

A GOOD FRIDAY REFLECTION

On the 900th Anniversary of the Death of St. Anselm

TERRY A. VELING

I LOVE THE sound of your name, St. Anselm. I'm glad I can still know you, through your words and your prayers, even though they buried your body 900 years ago.

During your time as Abbot of the famous monastery of Bec, you loved the monks under your care very tenderly. You were also a man of great learning, and you held no distinction between your love of learning and your desire for God. In your work, the *Proslogion*, in which you set out your famous argument for the existence of God, you begin with a great prayer of desire and yearning:

I set out hungry to look for you . . . Teach me to seek you, and reveal yourself to me as I seek, because I can neither seek you if you do not teach me how, nor find you unless you reveal yourself. Let me seek you in desiring you; let me desire you in seeking you; let me find you in loving you; let me love you in finding you.¹

This, St. Anselm, is your prayer. And I sense that you are not merely talking about God as a huge metaphysical concept or a complex theological object. The 'You' of your prayer could just as easily be whispered to a lover, ever so sweetly, in the chambers of human intimacy—'let me desire you in seeking you, let me love you in finding you.'

It is in my very nature to want you and need you. It is in my nature to seek you out. It is my nature to desire you and love you. It is in my nature—not because of my self alone or my own self-seeking—but because of You.

Yet 'who is it that I love when I love you?' you ask. 'O my flesh, what do I love, O my soul, what do I desire?' And you go on to say that if beauty delights us, or wisdom, or music, or joy, or friendship, or peace, or goodness—'there it is, there it is!' you exclaim—in all these things that I love and desire, it is God's

love and goodness that fills my soul, 'so that I may remember You, think of You, and love You' (149-50).

You described your search for God as 'faith seeking understanding' (105). Caught up in this endless love for God, your love is driven to further understand this infinite love. This may sound like a circular argument, yet it is true of all the ways we love. It is like a musician who says, 'only music can help me understand music,' or an ecologist who says, 'only the wetlands can help me understand the wetlands,' or a lover who says, 'only your love can help me understand the love I feel for you.' Only the things we love, deeply and truly, can teach us. 'For I do not seek to understand so that I may believe,' you say, 'but I believe so that I may understand' (115). There is little we can understand, unless we first love and believe.

It is only at this point, St. Anselm, that you introduce your famous argument for the existence of God. 'We believe that You are something which nothing greater can be thought' (117). This little thesis of yours has been the subject of much philosophical debate for centuries, yet I don't think you offered your argument in order to give philosophers a headache. Rather, you are reminding us that God is always greater than our concepts, that God is so plentiful, so really real, so expansive—that we must always respect the bountifulness and incomprehensibility of God.

You bear witness to God's overflowing love. God is not so much the 'Wholly Other' that exists in some transcendent realm apart from our lives. Rather, transcendence is 'excedence' or 'surplus' or 'more than'—there is always more that I can know, more that I can love, more that I can cherish. We are al-

ways in relation with that which exceeds our lives. ‘*Inquietum cor nostrum*,’ St. Augustine says—our hearts are always restless. ‘Nothing suffices for the soul,’ St. Bonaventure says, ‘but that which exceeds its capacity’ (‘*Nihil sufficit animae, nisi ejus capacitatem excedat*’). This desire does not so much emerge from the negativity of a lack—a *via negativa*—but from a positive overflowing, a surplus, a *via superlativa*. When we read poetry, when we love, when we pray, we experience this ‘more than’ or this great surplus that continually overflows our lives, and we seek to summon this overflowing love into the world. Unlike the fool who says in his heart, ‘there is no God,’ the believer is overwhelmed by God’s great love, overcome by God’s overflowing fullness, dazzled by God, ‘dazzled by You’ (135).

Dear St. Anselm, you have taught me that I need to love in order to understand—that love will guide me and lead me. You have taught me that God’s love is in all things and that when I love, or am loved by others, it is You, O God, who stirs my soul and fills my heart.

Before I go, St. Anselm, I must turn to that other great question you pondered, ‘Why did God become human?’ (*Cur Deus Homo*). In this work, you reflect on one of the central tenets of Christian faith. Everything of *God* is ultimately concerned with everything of *humanity*. We cannot speak of God without speaking of humanity. We cannot speak of our relation to God without speaking of our relation to one another. We cannot love God unless we love our brother and sister (cf. John 4:20-21). God and humanity are inexorably bound.

Yet it is the answer you give to your own question that really stuns me. I doubt that I, or our own troubled world, will ever fully understand it. God became human, you say, to bear our sin, to suffer our sin in his body, to die at the hands of our inhumanity, to absorb all the



Terry Veling is Head of the McAuley School of Theology at the Australian Catholic University. He has taught in the US for many years. His most recent book is *Practical Theology* (Orbis 2005).

hatred and violence that spills out in blood and tortured flesh, in the smell of death all through human history—then, and now—still now, still now. We still do not know, we still have not understood, what we are doing to each other (cf. Luke 23:34).

To suffer for you, because of you, because of your great fault—this is why God became human. To bear our sin. And if we live in Christ, then we too must bear the sins of others, we too must suffer the effects of human hatred, we too must take sin into our flesh—renouncing violence, renouncing hatred, renouncing all the ways that humanity deals in death.

Underlying your question, ‘Why did God become human?’ stands the whole gravity of love—a love that is not hateful or resentful, a love that takes no pleasure in other people’s sins; rather, a love that ‘bears all things’ (1 Cor. 13:7).

How to absorb sin? This is the religious question. How to take an arrow without defense? This is the religious question. How to bear with one another? How to refuse hatred and vengeance, arrogance and fear? This is the religious question. This is why Christ became human, and this is what he came to teach us. When we love each other, we must necessarily suffer each other’s fault and undergo each other’s sin, in forgiveness and forbearance, upholding rather than condemning each other in our shared humanity.

NOTE

1. St. Anselm, *Prosologian*. Tr. M.J. Charlesworth (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 115. Subsequent references are provided in parentheses.