

## What about Mysticism?

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

We may not all have the genius of old Einstein, but most of us really are bright enough to perceive that such an ordered and carefully designed universe must have a first cause; so most of us do not have trouble with the existence of God. We can agree with Einstein. He says this, "My religion consists of a humble admiration of the illimitable superior spirit who reveals himself in the slight details we are able to perceive with our frail and feeble minds. That deeply emotional conviction of the presence of a superior reasoning power which is revealed in the incomprehensible universe forms my idea of God." And most of us would at least go that far. And we would agree that our problem is not, "Is there a God?" But our real problem is to have an idea of what he thinks about us personally. And that's the important thing. And I think most of us are in that position this morning.

There may be some real atheist here, though it's very difficult to logically hold to a position of pure atheism, but there maybe some atheist and there may be a few agnostics who say, "Well, I don't know," and who haven't caught up with Einstein's own conclusions yet. But I think most of us probably would be in the position where we say, "Yes, that isn't a great difficulty to us. We believe there is a God. But what is his attitude to us?" And that's why really, those lovely summer afternoons during our early teens were so good, where school would be out, and you'd lie beside the lake. And you'd feel the water lapping there, and you'd hear the hum of the old bees and the crickets. And you'd just lie there with the sun beaming down on you, and it really would seem that just all was right with the world. And you'd just daydream and feel there wasn't a worry in the world. And you hadn't things like loans to think about or futures to think about, and it was just beautiful. And really what was most enjoyable about that experience was you felt, "In some way I'm touching near the heart of the universe. There's some peace here; there's some contentment here; and somehow I'm getting deep down near the heart of things."

Now that's the way most mystics try to contact God. That's the way most mystics try to feel that God is satisfied with them and that they're right with God. They do it through that attempt to sense a oneness between themselves and the whole world of nature. And old Wordsworth would go out onto the lakes in England and would say, "And I have felt a presence that disturbs me with the joy of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused, whose dwelling is the light of setting suns, and blue sky, and the round earth, and in the mind of man; a spirit that impels all thinking things, all objects of all thought, and rolls through all things." And nature mystics would try to feel that they were right with the Creator of the universe through that kind of almost cosmic identification of themselves with the life force in nature. And that's one way of doing it.

There are other kind of psychic mystics who would try to work primarily on their intellects rather than on their physical perception of their oneness with the world. And they would work on their intellects and either by drugs, or by hypnotism, or simply by the power of meditation would try to raise their intellectual perception to the nth degree, to the point where they would experience phenomena that would seem supernatural and would give them a sense of something supernatural. And old Coleridge was one of that kind of person really. He was an English poet and you remember he wrote a poem called "Kubla Khan." And then you remember, he finished it and he said, "We've a circle round him thrice and close your eyes with holy dread for he on honeydew have fed and drunk the milk of paradise." And we feel that Coleridge was trying it through drugs of some kind and he was really

talking in honeydew about drugs.

And either with drugs, or with hypnotism, or with meditation there are many kind of psychic mystics who work primarily on their powers of their mind to make themselves feel right with the being that is behind the universe.

There are others really who do it primarily on an emotional level. There are people who try to give significance and a sense of eternity to the ordinary everyday things of life. And they try in that way, to emotionally feel that they are really eternal. Most of us I think look down on that glorified attitude to war that they had to the First World War, but I think a lot of people still do it with death. They try to raise either patriotism or death itself to such a high level that you persuade yourself emotionally that you feel a contact with the eternal behind the universe. And old Brooke was an air force pilot really in the First World War and he used this kind of way to express it. And we are very skeptical of it now with the mess in Vietnam. But I think a lot of people still treat death like this. He said,

“If I should die, think only this of me;  
That there's some corner of a foreign field  
That is for ever England. There shall be  
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;  
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,  
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,  
A body of England's breathing English air,  
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,  
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less  
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;  
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;  
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,  
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

And I think a lot of people try to attribute that kind of meaning to their own body and to death itself. And they try to feel emotionally, “Yes, wherever I go, wherever my body goes somewhere I’ll have contact with the great being behind the universe.” And you can see that whether they’re psychic mystics, or physical mystics, or emotional mystics, or intellectual mystics, or whether they’re spiritist mystics who try to contact indiscriminately the spiritual world that undoubtedly exists behind our world -- whatever kind of mystic they are, they try to find out what the great being behind the universe thinks of them by feeling it in their own experience.

There are of course two great difficulties with it: One is this, can you be sure that the feeling of harmony that you have in your own mind and emotions really represents some objective reality as far as the great being behind the universe is concerned? That’s the great problem with mysticism. Can you be sure that your inward subjective experience is saying anything at all about what is really out there? Maybe it is a great roaring tyrant that hates you and is determined to destroy you. Maybe your experience is not reliable.

And we know it isn’t. You watch a ship going over the horizon and you know it is getting smaller. But, it’s not. It’s not getting smaller. But, it looks to you as if it’s getting smaller. And

repeatedly we have seen that our own personal experience is not a reliable record of what is happening in objective reality. That's one of the difficulties of mysticism, brothers and sisters. It's one of the difficulties of laying total emphasis on your personal experience of what you think the attitude of the author of the universe is to you.

The other difficulty is this: that all of us have found the bees stop humming; the crickets stop clicking; and school starts again, and winter comes; and the kind of feeling doesn't last forever. And even the old drug doesn't last forever. And we've found that the experience of harmony and integration that we sense at that time does not last. There are times when it disappears completely, and we're back in the midst of anxiety, and depression, and fear, and worry. Now those are two of the great difficulties with trying to contact the author of the universe through just a mystical personal experience.

Now it was never God's will. It was never God's will that we should wander about in such uncertainty about his attitude to us. It was never his desire that we should wander up and down the labyrinths of mystical experience trying to feel him present. God did not condemn us to that. And that really, brothers and sisters, is the tremendous difference there is between a kind of mystical experience and really the kind of Christian experience. That one has certainty and the other is bound with uncertainty.

Here's what God in fact did instead, he allowed his Son to live among us for 35 years; that is, in an ordinary physical body that we could touch, that we could poke our fingers into and see it was there. He allowed his Son to live among us for 35 years and he testified that it was his Son. And other people who were enemies of this man even testified the same thing.

Now maybe you'd look at the historical record of that just before we go on. Its Matthew 3:17. And it's this kind of down to earth fact that is the basis of our belief about God's attitude to us. It isn't just what we feel, but it is that this man actually lived on our earth for 35 years, and that we have historical records showing that. And the fact that he was God's Son is testified to by God himself. Matthew 3:17, "And lo, a voice from heaven, saying, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.'" And you remember, I think it's in Peter, that that was said again by God. And Peter points out that they actually heard that. And there was another occasion you see on which this voice was heard from heaven at his baptism, at Jesus' baptism, and then on another occasion on a mountain top. And there you have it in 2 Peter 1:16, "For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,' we heard this voice born from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain."

So first of all, God allowed his Son to live among us and testified that this was his Son. Even enemies testified that he was God's Son. If you'd like to look at Matthew 27:54, you see that even the man that was used by the government, the Roman government to destroy Jesus thought the same thing. "When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe, and said, 'Truly this was the Son of God!'" Now God didn't only allow this man to live among us for 35 years but he allowed him to tell us that when he died he was going to give his life for you and me, and that actually he was going to take back his life again, and he wasn't going to lose it forever. And God allowed this man to do this so that you and I would know that he was not just bluffing.

It's very easy for me to say to you, "Look, I'm going to make everything right between you and your Creator. I'm going to bear the penalty for all your sins, that's what I'm going to die for." And I die and you never see me again. Well, big deal I could be right I could be wrong; you can't tell. But if I come back, if I say to you, "Look I'm going to give my life to my Father your Creator for your sins, and he's going to give me that life right back." Then it will be easier to believe the first promise if the second is true, won't it? It will be easier to believe that he actually did give his life for your sins and he made things right between you and his Father, if he actually makes the second promise come true. And this you remember, is what Jesus did.

It's John 10:17-18 where he made the statement. Maybe it would be good to look just at John 10:11 first, where he states the reason for his death. John 10:11, that he is not just a political victim of the Jewish/Roman feud. "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." And he states plainly that that's why he's dying. Then 17-18 if you look at it, "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one takes it from me." "I'm not dying by sheer political chance here". "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again; this charge I have received from my Father."

Now that's all illusion unless he actually came back from the dead and this in fact, is what he did.

In 1 Corinthians 15, you see it there. 1 Corinthians 15:3-6, and Paul is repeating what he obviously observed, "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep."

Now God allowed that to happen. He allowed his Son to live among us, he identified him as his Son, he allowed him to give his life and say that he was giving it for our sins to make things right between us and his Creator, and then he returned again over a period of 40 days. Now that's the basis of our belief that God is rightly related to us and that God approves of us, and accepts us. It's not mystical experience. It's really what is stated there in Romans 4:22 and it's the verse that really we'd study this morning. Romans 4:22, "That is why his faith was 'reckoned to him as righteousness.' But the words, 'it was reckoned to him,' were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him that raised from the dead Jesus our Lord." Now the 'it' is faith. Faith will be reckoned to us as righteousness. We will be made right with our Creator if we believe in him that raised from the dead Jesus our Lord and that's the basis of our sense that we are right with God and that's the difference between it and mystical experience. One is faith, the other is sight.

Now it might be good to look at the verse before we elaborate it. It's 2 Corinthians 5:7. And this is the distinction really between a Christian's assurance that his Creator accepts him and a mystic's assurance. "For we walk by faith, not by sight." And God is so anxious to preserve that in each one of us who have entered into that relationship with him that he often tests us with it. He often tests to see if we're walking by faith or by sight. The mystic walks by sight, "And I have felt a presence that disturbs me with the joy of elevated thoughts." And when I cease to feel it, I then, am uncertain of what the Creator really thinks of me. And the person who is under drugs and has a psychic experience that seems to him like a spiritual experience, when the drugs go he ceases to feel it. He ceases to be sure whether he's right or not. He walks by sight. He walks by the sight of his feelings, the sight of his mind, the sight of his body.

But we walk by faith. We believe that this historical fact is true; we believe that this Jesus actually did make things right when he went to his Father, and we believe therefore, that his Father accepts us. And it is by faith and not by sight. Now because it's by faith, God goes to a great deal of trouble to make sure that we continue in faith and so many of us have found, when we first came to believe that Jesus had made things right between us and God, we found a great peace coming into our hearts; just an incomprehensible peace and contentment that filled our hearts. And we really felt, "My God I am thine, what a comfort divine, what a blessing to know that my Jesus is mine." And we just sensed the joy of being God's. And then God withdrew the joy from us to check if we were walking in a mystical experience of sight, or in a real Christian experience of faith. And of course, many of us in those early days, started to look around for our feeling. Where's the joy gone? And really what God was trying to do was to see if we were walking by faith or by sight, whether we were walking by that great feeling of peace we had or that great feeling of contentment we had, and whether we were laying emphasis on that, or whether we were simply believing, "God is satisfied with the blood of his Son, so things are right between me and him."

And so God often does that. At the beginning, you remember, God really makes things go very well. Really, everything goes very prosperously for the first few months when you really believe that God loves you and accepts you as his own. And then God allows you to begin to come into some lack of prosperity, and some obstacles, and some difficulties to see if you are walking by faith or walking by sight. And so repeatedly he will do this. He will do it with your physical circumstances. He'll allow them to become problematical to you, to see am I walking by faith or am I walking by sight? Because it's so easy brothers and sisters, to suddenly change the ground of your justification, you see; to look in and see the things that God has wrought in your experience and actually to sink into a mystical experience.

Now do you see that we believe things are right between us and God because Jesus has died for us, because it's a historical fact? Romans 5:9, we are justified by the blood of his Son. God has said, "When I see the life of Jesus presented to me on your behalf I regard you as right with me." That's it. Many of us you see try to look at the blood of Jesus and feel its value. So in prayer times we'll go before God and then we'll look in and see, "Do I feel right with God? Do I feel his presence in my heart?" You can't feel the blood of Jesus. You can't feel the value of the blood of Jesus. You appreciate the value of Jesus' life by saying, "God regards it as paying for the sins of the whole world so I'm going to look at it that way too."

It's an objective reality that you look out to. And brothers and sisters, there's a great deliverance from a welter of subjective mysticism when a person really plants their feet firmly on the fact of belief that the blood of Jesus satisfies our Father. There's just a great deliverance from that subjective world of, "Do I feel the same as I felt yesterday?" And we go before God and we say, "Do I feel his presence? No. I have to feel his presence. Now, let me try to feel his presence." And you start trying to feel his presence and you don't feel his presence so you say, "Ah, there must be some sin in my life because I don't feel his presence."

Do you see brothers and sisters that God has delivered us from mysticism? He has delivered us from looking into our feelings, or looking into our minds, or looking into our bodies, or looking into our spirits to see whether we're right with him. We go by faith. Is it raining outside? Well, I mean it's just corny, for Dave to say, "Well, I feel a twinge of arthritis. Yeah, I think it might be." Or, for someone in the third row to say, "Yeah, I think I remember it was. No, it wasn't raining. No." Or, for all of us to strain our ears and to try and hear a vague sound of rain

through the roof. The easiest thing is for me to say, "Jack, go out and see if it's raining, come back and tell us."

Now that's what Jesus has done, you see. He's gone right out and come back and said, "Things are okay, and my Father loves you." And it's just all the difference in the world. It's all the difference in the world between accepting that, and trying to 'feel' it by producing a mystical experience inside of you.

And what do we do? Well really God has made it plain: you just admit any things that are wrong in your life; you stop doing them; and you accept that God has paid for those with Jesus' blood, and that he accepts you as his own children. And when you kind of feel that maybe you're not his child, you throw the feelings away and you say, "No, Romans 5:9 'I am justified by the blood of his Son; my faith will be reckoned to 'me' who believe in Jesus who was raised from the dead.'" But it's faith, dear ones. It's faith in the fact. Let the feeling take care of itself.

But do you see the importance? Brothers and sisters it seems it takes us so long to learn not to keep looking inside ourselves to see if we're right with God. That's not the basis of it. It's not by sight but by faith. We don't ask ourselves, "Do I feel right with God? Do I feel part of the universe? Do I feel part of nature?" No, Jesus has gone outside, has come in and told us, "The clouds have gone. The sun of my Father's love is shining on you and he regards you as his children if you simply believe in me and begin to submit yourself to me." And that's it and it is really such a deliverance.

So, I don't know if some of you are wrapped up in the old mystical trip. I think most of us were at some time. I certainly was involved in it at one time. And I think it's very hard at the beginning to disregard that inner mystical experience. But do you see that that's the basis of a right relationship with God. Not looking inward mystically but looking out at what Jesus has done with his Father, and believing that. And sometimes that's believing just 'cold turkey', just believing 'dead cold'. Nothing! Nothing else! No feeling! Just believing!

But then you begin to find, as you concentrate on the fact, that your faith grows and then the feeling comes up after it. But when you concentrate on the feeling, and when the feeling goes, then the faith is undermined, and then the fact seems vague and uncertain. But really when it's Fact and Faith and Feeling, [emphasizing the order] then it is really a life of continuous assurance and complete confidence that the universe is friendly, and that the Creator really loves us. And that's a good way to live, a good way to fly. I pray that God will show you it.

Let us pray.

Father, we would really pray for our brothers and sisters here this morning who may be involved either as Christians, or as unbelievers in some kind of mysticism. Father, we would trust you now to give them revelation. Not crudely to identify their experience with the one described this morning, but rather that they will go to you and will receive revelation about their experience. And Father, if any of them are up and down day after day because they're looking in to their feelings instead of looking out to the fact that Jesus has made things right with you, then we would trust you to deliver them from that and bring them into this clear, open, sunlit upland where you walk in constant assurance that you are our Father, and that you love us, and that you have no doubt that you can accept us.

Father, we thank you for that. We trust you to bring every one of us into an assurance of that situation for Jesus' glory. Amen.