

"A better atheism"

Our psalm, as we heard it read this morning, began with a call to the "heavenly beings" to "ascribe glory and strength" to the God of Israel. There is an older translation, however, which runs like our call to worship this morning: "Ascribe to the Lord, you *gods*, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength." Either translation can be justified, in part because many biblical scholars believe that the psalm is probably borrowed from a one of the neighbouring polytheistic religions and pressing into service for Israel its God. But the older translation perhaps jars with the sensitivities believers today, for we've long held that there is only one God – whether we claim this one as our God alone, or allow that maybe other religions have some sort of access to this one God as well. We have understood that there has been a progression from a polytheism (the belief in many gods) to henotheism (the belief in only one god, among many options), to monotheism (the belief that there is only one god – not least because it is a nice neat philosophical idea. Having run this course, it seems odd to speak again about "the gods". But I wonder if perhaps it is time to take up once again talk of a pantheon. The reason is, perhaps surprisingly, the rise of the current form of popular atheism. I want this morning to focus our thinking on what it means even to talk about God these days, beginning with a look at how modern popular atheism imagines itself to be doing its particular good.

The basic assertion of popular atheism these days is, of course, simply that "there is no God." This claim is a conclusion which is drawn from two more basic and related assumptions. The first is the assumption that the "existence" of God is central to belief, and the second is the assumption that God basically serves as an explanation for the world as we find it. We'll focus on just the first of these this morning.

What do we mean if we declare that "God exists" or that "God *is*"? For here we meet our first problem, in that "is" is a word we use for ourselves and other things in the world: that chair "is"; that man "is", that tree "is" – or these things "exist", we say. If we want to say then that *God* "is" – that God "exists" – then we are effectively reducing God to being an object like a chair or a man or a tree, somehow a *part* of the world. But if God is a kind of "thing" quite unlike *any* other thing in the world, then we have to say that if *we* exist, then God does not. The difference between God's "is-ness" and our "is-ness" is so great that it is most simply expressed by saying that God does not exist. And this must be said in order that we might give God right praise, and not at all to deny God. Or, to pick up the theme from my sermon on Christmas day: if we insist on declaring that God does "exists", we have to conclude that there's a very important sense in which we do *not*. This is not to say that God or we don't matter, but only that questions and assertions about God's existence won't get us anywhere very interesting.

The existence of God is not a question which ought to exercise us too much one way or another, because it is a question which is usually too confused to admit of a sensible answer. To say that God does not exist would simply be to say that however God is, God is not like we are, which is say something that the church already knows very well.

Of course, part of the problem with this analysis of popular atheism's assumption about the existence of God is that this assumption is in fact one which many believers make. Public theological debate rages around the existence of God because many Christians (and other theists) *do* assume that these things are central to belief: that faith is faith that God exists, and that God exists as an explanation of "all that is". Yet, I suggest to you that this misses the mark on what is central to Christian belief, and that we would do well to make this point by taking the older translation of Psalm 29 with its many "gods", and by beginning to speak again of a pantheon. For the question of the Scriptures is not whether God exists. Rather, the Scriptures are always interested in *which* god it is which matters, and not whether there "is" a God, or how many gods there are.

To make more sense of this, there's one more thing to be noted about our use of the word God, and that is the way in which we use the word in a double sense – sometimes to denote a kind of thing, and sometimes as a name. This is a little like the words "mum" and "dad". (My son) Coulton knows that lots of people have a "daddy" [or a "gaggy", as he pronounces it!], but when he *addresses me* it is with "Daddy" as my *name*. There are many daddies, but we only *call one* of them "Daddy". It is much the same for "God". In the Scriptures there are many entities which are called gods, but when we say "I believe in God", we mean only one of them.

The trick is, *which* one of them? The psalm gives his answer: the one whose name is "the LORD" – which is the standard English translation of the divine name in Hebrew: Yahweh (or Jehovah, in the old money). In almost every line of the Psalm we heard this name repeated:

² *Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name;
worship the LORD in holy splendor.*

⁵ *The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars...*

⁷ *The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.*

⁸ *The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness...*

⁹ *The voice of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl...*

¹⁰ *The LORD sits enthroned over the flood;
the LORD sits enthroned as king forever.*

*¹¹ May the LORD give strength to his people!
May the LORD bless his people with
peace!*

What the psalmist does here is have all the gods turn their gaze towards "the LORD", and ascribe to this one the kingship. Not the oneness of God, then, is the poet's concern, but the *sovereignty* of this particular god over all the others.

The important thing in the Psalm – or in the Old Testament as a whole – is this *distinction* between the gods. The divine names are a way of distinguishing between the gods as different powers available to us to deliver the life we seek. In the Old Testament a god is something you call upon for security, health and prosperity. The only question is, which of the gods will deliver? It is the *purpose* of the gods – their *function* in human life – which is the important thing for recasting our talk about belief and unbelief today. To the extent that we today call upon powers to save us, we find ourselves in the theological space of the Scriptures. It matters not whether we *call* these powers "gods", for they still have all the *characteristics* of gods.

There are many such powers which we seek to placate or to control and wield in modern life. We might name the economy as one, with its doctrines of the need for constant consumption and for constant increase in consumption. You don't have to be a professor of economics to notice how large economic concerns loom for us as a society or the religious fervour with which it is served. Nor do you need such qualifications to understand that there are limits to growth which current prevailing economic doctrine seems to have no interest in taking into account.

Linked to this particular divinity is that of our political system. Democracy has been described as the worst form of government, except for all the others we've tried (Churchill). Part of the problem of democracy is that elected representatives are held accountable in the short term for effects which arise from the long term, or decisions which must be made for the long term. This means, for example, that an opposition leader can imagine that the role of an opposition is to provide a clear alternative on major policies, that voters might have a "clear choice", rather than thinking clearly as to what might be the *best* policy in a particular case. It would be easier to take current atheistic diatribe more seriously if its concern for human well-being extended also to critique of the dangers which such political and economic myopia creates for society. It is not enough to declare simply that "this is the best we can do", for this is the declaration of the winners in the democratic system, and their (= *our*) judgement about what is satisfactory here is rightly considered suspect.

We might name the nation as another power-cum-divinity which has a powerful grip on us. The nation-state is a relatively recent invention in our history, but in one form or another it has been with us for as long as we've drawn distinctions between tribes and clans. And, with tragic consequences, we've seen recently the way in which national or racial identity can be turned into a weapon against those who are different.

If there were time we could list many more such

quasi-divinities lurking in our world, unrecognised for their divine characteristics: "Tradition", "the individual", "youth", "money" are but a few we could add to the list. Any one of these has the potential to take on demonic dimensions within which what is small and specific and precious is crushed by what is large and general. The poverty of popular atheism is not the paucity of its arguments about God but the absence in all that diatribe of a viable economic political model or ethical framework which would make sense of us in our malaise. Our problem is not God or religion as such – at least as they are cast by our atheistic critics. Our problem is that we cannot save ourselves, without a lot of us being lost or crushed along the way, and that is scarcely being "saved". The Sunday after Christmas I read here a critique of a Christmas sermon by Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr remarked that sentiments like "if only we would love one another" do not give an adequate account of what it would take to be human in a world like this one. Such simplistic calls to love are not only the mark of bad sermons but also of unreflective and self-righteous atheism. Getting rid of religion is not going to solve the problem, for getting rid of our religious bent has been the work of God among his people at least since the call of Abraham, and it's not been managed yet. A few controversial books which miss the main points are not going to make much difference.

We need a better atheism – one like that of which Christians themselves accused in the early days of the church in Rome – an atheism which does not deny the presence of the many powers in our lives, but distinguishes between them in order to name which is the one which speaks us – all of us – the best. The atheism of the early church was that it would not worship the powers which were thought to be essential for the well-being of the empire; this refusal often had deadly consequences for those believers.

There is much more which must be said, but today it will have to be enough simply to suggest that, for the sake of the gospel, we might have to allow that the God we gather to worship on Sundays is in fact one among many gods in our lives, and yet this one actively seeks us out, that we might have strength and peace. This the psalmist knows better than most of us. We are under the influence of the gods, and they are at best untrustworthy or, at worst, outright dangerous. It is, then, to the God of Israel – the God and Father of Jesus Christ – that the poet calls the gods and all peoples to turn, that they might watch as this One – the LORD – gives *strength* to his people, and blesses this people with *peace* (v11).

May God's people, too, hear this call, and turn with the gods to the Holy One of Israel, that he may put us right.

Amen.