Is it no wonder that people who are aware of these absurdities are not attracted to the church which appears to be preaching them? It is one thing to reject Christ as He really is and as He taught and Who challenges us. It is quite another thing to reject the watered-down Jesus who is often presented to us today. In many ways Christ is being crucified by the indifference of His followers more cruelly than He was on Calvary by the poor, ignorant Roman soldiers. They and their officers and the leaders

in Jerusalem were trying to get rid of a troublemaker. Actually, they were preparing the way for the resurrection and the birth of the church. We are horrified by the physical cruelty of what they did. We should be equally horrified by the spiritual cruelty of indifference.

Why do we do this? Why will we not attempt to listen, hear and follow? What is the problem? What is the hindrance? In order to answer these questions we need to look deeply and honestly into ourselves, but we don't do this. Maybe we are afraid we will find something we don't like at our core. We end up as our own worst enemies but we are afraid to admit it. For example, some of us become so afraid to be alone with ourselves that we keep a radio or a TV going constantly, even though we don't listen to them.

If only we understood the message of the incarnation: we are never alone, for GOD loves us, and is always with us no matter what our condition may be. But if GOD is reality, then how will this comfort us? Sometimes it is reality that makes us lonely. This

Beyond Words

makes GOD seem human again. Wouldn't it be better to say that we will never be lonely if we know the truth; if we understand happiness and how to achieve it? He will protect us from ourselves if only we will let Him. Our LORD told us that losing our life in the great cause of GOD is the only way to find it (Matthew 10:39). That, from the point of view of the world, sounds ridiculous, but it is true.

Here is the problem we all face: the problem of the ego, the "I." Jesus' life was totally dedicated to and founded on GOD. Though it may seem to have ended in the failure of the cross, the cross was, really, the culmination and perfection of His life on earth. The cross became the altar on which He totally offered Himself. Someone has said that the cross is, in fact, a capital "I"—crossed out! This is what GOD is showing us in the incarnation—what is our real enemy and how it can be overcome. The martyrs endured physical torture and death but for most of us our battle is spiritual, rather than physical.

We must realize and admit that, by ourselves,

we can accomplish nothing. We can admit this when, personally, we come to know, through regular prayer, worship, study, meditation and service to others, the incarnate GOD, Jesus the Christ. We will come to know that the fact that we cannot solve our problems by ourselves does not mean that they are unsolvable. GOD incarnated Himself so that we might know that He is always with us and will help us. GOD is love and He loves us, unlovable as we may think ourselves to be.

3. The Doctrine of the Redemption

This brings us to another central doctrine of the faith: the redemption. For a long time I was unable to see the reality of this doctrine as it is usually presented. Since I cannot fail to believe in GOD and have experienced His miracles in my own life, my inability to understand some aspect of the faith does not, thank GOD, lead me to reject the whole thing.

The doctrine of the redemption has to do with the way GOD, solved the problem of our estrangement from Him; the problem of sin. Our separation from

Beyond Words

GOD blocks our ability to love ourselves in a healthy, whole and holy way. If we cannot love ourselves how can we love others? The two great commandments really hang together here and when we come to love GOD the problem is solved! First, allow me to explain what I take to be the widely—held understanding of this doctrine. After this, I will explain why I am not satisfied with this explanation and propose a more rational way to understand its meaning and purpose.

The word "redemption" means: a buying back, a payment. When a person borrows money, a security is left to guarantee the repayment of the loan. When the loan has been repaid, it is said that the security that was left has been redeemed. The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines redemption as "redeeming or being redeemed, especially the deliverance from sin and damnation wrought by Christ's atonement." So, as the name implies, there is the idea of the repayment of a price in the doctrine of the redemption, traditionally by GOD'S love to His justice. It is generally accepted that a price must be paid, if a relationship is to be restored. The

question here is by whom the price must be paid and to whom.

The sin of mankind is great and the resulting separation of people from each other, from GOD and from themselves is deep. The price to be paid to correct the situation must be very great. The argument runs that since GOD is almighty and all-holy, He must be infinitely offended by the behavior of mankind—so runs the argument. How can anyone pay a fitting price for such an offense? It appears impossible, so GOD remains offended and unappeased and friendship with Him is not re-established.

In thinking about this in the old patterns of thought the problem seemed insoluble and the situation hopeless until it was seen that GOD, being love, could and did take a hand in it Himself. Since mankind could not pay the price, GOD would. But He is the offended One and His justice must be satisfied. GOD is love and mercy and so, in the Person of Jesus Christ, the mercy and love of GOD pays the price to His justice.

Christ offers himself on the altar of the cross

Beyond Words

to pay the price for the sin of mankind. So, when we accept Him as our personal Savior, the outpoured blood of Christ saves us from the wrath of GOD; from eternal punishment in hell.

Now this is probably an oversimplification of the traditional doctrine and yet it is a fairly accurate description of the way I understood it when I was taught about it in seminary. I can see no more in it now than I could then. It leaves me rather cold. If the second Person of the Trinity, inspired by the third, offers Himself in a peculiarly painful way to appease the anger of the first, I cannot see how I am involved at all. The whole thing seems to indicate a terrible case in the Godhead of divine schizophrenia.

Furthermore, this presentation of the doctrine of the redemption contains two obvious fallacies. The first involves the primitive notion that, in the broken relationship, which is sin, GOD, Who is love, is the offended One and, therefore, the One to Whom the price must be paid. The second is the very primitive notion that sacrifice, in the sense that something must

be killed, is necessary to appease the wrath of GOD. The problem is that neither of these notions has anything to do with GOD as He has revealed Himself to us in the Person of Jesus Christ.

Since GOD is love, the reason that He is offended by sin is that He knows what sin does to us. The only barrier that can exist between us and GOD is the one which we erect. Something must be done to tear that down. The "mind" of GOD never changes but our mind does so we must, somehow, be led to change so that we can come to repentance. Trying to solve this problem we can see a new and Christian meaning to sacrifice; that of a life being lived and offered rather than taken. When we make ourselves over to the LORD He can use us as His instruments. In the Book of Common Prayer of the Episcopal Church, in the consecration prayer of the Rite I Communion Service, are these words: "And here we offer and present unto Thee, O LORD, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy and living sacrifice unto Thee." Here is the kind of sacrifice that GOD can use. Here is the

Beyond Words

overcoming of sin! But I had not yet seen the redemption in a way that would fit in with these thoughts, so my difficulties remained.

4. Redeeming the Meaning of the Redemption

Now all of this bothered me for a long time. I didn't like being a priest of the Church and, at the same time, be embarrassed by one of her central doctrines. But, thanks be to GOD, I was patient and realized, however dimly, that the fault was not with GOD but with me as I failed to understand Him. I say "thanks be to GOD" for his patience because it was His gift, one of those miracles which, in my growing relationship with GOD, I have come to expect. Through the miracle of patience and faith the other miracle occurred through which, I believe, GOD revealed to me an interpretation of the redemption which is, to me at least, completely satisfying and real.

The miracle took place, as miracles will, in a strange way. I was a chaplain at a camp in the Philippine Islands at the end of the second World War. I was having a beer in the Officer's Club with a friend and we

were talking about the morale of the troops and of what it is that makes a good officer. I assure you that I was not thinking about GOD or religion! My friend told me the following story about a friend of his who was, he thought, about the finest example he had ever known of a really good officer.

"He was a captain," my friend said, "in a training camp in Texas. One evening a squad of men in a tent were making a lot of noise. They had probably been drinking. The captain went to their tent and asked them to be quiet. He had just returned to company headquarters when the noise began again. He went back a second time and asked them to quiet down. When the same thing happened a third time, he told the men to fall out in uniform and full field equipment—which includes almost everything and is pretty heavy. It happened that one man in the tent was in the hospital and so the captain put on his field equipment, which was hanging by his cot, and lined the men up outside the tent. Then he asked them if anyone wanted to go to bed. When none of them said anything he told them to

Beyond Words

follow him. He led them, dressed just as they were, on the double, around the obstacle course through a *very* grueling exercise! When they got back to the tent he asked them if any of them wanted to go bed and a few of them did, he told the rest to follow him. He led the men around that course three times and finally there was only one man left, and he then agreed to go to bed. It was just as well that he did, for he told me later that he would not have been able to go around the course again himself! He never had any more trouble with those men or with any others for word got around that he was 'a good Joe' who could, and would, take it as well as dish it out. He was the best officer I have ever known. He really was an officer and a gentleman." And while I was agreeing with my friend that this is the spirit which really makes a leader of men, I suddenly saw the parallel between that story and what GOD had done in the incarnation and redemption.

The officer in the story was in no sense responsible for the disturbance any more than GOD is responsible for the mess which we are apt to make of

life. There was no reason, therefore, for him to accept punishment for it. But he identified himself with the men by doing so. He had twice asked them to quiet down, but it did no good; for they were probably enjoying the commotion they were causing—especially since they received no punishment for it.

They probably thought that the captain was a rather weak man. But when he allowed himself to be punished just as they were, something happened in them. They were taken out of themselves by admiration into a loyalty which comes close to love. From then on, they really wanted to please the captain more than they wanted to please themselves. There was redemption but they had made no payment to the officer. He had made the payment to them.

GOD, speaking through the prophet Jeremiah, said: "...I have persistently sent all my servants the prophets...yet they did not listen to me but stiffened their neck." (Jeremiah 7:25-26). Over and over again, through inspired men and women, GOD has begged us to learn and to obey and we have paid no attention.

Beyond Words

Finally, in the "fullness of time," GOD assumed the limitations of human existence, put on our flesh, and became incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ. He really did put on "full field equipment" and went, on the double, around the obstacle course of life ahead of us.

5. Full Field Equipment

Many of the things we argue about in the creeds are descriptions of this very thing. GOD, incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ, was born into a poor and hardworking family. His mother was not married! Surely, whatever else it may mean, that is an important part of the doctrine of the virgin birth. His life on earth was very hard. He certainly put on full field equipment for living it. "The foxes have holes, the birds of the air have nests but the Son of man has nowhere to lay His head," (Matthew 8:20), He said of His own living conditions.

His ministry of teaching and healing lasted only three years. At the end of His life on earth His friends deserted Him and He was condemned to a cruel

and shameful death under the authority of a pagan: the Roman governor. On the cross He even experienced the black loneliness of hell and felt forsaken by GOD. "...My GOD, my GOD, why hast Thou forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34), He cried. The incarnation is so real and so mysterious that GOD Almighty knows what it is to be in hell, utterly separate from GOD. Is there any aspect of the full field equipment that GOD failed to put on in Jesus Christ, in order to lead us around the obstacle course of life?

As we meditate on the life of Christ and see how Christ's life is evidence of the greatness of GOD'S love for us, is it possible that our hearts are not touched, that our natures are not changed? It is difficult to believe in GOD and His love for us, but if we can get over this hurdle and come to see what GOD is doing for us, can we fail to be moved? Do we not begin to feel a loyalty which is close to love for GOD in our heart? And when we begin truly to love GOD then the miracles really begin to take place in our lives.

"Love GOD," said St. Augustine of Hippo,

Beyond Words

"and do as you please." When a boy falls in love a miracle happens because perhaps for the first time in his life, he no longer wants only to please himself, but someone else: his girl! All at once, things he never before liked begin to take on a fascination for him because they mean something to her. He has been taken out of himself by love. As we advance in love for GOD, the same thing happens in us. Those things which have separated us from GOD become less and less attractive to us. We even begin to learn how to use them, properly for even they are His gifts.

I now believe in the doctrine of the redemption with all my heart. Where I believe that we went wrong was in failing to see to whom and by Whom the price was paid. I know now that the price is paid by GOD, to us, for the overcoming of our pride, for our lives.

The Yardstick of Measure

I believe that I might join anyone, anywhere, in virtually any form of sincere worship and know that I was worshiping GOD. The more sure one's faith in GOD becomes, the more one is able to find Him in any synagogue, temple, church or mosque where He is sought with sincerity.

I am always astonished when an intelligent person claims not to believe in GOD. What is it he does not believe in? It reminds me of the man who is supposed to have said: "I am an atheist, thank God!" As I have pointed out, the trouble is that so many of us have a very silly notion of what the word GOD means.

GOD is the person of the universe, always seeking to help and encourage His children wherever they are: on earth, in our solar system or elsewhere. There has never been a moment since the consciousness of mankind emerged that he has not sought after the higher power which we call GOD. The experience of that communication has varied at different times and

Beyond Words

in different places. Environment affects personality and GOD must speak to each person in terms which his or her personality can understand. Thus, the messages received by the leaders of the various philosophies and religions of the world have been colored by the cultures which produced those leaders. There have been, and are, important differences between these religions and philosophies and GOD must often be pained by the things which are taught and practiced in His Name. His existence, however, is the common source of all inspiration, knowledge and wisdom.

1. The Yardstick of Measure

The Bible, when properly read, shows that there has been inexorable progress in the ability of human beings to receive revelation. The understanding of each revelation prepares the way for the greater depth of understanding that we gain from the next. In this way each prophet has been conditioned by his predecessors to have a clearer knowledge of GOD and so to reveal the next step to his followers. This never-ending process is only limited by the current inability or un-

willingness of the human mind to assimilate wisdom.

If all this is true, how can an intelligent person believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ; the One in the process who is unique? Is He not just one more in the long line of enlightened men and women? Is not one person's view just as good as another's? Of course there is logic in these questions. But here we can say that simple logic breaks down. The Christian faith is not founded on logic but on faith, which has been strengthened by experience. I believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the unique person at Whom the whole process of gradual revelation has been aimed, and Whose coming into the world is the pivotal event of history.

When one comes to understand and appreciate the meaning of objective truth and sees that this is what is meant by the word GOD, it becomes clear that there is an element of that Truth in all creation, but that these elements are not all of equal value. Each facet of the Truth may be satisfactory to those to whom it comes and, like the retaliatory law of Hammurabi, for them, it

Beyond Words

is a great step forward. When you can see that the advance in knowledge and expertise in every field is a response to the loving and beckoning hand of GOD, it is clear that some of the responses are wiser and more complete than others.

In order to evaluate the truths which we have received, it is necessary to have a standard or yardstick. In the Washington Bureau of Weights and Measures there is the American standard yardstick which is carefully kept at the same atmospheric pressure, temperature, etc., all the time. Wooden yardsticks are inaccurate; however, they serve the purpose for most of us. Each religion is a partial response to the beckoning of GOD. It is like a wooden yardstick which serves the purpose for the place where it is. Christians believe, however, that Jesus Christ is the standard by which the accuracy of all the others can be measured. He came to us for this purpose, among others.

Whatever the reason may be, it is clear certain types of people have been more receptive to revelation than others. The descendants of Abraham appear to be

more consistently open to spiritual truth than most people. Probably they have been led by GOD or chosen for this characteristic. There is an amazing pertinacity in the character of the Jews. Perhaps it is this which has set them apart as the "chosen people" and made them in varying degrees emulated, envied, disliked and hated. In spite of frequent persecutions and pogroms, as a people they have held to their destiny. No matter how indifferent a Jew may think himself to be, the practice of religion, the things of GOD and his relationship to GOD is seldom very far beneath the surface of his consciousness. It is for this reason that they are the people through whom GOD has been able most fully to reveal Himself to mankind.

Jesus, whom Christians believe to be the Messiah, the anointed One, the Christ, is the Jew of Jews. He is the flowering of Israel. The law, the prophets and the writings are fulfilled in Him. His teaching is all Jewish and His life on earth followed the pattern of the religious observance of the Jews. It was His invariable custom to go to the synagogue on the Sabbath day

Beyond Words

(Luke 4:16). Far from destroying or superseding the law and the prophets, He made explicit what had always been implicit in them. He took the essence of truth in each statement and carried it to its logical conclusion in His life and teaching. For instance, Moses condemned murder. Then Jesus carried this to its logical conclusion by showing that murder is the logical outcome of anger, hatred, hostility and greed. Replace these with love and you will not have to worry about murder. Much of adultery and broken homes will be gotten rid of if love is rediscovered in the place of lust. It is the spirit behind the action which is more important than the action to which it leads. Wrong action is easily identified and sometimes can be dealt with by the enactment of laws. Wrong intent, the foundation of action, is more subtle and difficult to deal with.

Most religious thinking has centered on action. Most of the religions of the world, therefore, are complicated with masses of rules. Jesus did not lay down rules or laws. He summed up the whole business with two rules from the Torah—the Law of Moses.

Love GOD and love your neighbor. Let these rules be your guide, and everything else will take care of itself. Love is the basic rule of GOD. It is impossible for a clever lawyer to find a loophole when he is dealing with a law as general and all-embracing as that!

2. The Miracle of Jesus

A Christian believes that Jesus is the miracle “par excellence,” the very act of GOD in human terms in history. All of GOD’s nature that we can understand is expressed in Jesus. He is the culmination of Israel, the fulfillment of the promise which GOD made to Abraham that all the nations of the world would be blessed through his descendants (Genesis 12:3). As the true understanding of the Messiah and of the messianic call of Israel unfolded in the teaching of the Prophets, it was fulfilled in Jesus. When Isaiah saw that Israel was called to be the suffering servant of GOD and of mankind His revelation was dramatically lived out in the person of Jesus. When Christians call Jesus the Son of GOD they do not mean that He is a demigod or a divine magician but that the miracle of the revelation of

Beyond Words

GOD which is going on all the time is completely expressed in the life, teaching and person of Jesus.

Jesus is seen as the great miracle because, among other things, He is so completely unexpected. He does not follow any preconceived pattern. He is not wealthy, powerful (in the worldly sense), cultured, widely traveled or well-educated. He was born in a filthy sheep-cave, because there was no room for His mother in the hardly less filthy inn. His mother was not married until after He was born and her husband was a poor carpenter. Jesus grew up knowing poverty and hard work. His life on earth was short and His ministry much shorter. For only about three years He went about teaching and doing good. He was rejected and misunderstood not only by His enemies, who were many, but by His friends, who were few. In the end, He was abandoned and betrayed by His foolish and cowardly followers who were disappointed because He didn't start a revolution. He was tortured to death on a cross where He went through the hell of utter loneliness and extreme pain. What an epitome of the long

history of the Jews was the life of Jesus! In Him was the love of GOD supremely and completely demonstrated? His was the life of GOD lived out among men and women. What does it matter which doctrine or theological formula is worked out to describe the coming of His divinity and His humanity? It is the fact that matters—the fact of the love of GOD shown for all time and for all humanity in Him.

You do not like calling Him the Son of GOD? What matter? Express the reality of it another way, if you can. You find the doctrine of the Holy Trinity confusing and you think that it denies the Unity of GOD? Very well, put it into other words: the fact that GOD is the creator, redeemer and inspirer all in one. GOD is the One outside of us, Whom we worship; GOD is beside us, teaching us to worship; and GOD is inside us, impelling us to worship. Whatever words you use, you cannot diminish the wonder and glory of the life of Jesus nor the wonder and saving power of GOD. Jesus was no ordinary man who simply thought and lived more deeply than most. The only satisfactory explana-

Beyond Words

tion of Him is that in Him GOD was revealing Himself to us as fully as is possible and He continues to do so today!

So all other religions than Christianity are not entirely wrong. Most of them are right up to a point—the point beyond which their followers are not able to understand. There is nothing exclusive about the Truth, but if you want to find out how right any statement of religion may be you can do so by comparing it to the living Truth which is Jesus. Don't use "Christianity" as your standard, which over the centuries has often become very confused and confusing. Use, rather, Jesus Christ Himself. The watered-down and scholarly version of Jesus which is accepted by many today is little more than a caricature of the reality. Often Christians have a rather unattractive picture of Jesus, meek and mild, which is far from the reality. Dorothy Sayers described Jesus more accurately when she said that He "...went through the earth like a flame." If you want to find out how right or wrong an important aspect of a religion is don't compare it to Christianity—compare it

to Christ!

By the same token, as one's faith expands into deeper understanding, one finds and feels a fundamental unity with all mankind. I believe that I might join anyone, anywhere, in virtually any form of sincere worship and know that I was worshiping GOD. The more sure one's faith in GOD becomes, the more one is able to find Him in any synagogue, temple, church or mosque where He is sought with sincerity. It has never been my privilege to worship GOD in a temple or a mosque but I have often done so in a synagogue and found the experience of worship using some of the very same words that our LORD used, deeply moving. As a matter of fact, there is nothing said in Hebrew worship, as far as I know, which is at variance with Christ.

3. Conditions Change, Life Remains the Same

One final thing remains to be said about the meaning of Jesus to those who believe in Him. He is all that can be said by GOD about man and about GOD to man. But that is said in a qualitative rather than a quantitative sense. Jesus reveals to us, in His person, teach-

Beyond Words

ing and living, the essence of Truth. We seek in Him the principles to guide us in our lives and we find them if we are sincere in our search. But this does not mean that every situation which arises has its counterpart in the first! GOD did not, in Christ, give us a blueprint in which a solution to every problem which might arise at any time might be found. The highly complex life which we live today puts to us many specific problems which could not have been foreseen in the time of our LORD. Just as it would have been impossible for anyone to understand Him if He had appeared and preached the gospel in the time of Abraham, so too would it have been equally impossible if He had preached to His own time in terms of twenty-first century experience. Christ gives us the pattern, the attitude, and we must use them in our own times for ourselves but always with His help. The conditions of life change, but life itself does not. Men and women have the same basic needs today as they had in the time of the Pharaoh Ikhnaton, but the ways in which those needs express themselves and the manner in which

they must be met change in every generation.

The gospel of love is as true and satisfying today as it ever was but we need to find new parables in our time in order to express it effectively. The very word "love" must be redefined and re-expressed in each generation. Hymns which expressed something of the Truth very well in Victorian times may be all but unintelligible today. It is part of the challenging and fascinating work of the Church, the body of Christ, to express each day, as He did, the unchanging Truth in ever-changing language.

So now let us look at the present. Has the age of prophecy and of miracles come to an end? Is there nothing left for GOD to say to us since the time when the last book of the Bible was written? Was Truth revealed and did GOD then shut His mouth forever? Or can we apply the attitudes toward Truth and revelation which we have learned from the Bible to our lives today and find that GOD is still speaking to us in the very same way He spoke to Moses, and Abraham and the prophets? Can you, in a way, read the daily news-

Beyond Words

paper and think of it as the latest chapter in the revelation of the word of GOD? I believe—I know—from my own experience, that the Word of GOD goes on today and will never cease so long as we keep looking for it in all that we do.

Conclusion

Outside Ourselves

I cannot make my sailboat go by blowing on its sails myself...

"Never forget, gentlemen, that man is a very peculiar animal," said a wonderful professor of mine during seminary. My experience in the years I spent ministering as an Army chaplain, college chaplain and parish priest have burnt the truth of this statement into my mind. Man is, indeed, a most peculiar animal. We like to think that the problems of the world are the result of ignorance, which education will cure, but they are not. We like to think that if we are shown the right and successful way we will walk in it, but we do not. The problem is not one of environment, need, or ignorance; the real problem is ourselves. The solution to our problems can only come with a fundamental change in our very nature.

Put in the Church's old way: the problem is sin

Beyond Words

and the solution can only come with conversion. Shakespeare had Cassius say to Brutus in "Julius Caesar": "The fault, dear Brutus, lies not in our stars but in ourselves that we are underlings." How true! Cassius and Brutus tried to correct things by killing Caesar. It didn't work. We try to do the same kind of thing today but it still doesn't work. We hope that by changing our environment or our husband or wife, we will find happiness. But then we find that the fundamental problem is still with us and whatever improvement there may be is very temporary.

If this is so it would seem that we are in a rather difficult spot. If the enemy to my well-being is really myself, what can I do about it? The more I try to improve things the more I find I am simply stewing in my own juices. I cannot make my sailboat go by blowing on its sails myself. I cannot raise myself by pulling on my own boot-straps. It won't work. Man *is* a very peculiar animal and the more he tries to help himself, the more peculiar he gets.

1. Today's Problems

People have always seen things through the eyes of their own maturity. We do the same today. This is the age of science and technology. Power and financial success are our gods. Even our schooling is aimed at bringing us to financial success. We think there is a material solution to every problem. Man is very clever, but he is far from wise. Let him think that he has discovered the root cause of a problem and he is sure that the cure for it can be found and that he will find it! This is our simple faith. If there are riots, it must be because of injustice or because people are hungry. The answer, therefore, must be: correct the injustice and provide people with food. When we have done these things and still there are riots, we are bewildered. With science and rationality as our god we fail to look into ourselves for fear that we will find the truth, that we are not completely rational beings, our behavior patterns cannot be categorized and reduced to scientific propositions. We seem unwilling to face our own weakness, as well as our own strength; of our capability for beauty, as well as our capability for extreme ugliness. With all our

Beyond Words

ingenuity and cleverness we are unable, or unwilling, to make an honest assessment of ourselves and find a solution to our own very real problems. Those who present the Bible as a magical book with an occult path to success hidden away in its pages only make of the book a volume which, having been closed by disinterest to many folk, becomes closed more tightly still.

In an attempt to combat this diminishing interest in religion, the Bible is translated over and over again, more or less accurately, into the language of scholars or casually in what they think to be the modern idiom. Books are written, some of which are rather startling. Strange things are done in churches in an apparent attempt to show how "with it" the church really is. But it is so hard to get away from the patterns which have dominated our thinking for so long that nothing seems to do much good. We try to get out of the "religious" net we are in, only to find that we are still caught, still entangled, in the same old mesh in a new way. We become angry or upset as we try to attack or defend, as the case may be, a thing which is really not

worth any attention at all. The result is that religion, which is intended to break down the walls between ourselves and GOD and ourselves and one another, becomes the occasion of worse and more insurmountable barriers. It never seems to occur to anyone that the trouble is that, on both sides, our whole approach is simply wrong.

Is there, then, no remedy? Of course there is, but it is part of man's peculiarity that he dislikes the remedy and will not even try to use it. The remedy lies outside ourselves. A force outside me can lift me up. A wind from outside of the sailboat will make it go. The power and wisdom which exist outside of me can transform me, if I let It. There is no help in man but there is help in GOD, the absolute and ultimate Truth. The psalmist was not being Gloomy but realistic when he sang, "O put not your trust in princes nor in any power of man for there is no help in them," (Psalm 146:-3), for the psalm goes on to say, "Blessed is the man who has the GOD of Jacob for his help... "

There is help, if we want it. I know this is

Beyond Words

true; I have experienced it. If you have read this far you will know that my experiences are simple and everyday. I am sure you have had many such experiences yourself. Each of us is unique, and so is each relationship with another person, or with GOD.

The gospel, the treasure of the church, is of inestimable value, but it is neither easy nor natural to us. So we have rejected it and covered it up with many complications which make it difficult to find. The simple and effective message of the Gospel was entrusted by Christ to the Church to proclaim to the world. But we have not done this very well. The name of Christ has been so publicized that almost everyone has heard of Him. But knowing Him and the simple, effective but demanding power of His gospel? That is another question.

2. The Need for a More Unified Church

For about three centuries, the Christian faith was spread from one man or woman to another and this was done so effectively that the power and tortures of Rome could not stop it. To be a Christian was so dan-

gerous a thing that it was taken very seriously by its converts who found in it the cure for their troubles and recognized its power to heal society's problems, as well. Giving up life as it was lived in the Roman Empire they found new life, life as it should be lived, in Christ. They even found help to live in the society which they had left. The contrast between that society and Christ was so great that they believed they had died to the old and been "born again" to the new. When the empire tried to stop them by torture and death it didn't work because they would rather die in the body than return to the living death which they had left.

Then something happened. When the faith came out of hiding, it started to become fashionable to be a Christian, and devotion weakened as a result. The enemies of the church had been unable to kill it but now it began to totter before the unwitting attack of its friends. As its power grew, its saving strength was proportionately hidden. Theology was then developed and it made everything so complicated that it had to be taught and studied and the picture which began to be

Beyond Words

presented was a far cry from the fresh, simple and strong gospel which Jesus presented, and to which so many turned with love and enthusiasm. Alas, the method of rescuing the church from its supporters was withdrawal and the result was schism and the growth of different denominations, each convinced that it had hold of the Truth. But it is the body of Christ—the fellowship of those who love Him in their own way and wish to grow into His likeness—which is GOD's one instrument for the saving of souls, and of mankind.

Now, the organization, the business establishment of the Church, has become so cumbersome, so complex, that it must be purified. In a time when there is a famine in the world for the Word of GOD, as the prophet Amos predicted (Amos 8:11), the Church, as it appears today, often seems to be the enemy of salvation, not the instrument.

GOD forbid I should appear to attack the church, the mystical body of Christ on earth. I'm not attacking this. What I am attacking quite vehemently are the strange ideas which we have created and which

we worship as GOD. The homely images which have communicated the reality of GOD to childlike souls are far better than the often grotesque notions intellectuals have replaced them with. I think, by now, that it is clear that I *do* attack the materialistic belief in magical arts, which is thought by many to be religion.

3. The Rediscovery of GOD

I believe in GOD, in the church, in religion and in faith. The longer I live, the more reason I have to believe. I am lost in admiration for the incomparable, mysterious and fascinating wisdom of the Bible. Having been an Anglican priest for more than half a century, it was my custom to read the Bible every morning in the office of my parish church. I would end up getting through it substantially once a year. It never becomes boring for it is never even the same. The most familiar passages have such a freshness about them that it often seems I have never read them before. The honesty and depth of the Bible is such that at each stage of our development it has been there for us. The church, even organized religion, is the foundation of civiliza-

Beyond Words

tion and has been the mainstay of my life. To be a link in the long chain of seekers after GOD, to join in the fellowship of the saints throughout the world and of history is the best therapy that can be imagined for the loneliness of life.

Fundamental to all of this, of course, is the rediscovery of GOD, of the ultimate Reality which is GOD. I have not presumed to write about theology, but have tried to share with you the grounds of my faith. If I can share with some the essential simplicity which I have found in the Faith then they can develop the approach which will be best for them. Dogma and teaching are vital helps to lead us into the experience of GOD, but they are no substitute for Him.

St. Paul warned his disciple, Timothy, that the time would come when people would no longer "...endure sound teaching but, having itching ears, they will accumulate to themselves teachers to suit their own likings" (2 Timothy 4:3). Such a time seems surely to have come. I hope that, in my own way, I have been able to bear witness to Christ as St. Paul did

in his and share with you this way to bear witness to
Him as well.

About the Author

From 1946-1949 Whitman served as a chaplain to the U.S. Army in the Philippines before taking a position as associate rector of Bruton Parish Church in Williamsburg, Virginia, where he also served as chaplain to Episcopal students at the College of William and Mary. The Massachusetts Berkshires served as the backdrop for Whitman's substantive ministry.

He served as rector of Trinity Episcopal Church, Lenox, Mass., for thirty-one years before retiring on July 27, 1981. After a few years absence, however, Whitman returned to the ministry as rector of St. Martin's Church in Pittsfield, Mass.

He is a graduate of the Berkeley Divinity School in New Haven, CT, lives in Guilford, CT, with his wife Eleanor, has two daughters and would like to thank his grandson, Reess, for his help with getting this book published. To email the author, comment on this work and discuss it with other readers please visit <http://www.rootofsite.com/beyondwords/>.