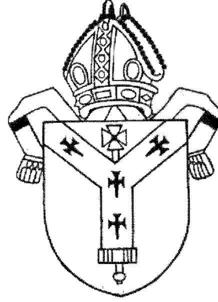

**The Archbishop of Canterbury**

**Dr Rowan Williams**

# Address to St Paul's Theological Centre

**Part 2**

**22 September 2012**

I want to begin this second round by thinking about some of those issues that were coming up in the very early Church, to do with what the limits are of what you can say theologically – whether there are boundaries, truth conditions; whether there is such a thing as "orthodoxy", in fact, or "dogma" or "right doctrine". It is a question which clearly preoccupies a lot of people, and some are very eager to answer, "Yes, and I will tell you exactly what it is *now*". But why does it matter? What is involved here?

There is a general answer, and then some more particular ones. The general answer is what I have been trying to outline: what you need to do, when you are trying to talk about God, is to keep open the enormous breadth and scope of what the New Testament says about Jesus and the Spirit. I think that is the most basic criterion. Are you saying less than scripture says about Jesus and the Spirit? Because the language of the New Testament is trying to push the boundaries again and again to say as much as you possibly can about the real newness – the comprehensive newness of the new world you come into in faith. A great deal of controversy in the early Church, and indeed later on, is about the question: are you trying to shrink those boundaries again? Are you drawing in your horns a bit? Are you trying to say less than the New Testament says?

I think that is part of what was going on in those really complicated controversies in the third, fourth, fifth centuries of the Church – and they were really complicated (I used to teach this stuff!). But the question is always: are you shrinking the range of what you can say? And if you want a definition of heresy, I would rather not give too formal a definition, but would say: real heresy is saying less about God than God deserves. So the problem with denying the divinity of Jesus or whatever, isn't that you have got the idea wrong, it is that you are not doing justice to the depth of what has happened in you and in others. The search for orthodoxy is the search for the kind of language that tries its level best to do justice to the range and the depth of what has happened.

I have often said, in teaching this material, that the history of doctrine is not so much searching for the perfect formula as searching for the least stupid thing you can say – when you know you haven't got it wrapped up, but this is probably on balance the least inadequate thing you can come up with. Hence the language of the creeds, which is not meant to give you a comprehensive map of heaven, it is just meant to say, "Look, whatever you say, it has got to be at least this."

The creed is an interesting case in point. Let me pause a moment on this – it will relate to something I say later. We think sometimes of the creed in the Church as if it were the conditions of membership. But the creeds in the early Church came from two inter-related but different sources. The first was the creed that you said at baptism. You came for baptism, usually as an adult of course in the early Church, and the bishop, who would be the person who baptised you in the early Church at Easter would say, "Okay, so what are you here for?"

And you would say, "Eternal life please."

The bishop would say, "So do you believe that God really made the world and everything in it? You are not one of those Gnostics are you?"

You would say, "Yes I believe in God who made everything. Matter and spirit, heaven and earth."

"Right, and you believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who brings the life of God into the world, who died for your sins and rose again from the dead, you believe that?"

"Yes" you would say.

"What about the Holy Spirit?" the bishop would say. "You're confident, are you, that the Holy Spirit is the one who renews your life, gives you the promise of eternal life, binds you together with other people in the Church?"

"Yes."

"Yes? Right, I baptise you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

And actually, he would push you under the water at that point – they did things very robustly in the early Church. Then you would have oil poured all over you, and a white garment put on you, and you would be brought into a brightly lit church, and you would take communion for the first time, and it was Easter in you and around you. We have thinned it down quite a lot over the centuries. The point is that the Baptismal Creed is a profession of your personal commitment to the God who works in this way. Not as a condition of membership, not the rules and constitutions of the society. You are saying, "This really is the God I trust."

I suggested, a few years ago when I was talking about this, that to say, "I believe in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit" isn't saying, "I have these ideas about God." It is a bit more like something from a very, very different world. When you become a Buddhist, you say, "I take refuge in the Buddha." And I think when I say, "I believe in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" it is almost like, "I take refuge in, I put myself in the hands of this God." So, not theory, not just ideas, but "I put myself in the hands of this kind of God." That is one strand that the creed comes out of. The Apostle's Creed, which we still use in the

Church of England in morning and evening prayer, called “The Apostle’s Creed” but not written by the Apostles, is actually a very early form of this baptismal question and answer session, crystallised into a short summary. “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, his only son, our lord” and so on. Quite simple, quite direct.

Then there is another source for the creeds, and I think this is a very interesting one. In the service of Holy Communion in the very early Church, there was a point at which, as you began the great prayer of thanksgiving over the bread and wine, you were supposed to recite all that God had done. You told the story. You said, “All praise and glory and thanks be to you, God, Father Almighty, who made all things by your power. And who, by your providence, guided your people through the centuries, and in the fullness of time gave your Son, the eternal Word Jesus Christ to be born of the Virgin Mary, to live among us, to die upon the cross, to rise again, and who poured out the Holy Spirit for the life of all” and so forth. You would say that over the bread and wine, and go on from there to say, “When he had taken flesh of the Virgin Mary, and completed his work on earth, he came to supper with his friends. On the night he was betrayed he took bread.” The whole thing is moving in to that action of lifting up the bread and the wine and asking the Holy Spirit to fill them with power.

So that is another source for the language of the creed. As you pray over the bread and the wine, you tell the story of God, and increasingly (especially in the Eastern Church) you would pile up the elaboration of language. “It is truly right to give you praise, eternal God, maker of all things, invisible, incomprehensible, glorious beyond measure. Because upon you attend the cherubim and the seraphim and the archangels, and the angels with six wings and full of eyes, aloft upon the wing, crying aloud holy, holy, holy.” Tremendous drama - these are beautiful, beautiful prayers. The other form of the creed is a kind of distillation of what you might say in those Holy Communion prayers.

So the creeds come out of worship. They emerge from the experience of worship, this wonderful experience of being brought into to putting your life in the hands of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, and this experience of hearing the story of creation and redemption prayed out loud over the bread and wine on which you are calling down the Holy Spirit. Next time you are at a Holy Communion service, you may notice there is a faint relic of that extravagant early language in the way that you mention some of what God has done in the prayer. I would love to see a prayer at that point that was a bit more extravagant, a bit more “unbuttoned” in the way that those ancient prayers are. In the fourth century, when these texts of the creed were finally knocked into their definitive shape, they were done so very much in connection with the life of a worshipping church. Even when you get one or two rather technical words put in – “of one substance with the Father” and so forth – it’s all within that context of prayer and praise.

So orthodoxy is something that always happens in tandem with the process of worship. Once again (sorry to keep talking about the Eastern Church – it means a lot to me as you will have gathered), the word “orthodoxy” in Greek means not just “right-thinking”, it also means “right-glorifying”: this is the right way to glorify God; this is a fit *appropriate* way of praising God. So orthodox language isn’t just correct language – like being an orthodox Marxist, which means you have really read *Das Kapital* properly and have

worked your way through the volumes of Lenin's writings or whatever – nothing so boring: orthodoxy is giving God appropriate praise. This is the kind of language you are going to need to praise God fully. Back to what I said right at the beginning, theology is really about being a joyful disciple. Orthodoxy is about joy. It is so sad that the word has become, like "orthodox Marxism", a sign of dull, routine, conformist thinking, instead of being about how you praise God with the fullest vocabulary and the best resources you can manage.

So much for the creeds – but I want to connect that with this complicated question of the criteria that we use. What are the standards by which theology works? What are the benchmarks that help us discern what orthodoxy is and sounds like?

Of course the very first, and it has been there right from the start, is that adequate, fitting language for God has got to take its cue from the Bible. Right from the beginning people have taken that for granted. That's why I said earlier, you have to ask the question, are you trying to say less than the New Testament says about God or Jesus? The people who started working on theological issues in the very early Church didn't think that the Bible just answered all your questions like that, as if it were a sort of spiritual agony aunt where you just put in your question and out came a neat answer. They did work, and they knew that the Bible was quite an untidy set of writings, and that you had to make the connections and pray and think.

"Pray and think" is exactly the context, because when you read about schools of biblical study in the early Church, you find that these are places where people don't just do the technical work or the scholarly work, they are also meant to be spiritual environments. We hear, for example, about the great teacher in Alexandria at the end of the second and beginning of the third century called Origen. Origen was the greatest Christian intellectual of his day, and fortunately we have got a little autobiographical fragment of one of his students who describes what it was like to come to where Origen was teaching at the time in Palestine, and study with him. How, yes, you do a lot of work on your Greek and your Hebrew, and you do an awful lot of silent praying and contemplating. You live a very austere life with the other students – you get up early and you be silent together, then you do a bit of Greek, and then you would have some exposition of the Bible from your teacher, then you would talk about it with him. It was very like living in a monastery, and of course that is part of what some early monasteries build on.

It is a spiritual discipline, and I underline that because it's very important to remember that the Bible for those early Christians was a spiritual treasure. You didn't read it just for answers, you read it to bring that new universe alive for you. Of course it was a great challenge, with some bits of the Bible, to make that kind of sense of it. You are stuck with a chapter of the Book of Judges, let's say, describing enthusiastic Israelites massacring Canaanites. Exactly what are you going to do with this? How is that going to help you? And that is where you begin to get into the symbolic understanding of scripture – no, this is not about God telling you to go and massacre your neighbours. This is about the claims of God on your life, which put to death inside you all kinds of alien and rebellious ideas and impulses; that kind of symbolic interpretation, which is "Don't rush to an interpretation here, think about it, think about how this is going to make your Christian life work."

So, using the Bible is there from the start, but it is not using it mechanically. It is using it with a huge amount of contemplation, meditation and imagination. It assumes that the Bible is, as I was saying earlier, something you keep going back to and you are always going to find new things in. I mentioned Origen just now – he, in his vast array of works (he wrote commentaries on pretty well every book of the Bible), is someone who believes you have got to bring to the Bible all the best tools of scholarship you can find, but you don't stop there. Origen was one of the first early Christians to learn Hebrew properly, so that he could read the original, not just the Greek translations. He thought you ought to have a very careful eye for variations in the text to make sure that you were aware that there might a little bit of uncertainty from time to time in the textual tradition. And you ought to weigh very carefully which was the better reading, which was better supported in the manuscripts. You ought to be able to compare different translations – he actually prepared a great eight-column version of the Bible with the Hebrew transliterated into Greek letters and four different translations into Greek to compare them. You needed to use your mind.

But that wasn't all: your mind was inseparable from your imagination and your heart. That is what the best of Origen's readings of the Bible come to – a real vision of moving into the fullness of the biblical world.

So yes, you use the Bible, you struggle always to make your theological language say as much as the Bible says. If there are things in the Bible that are incompatible at first sight with each other, you work to find what it is deep down that makes them still part of the same world of understanding. An example I have mentioned already: in the fourth century people argued about what it meant in the Book of Proverbs that *the wisdom of God says the Lord created me*. Most Christians at that time wanted to say "Of course the wisdom of God which lives in Jesus isn't something created, it is something eternal. So what does it mean when Proverbs says that God created wisdom?" I won't go into the details, but it is just one of those complexities that the theologians have to deal with. To say: yes, beneath the apparent tensions, there is something consistent, something alive in it. And we will work at it. Because what we know is, all this has got to be tested against what the New Testament says about Jesus. How finely does it all fit into that great canopy?

For a very long time, "doing theology" was really "doing Bible study". Even in the Middle Ages, where people were beginning to do much more philosophical reflection on Christian teaching, the greatest theologian of the Middle Ages, St Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century, says that of course theology is studying scripture. Sacra doctrina – holy teaching – is sacra scriptura. It is studying the holy writings. He says it is, at root, all about thinking through the lives of the people we meet in scripture, and how they show God to us. And when you have worked through several thousand words of Thomas Aquinas's philosophical speculations, you think, "What exactly has that got to do with Abraham or Moses?" But that is what he thought he was doing. It could take a very long time to get to philosophy from Abraham or Moses, but St Thomas thought, "Yes, at the end of the day, we are just trying to work out what these lives, these stories in the Bible are showing us about God. That is the essence of holy teaching – theology."

At the time of the Reformation, of course, this became a little bit more complicated, like so many things. People began to say, "Well I can't find that in the Bible" because the Church had become much more

elaborate and seemed to have travelled quite a long way from its early enthusiasms. So, can you or can't you find this in the Bible? It was a new kind of question and a rather acute one. And you had Christians saying, "If you can't find it in the Bible I'm not interested", and others who said, "Well it is not just about the Bible you know – it's about the whole history of the Church and the tradition of the Church." On the whole, people painted themselves into corners at the time of the Reformation and set up all kinds of rather unhelpful oppositions. We are still living with the consequences of that. But one thing, which the very best of the reformers at the Reformation were quite clear about, was that you still had to read the Bible in connection with other people who read it. You didn't just read it as if nobody had read it before.

You might be surprised when you read some of the work of John Calvin (theologically definitely the greatest of the reformers), because Calvin, contrary to what a lot of people think, didn't just say, "Pick up the Bible and it is all there." Calvin said, "You have got to read the people who have read the Bible." That is the real meaning of tradition in the life of the Church. Tradition is not just what we happen to have inherited. Tradition is paying attention to people who have read the Bible before you.

Now, you don't treat tradition as if it were the Bible – it's other people reading it, it's not Holy Scripture. But when you are reading the Bible you need all the help you can get, so invite a lot of people in when you are reading the Bible. Invite in the people who have read it before you, invite in the people who are reading it now in different environments – get them into the room with you. Calvin is very keen that we should read the Bible together. People talk about the Reformation sometimes as if it were a great moment of breakthrough to individualism: everybody takes the Bible off to their own private room and just gets on with it. On the contrary, the great reformers believed that it was important to have the Bible in people's ordinary language so that you could read it *together*. Not so that you could shut yourself up in your own room and work out the date of the apocalypse from some mysterious chapter in Revelation, which is what some people seem to think. You read it together, you invite people into the room, and that means inviting people from the past as well as the present.

I think that is great thing about the best of Reformation theology. Against late Middle Ages thinking, which had so buried the Bible under tradition you couldn't get at it, they said, "No, the Bible comes first." But, against people who said, "Okay it is all there in the Bible, we'll give you the answers to everything", they said, "No, hang on, be hospitable in your reading. Read with the great readers." I think that is still extremely good advice. Read the Bible with the great readers of the Bible, and invite in the holy and wise people who have read it before you.

They are not always right. Sometimes, just like you and me, they are stupid. Sometimes they get it completely, disastrously, wrong. I like to think here especially of my favourite theologian of all time, St Augustine, undoubtedly in my mind the most moving, passionate, profound, enriching, wide-ranging theologian that perhaps we have ever had in the Christian Church. When I read St Augustine it still excites me and stirs me to the core – when I read his account of his confessions, all about his conversion to Christianity; when I read his meditations on the Trinity; when I read his comments on the Bible. Wonderful stuff. Then you read some of what he says about original sin, or about people being pre-destined to hell, and you think, "How could you? You are such a wonderful man and yet you come out

with absolute nonsense on some subjects." That's okay. Christians don't have to be infallible, they just have to be penitent. Augustine is so moving, partly because he says, "I may have got this wrong" at various points. And late in life, he actually wrote a whole book on the things he'd got wrong, a book called *The Retractations*. "I said this in such and such a book: I was wrong. I said this in another book: complete rubbish." He takes you right through all the things he has said in his career as a theologian. I think what an extraordinary example that is, somebody of his stature and his holiness just being able to get up and say, "Nope, sorry I thought I was right, but I wasn't."

So scripture and tradition are not two things on the same level, but tradition is part of the way we read scripture. Take tradition away from scripture and you get into traditionalism, which is never good for us – just repeating the way things have been. Understand tradition as the living reading of the Bible in company, with as many people as you can get in, then something different. A marvellous phrase from, again, an Eastern Orthodox theologian who said, "Tradition is the charismatic memory of the Church." That is a lovely phrase I think, the charismatic memory of the Church – the history of the Church made alive by the Holy Spirit in other words, so that you really feel you're reading the Bible in company with Christians of another age.

In addition to scripture and tradition, Anglicans have very often wanted to put a third leg of the stool: reason. You will often hear it said that for Anglicans, the three great criteria are scripture, tradition and reason. That is quite a complicated one to tease out, but I think what it means in its original setting is something like this. We all have ways of making sense of our world that come from our culture, the way that we expect people's minds to work in this or that era. And when we come to the reading of the Bible, we don't just shed all that, we don't step right out of our culture, right out of our habits of thinking – we bring the best of our habits of thinking and our disciplines of thinking to making sense of the Bible. Again, it's not as if reason is another source of revelation alongside tradition, which is a source of revelation, and the Bible, which is a source of revelation. The great new fact *is* the Bible, or rather what the Bible is about. Tradition is reading it in company with others, and reason is reading it using your common sense and making the best of what is around you in your environment to bring things alive.

It is because people talk about reason in this way, sometimes, that there is a strand of Anglican theology which says: well, reason allows us to go back and question a lot of the doctrinal settlements of an earlier age; reason allows us to rethink the creed or the definitions. And I see what people mean, but I don't feel very comfortable with that. Because it's not as if our reason is just working on a set of phenomena out there – reason works within Christian theology, working with and in the grain of what we are already saying, and praying, and singing. That's why, when there was a great fashion in the 1960s and 1970s for rethinking the creeds and rethinking the doctrines of the Trinity, or the divinity of Christ, I felt (and I still feel) it just isn't like that. It isn't as if we are bringing our intellectual powers to bear on a set of facts out there; I am already inside that world which the doctrines represent. That is where I live, and I am not going to start rebuilding the house I live in as if there were nothing there. So I don't want to make extravagant claims for reason, but I think there is a proper sense in which, yes, we bring to bear the agenda of our culture as we read.

Going back to the question I was asked earlier about the status of women, sometimes what we see in history is that Christianity starts off a whole chain of reasoning and questioning, a long fuse fizzing away. It explodes somewhere into a new understanding, and sometimes by that time it is rather outside the Church. The Church has to receive back the implications of what it has been saying all along, and think: "Ah, yes, so that's what we mean!" and bring to bear some of what culture has brought up in that way. Never un-critically; you never just take on what your society takes for granted, that's no way to read the Bible. But it is part of the agenda, and you keep that conversation going.

So historically, those elements – scripture, tradition, reason – have been the touchstones, the testing points for what you say theologically. Am I saying something that tries to say less than there is in the Bible? Am I reading all this in company with the holiest and wisest readers of the Bible across the ages? Am I using my common sense, and am I taking seriously the contemporary questions that are around? If I can get all that into theology then I am doing it properly. The great theologians of the modern era show some of that "weaving together". I could go on at tiresome length about some of those great theologians, but I will mention just one, the greatest theologian, I think, of the 20th century: Carl Bart, a great Swiss Reformed theologian.

Now Bart is very, very clear that what he is doing is reading the Bible. My favourite story of all time about Carl Bart is from when he was a very old man. He had written millions of words of theology and was doing an interview for a journal of some sort, and the journalist said, "Professor Bart, could you summarise your work for us in a couple of sentences?" And Bart grinned and said, "Jesus loves me, this I know, but for the Bible tells me so." I think that is absolutely wonderful and does tell you all you need to know about Carl Bart. But he thought: yes, it is all about reading the Bible. His huge work on *Church Dogmatics* (not one of your great sales-orientated titles) has long passages of wrestling with Biblical interpretation. Again and again he turns back to the great theologians to join him in the work of interpreting. He brings in Augustine and Calvin and others and blends them into his argument.

But what you don't always see quite so clearly but is deeply there in his work, is that he is somebody who is doing his theology at the time of the rise to power of the Nazis in Germany. He is a theology professor at a time when the Nazi Government in Germany is attempting to control the Churches, is beginning its persecution of the Jews, and is trying to exclude people of Jewish decent from the Christian Church. Bart was one of the great opponents of that, and as a result of his opposition to the Government he was exiled from Germany where he was working back to Switzerland. Some of his colleagues who were Germans and couldn't get away paid with their lives for resistance. Bart was lucky to escape with his life. When Bart says, "We must *not* take what our society is telling us as a criterion for theology" what he meant was, the agenda our society is giving us at the moment is something we have got to be absolutely clear about, and we must resist it with all our powers because it is an anti-Christian ideology. But that is his way of being contemporary. It is common sense – Christian common sense – not taking what society takes for granted, but saying, "That is the agenda; I have got to tackle that, I have got to wrestle with that and take it seriously." Right up to the end of his life, Bart continued to take very seriously contemporary issues. In the 1950s he was writing brilliantly complex and sophisticated stuff about nuclear weaponry, which not

many people have read, and bringing his theological skills to bear on the contemporary question of the nuclear bomb. saying, “We can’t have this.”

So he is somebody who is a great theologian, because he is primarily a reader of the Bible, he reads the Bible in company, and he reads the Bible, as he would like to say, “With a newspaper in the other hand.” That is the kind of blend. It doesn’t mean that Bart is right about everything, any more than St Augustine is right about everything. It does mean that that way of doing theology – focusing on “Am I saying less than the Bible is saying? Am I inviting enough people into the conversation? Am I reading the newspaper and making the connections?” – that is how to do it. And orthodoxy, right-glorifying, right-teaching, is not just about getting right answers, it is also about doing it in the right way, doing it prayerfully, intelligently, biblically in all those ways.

None of this gives you absolute criteria that will tell you, “This theological proposition is right; this is wrong.” But you have got a method, you have got a way of arguing, and that means you have got a way of disagreeing intelligently. That is always good for the Church.

For the last ten minutes or so, I want to round this off by coming back to the question of how we all do theology and the different ways in which this can work, to try and frame some of what I have been saying overall. I want to suggest to you a pattern that I have, here and there, tried to argue about different ways of doing theology. As I have hinted more than once this morning, the primary way we do theology is in prayer and praise. The language of prayer and praise begins to bubble over, begins to generate new things, new perspectives. That is why I would like to say that the ground of all theology is celebratory – the first way of doing theology is celebratory. We are looking for new words, new perspectives, and that is why most of us actually learn our theology from hymns and songs, sometimes good and sometimes bad. I think there is a real burden, you might say, on the writer of Christian hymns and songs to make it theologically nourishing. There is a whole genre of hymns and songs, ancient and modern, which don’t really do that – which focus so much on how I am feeling that you never get round to what the world is like, or what God is like. What the son of a priest friend of mine used unkindly to call the “Jesus is my girlfriend” style of song. We need something a little bit more robust than that to keep us going.

The great hymns of Christian tradition, the ones that really last, are the ones that do theology for us: celebratory theology. You might like to think about whether there are any hymns or songs that do that for you, that really crystallise what matters to you about Christian faith, that give you those enlarged perspectives. I can think of quite a few favourites of mine that have that kind of force for me. A lot of them are by Charles Wesley, because the great explosion of hymn-writing that Wesley was responsible for in 18th century was not just about “good Christian songs”, it was about teaching. Wesley’s hymns are an absolute encyclopaedia of Christian theology in the most vivid, lively images that you can think of. I hope that most of you know *And Can It Be?*

> *And can it be, that I should gain*
> *An interest in the Saviour’s blood?*

Well that is a hymn absolutely packed with theology. It is about the atonement, but it is also about the transformation by the Holy Spirit that brings us right into the heart of the courts of heaven.

*Bold I approach the eternal throne,*
*And claim the crown, through Christ my own.*

That is theology, crystallised in a wonderful, vivid, dramatic metaphor.

There is a much less well-known hymn of Wesley's, which begins:

*Since the Son hath made me free,*
*let me taste my liberty;*

In its three or four verses, it just goes through the essence of New Testament theology in simple rhymed couplets:

*Heavenly Adam, Life divine,*
*Change my nature into thine!*

*Abba, Father! hear thy child,*
*Late in Jesus reconciled*

Absolutely dead simple, and it is all there, the whole sense of our transformation through the grace and sacrifice of Christ, and the power of the resurrection and the spirit.

So the Methodists have a great deal to be thankful for in Charles Wesley, and it is one of the great gifts that Methodist tradition has always shared with the rest of us. But in the revival of hymn writing in 19th century England and the Church of England, we get a few others like that. There was a man called Christopher Wordsworth, who was a nephew of William Wordsworth the poet, and became Bishop of Lincoln. A very great scholar, but also a very interesting hymn-writer, and among the hymns he wrote was one about the Ascension:

*See, the Conqueror mounts in triumph; see the King in royal state,*
*Riding on the clouds, His chariot*

which in itself just bundles together a whole lot of biblical pictures: Ezekiel seeing the vision of the chariot of God in Heaven, the ascension of Jesus, all sorts of things. Part of that hymn is about what the Ascension means, that it is about the taking of human nature into the divine life.

*Thou hast raised our human nature in the clouds to God's right hand*
*There we sit in heavenly places, there with Thee in glory stand*

*Jesus reigns, adored by angels; man with God is on the throne;*
*Mighty Lord, in Thine ascension we by faith behold our own.*

So Wordsworth in that hymn is again expressing the transformation, the drawing up into the very centre of God's life.

There are lots of other hymns that do that work; I just mention those as examples of what I mean by picking up theology from the really great hymns. There are a good many modern worship songs and hymns which do the same. I am not knocking modern compositions – well, not all of them, because there are truly terrible 18th and 19th century hymns as well. I won't give examples or we would be here all morning.

But, celebration – we start theology by singing actually. Singing with mind and understanding, as St Paul puts it. That is something all of us are involved in in our worship, and that is the sense in which we are all doing theology. Celebration – that can work in hymns, and in the language of liturgy, formal worship. It can work in some kinds of meditation on doctrine, and I think of some sermons too which have that celebratory quality. We are leaning by finding new perspectives and new images.

Then there is a second kind of theology, which grows out of this. This is a celebration, this is our business as a church, as a community, we are having a great time celebrating – but somehow have to draw people in. We have got to make sense for the world around of what we are saying; we can't just smuggle into a cosy celebratory world and sing hymns at each other. Those hymns have got to get some traction in the way other people think. So stage two of theology is communication – celebration first, and communication: how do I find ways of making all this alive for those who haven't got the same commitment to the community? And that is partly about apologetics, defending the faith in public. It is partly also about thinking, "Can I find some new intellectual structure, some new set of metaphors, some new vocabulary that just surprises people enough to take this seriously?" Because the problem is often – as you all know – not so much that non-Christians know what we are saying and reject it, but that they don't even know what we are saying. They think they know what we are saying and they have rejected it already. One of the tasks that you have if you are talking to a Dawkins or a Philip Pullman or whoever is to say, "Hang on, who says that? You are assuming you know what I think before I've opened my mouth." But to do that you need to have some powerful, fresh perspectives to offer.

So quite a few of the great theologians over the ages have thought around, thought sideways about this, and have come up with new structures, new ideas, new concepts. I think here of a theologian at the beginning of the 19th century, that Bart disliked very much but was still a very important chap with the formidable name of Friedrich Schleiermacher, from the University of Berlin. Schleiermacher was somebody who wanted to address, as he put it, "the cultured despisers of religion." It is a lovely phrase – he published a whole set of lectures "On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers". What he wanted to do was to get past their defences and say, "Look, Christian theology isn't what you think it is. Lets start here, and see where we get." And in his great work, called simply "The Christian Faith", he says: okay, deep breath now, lets try and rethink the whole thing, beginning from the basic Christian fact which is dependence on the grace of God, a feeling of complete dependence. That's what faith gives us, a feeling of complete dependence. Now let's see if we can unfold the themes of theology from that basic fact.

So, as I said, he is not just answering objections to faith or defending it in the obvious sense, he is getting past other people's defences, saying, "Lets start somewhere else and see where we get." Communication – where you don't just think of your own agenda, your own vocabulary, you try and think yourself into the mind of somebody who is not a believer and see where can I connect with that, where can I build a bridge so that I get round what they think I think.

But coming out of that, in turn, is another phase of theological talking and thinking, which for the sake of argument I will call critical. And I don't mean by that negative. I mean self-questioning. You've done the celebration, you've tried the communication, and maybe there comes a point where you think: gosh, talking about God is so difficult. I am coming to the end of my resources again and again. I am driven back to think, well what do I really mean by this or that? A really self critical moment where I come back and think: I have used this language, I have talked cheerfully about redemption and atonement and justification and Trinity and incarnation. What do I mean? Am I serious? Turning the question back to myself, to ourselves, critically – as I say, not negatively. But just to say: this is so big, and here am I nattering away about it as if I know what I was talking about. Why don't I just shut up and pray and think a bit about it.

That third moment of "the critical" has always been a very significant element in Christian theology; what people sometimes call (misleadingly) "negative theology". Or in the Greek term, "apophatic theology", which is a theology of not saying. Both in Eastern and Western Christianity there is a very strong tradition that the better you are at talking theology, the more you are approaching the point where you have to say less and less. Less is more in theology, and you may find yourself at the end of a long complex process, thinking: the best thing I can say about God at this point is nothing. I just need to stop, and adore, or repent, or both.

And it's strange how that theme keeps coming up in the lives of great Christians. I mentioned Thomas Aquinas a little while ago, the greatest of the medieval theologians. He had a stroke not long before he died and couldn't speak at all for weeks afterwards. It had happened when he was celebrating mass, and he said, when his speech began to return, that at the moment when he had his stroke he realised everything he had written was like straw compared with what he had seen. Nothing he could say was adequate to what had been uncovered in that fleeting moment, and he died soon after. In the 16th century, our own great Anglican theologian Richard Hooker, who died in 1600, said in his long work on theology, "Where God is concerned, our safest eloquence is silence." The best way of talking about God is not to. St Augustine said, "When you start talking about God you think you know what you are talking about. The more you advance towards God, the less you know what you are talking about."

Perhaps most poignantly of all, there is Bart's friend and colleague in the 20th century, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who ended his life in a Nazi concentration camp, hanged by the Nazis just before the end of the Second World War. Bonhoeffer's letters and papers from prison is one of the great classics of 20th century Christianity. Bonhoeffer had resisted Hitler, had got involved in conspiring against Hitler, and was arrested, interrogated, tortured and eventually executed. The letters that he wrote from his prison cell show what was happening in him in those last days – and years, indeed. He says there in a letter of

1944, written to his godson on the day of the godson's baptism, "The trouble is in these recent years, we have talked away, we have tried to defend the Church and defend theology, and yet somehow our words have gone stale, they have gone dead, and we don't know what to say any longer." He says, "I just hope that by the time you grow up" – he is writing to a baby remember – "by the time you grow up, God may have given back to the Church the words we need. Words, which are like the words of Jesus, which just change things by being said. Do our words change things when we say them? No, we just churn out the words, and it is the same old stuff and nothing has changed. Maybe God is asking us just to shut up and go underground for a bit." Remember he is writing out of a sense that he has failed – tyranny and injustice and nightmare cruelty have won. There he is waiting for execution in his cell, saying, "Well I don't know what to say about God now. The words have gone, but God will give us back words one day." "Meanwhile", he said, "it is just prayer and doing the right thing. Hang on to that and maybe the words will come."

Apophatic theology, *not saying*, the critical moment, the self-critical moment. Bonhoeffer looking at all he had written – and he was a wonderful theologian – and saying, "No, it may all be true, it may all be absolutely true and right, but somehow it is not changing things. Somehow it is not carrying the spirit, it is not carrying grace. So I will say my prayers, I will do what I think is right, I will die and then we will see." The funny thing is, of course, that it is that critical moment, that apophatic, that not-saying moment, that takes us back to celebration. Because it is when you realise all your words are not going to work, nothing you are going to say is going to be adequate or do justice to God, then mysteriously you come back to realising, "My God, how great thou art." You are right back to celebration. When you say, "I don't know what to say." Then you see the scope of what you are really talking about. A philosopher friend of mine used to say that, "When I say to somebody 'I can't tell you how grateful I am', I am telling them how grateful I am." So when I say to God, "I can't tell you how great you are" I am telling God how great he is. And that is where the negative moment comes right round again to the celebratory moment, the sense that we are immersed in mystery and splendour and joy. What is theology about? Joyful discipleship. And although this process of the celebratory and the communicative and the critical is in some ways a pilgrimage into struggle and difficulty and feeling, "I don't know what to say", somehow in the middle of that, it flips around into joy and thanksgiving once again. It just keeps going around that cycle, I think, and that's what gives theology so much of its energy, so much of its integrity, as the Christian ages go on.

So I hope and pray that your own exploration in theology in the months ahead will have all those elements in it. That it will keep reminding you of the celebratory, that you will be able to sing about it. That it won't lose sight of the fact that you have got to make sense to those people around who don't start where you start. I hope there will be moments where you really do feel completely silenced, completely flummoxed by it all, and then find your way back to the affirmation and the celebration and the thanksgiving. And yes, I hope that that will be a joyful part of your discipleship.

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