

On Being Dominican*

Herbert McCabe O P

“They began to speak as the Spirit gave them utterance . . . and their hearers were bewildered because each one heard them speaking in his own language.”

We are the “Friars Preachers”, the preaching brethren, a community that specialises in talk. This is the mystery to which we have all been summoned. I say this community is a mystery in the sense in which a sacrament or a work of art is a mystery; there is a depth of meaning in it that is by no means obvious on the surface at first sight, a depth that reveals itself only gradually and in hints and glimpses as we enact and re-enact the mystery. *Macbeth* is a good thriller; but as we grow familiar with it, it yields profound secrets about man and nature and time, secrets that can only be revealed in this way, indirectly, as symbolised, as half hidden. Again, the Eucharist is a commonplace symbolic meal, a token of hospitality and friendship, but as we enter into it, it reveals the depth of love which is God, the love enacted on the cross. And so it is with us; we are a commonplace gathering of men meeting to make decisions about our work, men partly anxious, mainly bored, hoping to get a few things cleared up as well and as quickly as possible so that we can get away: but there is a depth here too.

The depth is not something alongside, added on to, associated with the surface significance; the deep meaning of *Macbeth* is not additional to the story of murder and intrigue; the grace of the Eucharist is not something associated with, linked with, the sacrament; the mystery of our community is not something alongside, additional to, our day to day life and work and difficulties: it is just the depth within them. We do not have a professional job together with a spiritual life, the depth and the spirituality are just in the living together and the doing of the work. We are not preaching brethren who pray; we are just preaching brethren, that's all. If prayer comes into that, well and good; if not, not.

To be in this community is to be engaged in mystery even though being a Dominican is not precisely a sacrament. The only

• A sermon preached to the Provincial Chapter, Hawkesyard 1982.

reason why being a Dominican is not a sacrament is that we are not the whole church. When the whole church acts as the whole church that, of course, is a sacramental mystery; that is what a sacrament is, that is an act of Christ.

Someone (not a Catholic) wrote to me the other day and said he sometimes thought that if the Roman Church would hand itself over to the Dominicans then it really would be the church of the world. He had it wrong, I'm afraid. The Dominicans are precisely not the Church of the world, the Roman Church is. You see, there are no boundaries to the church, she just has a horizon, the horizon of mankind; she is simply the human race moving towards the kingdom. She only seems to have boundaries to those who seek to be outside her and so set up the demarcation lines. But the church should never fall into the trap of seeing herself in that way. All men are called; all come within the scope of the *ecclesia*, she is just the religion of mankind, the world religion. And it is just because the church is simply mankind as mankind, simply mankind, Christ-kind, on its way to its own fulfilment that the acts of the church as such are acts of Christ, acts of God's love for mankind.

There are no boundaries to the church, she is just the human race, but there are boundaries to our community: we are for some people and not for others, there are some good things, some human things, some christian things, we do not have; we are just one way of being christian. It has always been essential to our sanity that we should be jealous of our own traditions but not be envious of others. It is only in those moments when we lose our jealousy for the special mystery that is ours, when we neglect our own life-story, that we start imagining we are imitation Benedictines or Jesuits or social workers or charismatic groups. And to do this is to lose touch with the life-giving depths, the mystery, in our own tradition and to gain nothing of importance in exchange. It takes a real Benedictine to draw life from that monastic mystery; our only source of living water is our own tradition.

Although our life is not, as such, a sacrament, nevertheless it is an engagement in mystery because although it is only one way of being christian, it is the whole way of being christian for us: it is everything to us even if it is not everything to the church. I mean we are not just a church organisation like the St Vincent de Paul Society or the Catholic Institute for International Relations. To work for one of these organisations is undoubtedly to live out the life of the Spirit in the world, it is to be an expression of God's love, but it can never be the whole of anybody's christian life: there are other things to do. But for us, being a Dominican is the whole of our christian lives, there is nothing else; our life-stories are the life-stories of Dominicans: this is the significance of our

profession, our vow of solidarity that we call obedience. For us henceforth to be human, to be ourselves is to be one of the preaching brethren, we have no other life-story. It is on this story that we are to be judged; and this means that the story of each of us is part of the story of this province; the judgment on each of us is part of the judgment on this province and on the order: what it has made of us and what we make of it.

And so, because for us (not for everybody, not for very many, but for us) being one of the brethren is the whole of our christian life, the whole of the church, the whole of our human identity – because of this, our being in this community is the enactment of mystery, it is what reveals to us the meaning of God and the love of God. And this, it seems to me, is why we have a definite and particular theological preaching tradition. All theology is, in the end, a matter of reflecting on who and what we are, on the meaning of a life-story; our theology comes from an exploration of the mystery that lies hidden (and revealed) in being the preaching brethren.

Being a Dominican preacher and theologian is not, for example, a matter of belonging to the school of Thomas Aquinas, if there is such a thing. But still we have to ask why the Dominican Order has resonated to St Thomas, why we found him and find him, speaking for us. It is surely because his writings do express the special Dominican mystery, they are so recognisably the words of one of the preaching brothers discovering what he is.

Let me try to spell that out. What is the depth of meaning that lies behind and within being a Friar Preacher? We say we are brethren (we live together) and we preach (we talk). The name itself asserts both a very modest and a very extravagant claim because, of course, this is how we would describe the human race: they are the animals that live together in a special way because they talk, or they talk because they live together in a special way. It is true that we are not just the talking but the preaching brothers, but this is no more than to say that our talk is not just chat, it is communication of ourselves at a deeper level than that. All talk is some kind of self-expression; to preach is to seek to communicate yourself at that deepest level in ourselves in which, as St Thomas says, we find God. So we make the modest and extravagant claim that to be a Dominican is simply to be dedicated to enacting and exploring the mystery of being human at all, to reach out to God by entering into what it is to be human, what it is to be this animal, this symbol-using, free, creative animal, the animal that, because it moves in the symbolic mode, reflects on its own being, the animal that can set itself over against the possibility of not being. To be a Dominican is to have a metaphysical question –

the question that arises from being human at all, the question of being at all.

And this is why we respond to St Thomas: because for him, God is the mystery, the unknown, we encounter when, with a kind of vertigo, we ask why *are* we instead of there not being anything. We respond to St Thomas not just because he says this but because he never loses sight of it. He never slips into talking of God as an element, a religious or moral element in human life, one we identify as part of our intelligible universe, as an explanation of anything. God does not come within the scope of our interpretation of the world or our language; he is source of there being language or explanation at all.

It is one of the special pleasures and excitements of teaching in our studium to watch the moment which comes to every student sooner or later, the moment of conversion you might say, when he realises that we are not free, we are not ourselves, in spite of God but because of God, the moment when he grasps what is surely the key Dominican teaching that God is not what he had thought, God is not less than the source of all my free acts, all my own acts, and the reason why they are my own. This is the liberating moment when his whole universe collapses and re-shapes itself; and when it comes together again it no longer contains God.

There is no God who is a being, an item in the universe, a rival person; there is just the unknown beyond and behind the whole universe itself, the mystery at the heart of my being myself. In Christ, says St Thomas, we are united to God as to the unknown.

This, I think, is what we exist to preach: it is our special task to show our friends and acquaintances that the universe does not contain God. And we have this task because of our tradition, because what we are dedicated to, what life means for us, is the radical exploration of what it is to be human, what it is to be one of those that come together and talk, to be a preaching brother.

We have, in fact, a thing to say about God because we are dedicated to reflection on being human, which is not just being this or that, but also being at all.

And the world needs us because the world is full of gods and men have grown tired of them. There is a weariness with a christianity that seems to be presenting us with yet another god; there is a weariness with a preaching that tries to recommend christianity by saying that the christian god is better than the others, has a nicer character or whatever. So long as christians just compare God to an important factor in the world, so long as they speak only in metaphors and images, they are going to sound as though all they had were an image for sale, an improved image. But men are tired of all the images; they reckon we should try to do without

them if we can, that we should face a world that does not contain any gods.

And this is exactly what we can tell them; this is our task. This is the task of preaching that, it seems to me, we are here this week to organise, the task of telling men that they can have images if they like, they may do no harm, but they are not what we are talking about, none of them are God: God is not part of the world, God is the unfathomable mystery of love by which the world is; there are no gods, there is only this love. And when we preach the gospel in these terms, the terms of our tradition, our hearers will indeed always be puzzled, perhaps especially our christian hearers will be puzzled. They will say: Is this what the Church teaches? Where is the religion, where is the piety, where are the gods? Where is the special language of church things? If we speak as the Spirit has given us utterance our hearers will be bewildered because each will hear us speaking in his own language the wonderful things of God.

Reviews

MESSIAH: SIX LECTURES ON THE MINISTRY OF JESUS by J C O'Neill,
Cochrane Press, Cambridge 1980. pp 127 £3.50.

This work consists of the six Cunningham Lectures John C O'Neill delivered at New College, Edinburgh in 1975–1976. These lectures deal with: John the Baptist and Jesus; The Kingdom; Jesus as teacher of the Law. Why did Jesus go up to Jerusalem? Bread and Wine, The Apostles. To these have been added three Appendices: The Synoptic Problem; The silence of Jesus and the son of man; The expression "The Kingdom". In light of O'Neill's previous works one might expect to find a freedom to reject and challenge traditional understandings and interpretations, and this work does not disappoint the reader in this regard. O'Neill has never felt bound by "the assured results of Biblical scholarship", and these lectures reveal that he still feels free to challenge such "results" and offer alternative explanations.

In chapter one O'Neill investigates what John the Baptist and Jesus thought of each other and calls into question the critical view that John did not see himself as the forerunner of Jesus. He begins by arguing that there is no reason why John could have believed that Jesus was the coming one of whom he spoke since what is said in Matthew 3:11-12 could apply not only to God but also to His Messiah and that the Jews accepted the possibility that the Messiah would for a time live unrecognised among them. Next he argues that Matthew 11:3; Acts 19:3-5; 18:24-28; and Clementine Recognitions 1.60 demonstrate that John's disciples could and did question themselves as to whether Jesus was the Messiah. Then in analysing

291