Enzo Bianchi was born in Castel Boglione, Piedmont, Italy, in 1943. In 1965, after graduating from the University of Turin, he founded an ecumenical monastic community – the Bose Community – of which he is still the prior. Fr Bianchi is a well-known author of books on *lectio divina* and the spiritual life, which have been translated into many languages. He has dedicated himself to the search for spirituality capable of giving life to Christians today and furthering communion among all people.

The Bose Community now numbers over 80 brothers and sisters of various Christian traditions, and receives thousands of visitors annually.

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GOD, WHERE ARE YOU?

Enzo Bianchi
Translated by Susan Leslie

SPCK

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One day, when he was receiving learned guests, Rabbi Mendel of Kozk astounded them by asking all of a sudden, 'Where does God dwell?' They laughed at him: 'What's the matter with you? Isn't the world full of his glory?' But the rabbi himself answered his question: 'God dwells where he is allowed to enter.'

(M. Buber, *The Way of Man*)

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Series Foreword

To read Enzo Bianchi's work is, among other things, to be forcefully made aware that we have got used to a rather thin diet of resources to help us read the Bible. We have plenty of good scholarship and plenty of good popular summaries of that scholarship – but very little on the actual *theology* of reading the Bible, very little on reading the Bible as a central form of our *discipleship*. Twentieth-century theology has left us with a great heritage of recovering and reworking some of the major themes in the kind of scriptural study practised in the early or medieval Church or in the Reformation: Henri de Lubac, Karl Barth and others have helped us question the bland modern assumption that the Bible is primarily a set of historical texts, to be read and understood by criteria external to themselves. All but the narrowest of conservative Protestant theology has moved some distance away from that other modern assumption which sees Scripture as a guaranteed source of unquestionably reliable information and little more. But how then should we understand the relationship between our common life and prayer and our study of Scripture?

Fr Enzo often returns in one way or another to the theme of 'epiclesis' – the invocation of the Holy Spirit – as a focal act of the community, especially the monastic community. It is part of the way in which we live as Christians with a keen awareness of the age to come, the way we live eschatologically. And what the Holy Spirit does is to bring us face to face with the Word of God, the living action of the Second Person of the Trinity. Thus if we read Scripture as we must, invoking the Holy Spirit, what we encounter in Scripture is that living Word. We are made contemporary with what Scripture witnesses to; we discover the *unity* of Scripture not in any theory but in the person of Jesus Christ, on whom the whole of Scripture converges and around whom it finds its shape.

For Fr Enzo, this is the key to an extraordinarily broad range of reflection – on priesthood, on religious life, on the challenges of contemporary European society, on the daily struggle and frustration of being a Christian. If it is true that there is no way of finding or being found by God that is not also a finding of one's own humanity, then what is happening in the scriptural encounter is an unveiling of who we are – as human beings and as the particular people we happen to be. In this encounter we meet the God who has already become present in us and seeks to be made known through us; we become a place where God's glory can be manifest. The variety of scriptural narrative is testimony to the diversity of the modes of God's presence in each one. So as we read, in community, in company with our brothers and sisters, we are doubly alert – to what we are being taught about the calling, dignity and destiny of men and women, and to what we are learning about our own calling and gifting.

The reading of Scripture is a genuinely sacramental event, one in which God's act in the past, the present and the future is laid bare to us and in which we are ourselves caught up in that act. As we absorb the communication of the Word, we become contemporary with the events of primal revelation, and contemporary with the climax of history in which Christ is all in all. And it is in this way alone that we become truly contemporary with our own times. We may think there is no problem about being 'contemporary' here and now; but the truth is that, without an anchorage in the Word of God, we are insubstantial, distracted by our own private agendas and incapable of truthful relationship with each other. Our communion with God the Word, realized in our communion as readers together of the written vehicle of the Word, delivers us from this shadow world and equips us to give voice to something of God's perspective on the world we inhabit – both as celebrants of the environment in which we stand and as hopeful critics of a human world that is profoundly confused and conflicted.

Fr Enzo's books are a powerful witness to what the monastic calling can still make possible in our time. Behind all he writes

stands the practice of the community at Bose, a community that has offered a unique remodelling of the traditions of classical monasticism in a style that is compelling for countless people today. It is a community in which the corporate study of Scripture is central; those who have experienced biblical reflection in community at Bose will know what an extraordinary experience it is, an opening of unimagined depths in the text. But the friends and guests of Bose will also recognize how this approach shapes the whole ethos of worship through a liturgy that, like all the best monastic liturgies, lays out the wholeness of scriptural imagery and narrative in all its rich interconnection and interdependence. Fr Enzo's writing shows how this, far from creating an inward-looking, 'aesthetic' spirit, provides the resources we need as Christians to bring real illumination to the confusions of our culture.

Enzo Bianchi is one of the most significant Christian voices in Europe. He shows what can be achieved by an immersion in Scripture that involves both intellect and imagination alike, and – in common with all the most serious Christian voices of our day – he cannot be labelled as a partisan 'liberal' or 'traditionalist'. He offers exactly what the monastic voice at its truest has always offered: a way into the heart of our ecclesial and social questions that is honest, patient and sensitive. His is a perspective that the English-speaking Christian world should welcome enthusiastically.

Rowan Williams
Magdalene College, Cambridge

Introduction

All our life, we hear in the depths of our heart a gentle whisper, like a still small voice (cf. 1 Kings 19.12, KJV): 'Where are you?' This is the first word that God addresses to human beings who have discovered that they are capable of self-determination, able to choose and to do evil (cf. Gen. 3.9). 'Where are you?' that is: what stage have you reached in the process of becoming human, a work of art to be created with intelligence, love and freedom? This is the real question, the decisive one for every man and woman under the sun. Only by answering this question do we realize who we are, what we are becoming, our responsibility to others and to the world. To answer this question means to 'search for man', *quaerere hominem*, a task that cannot be shirked either by those who believe in God or those who do not.

However, there are times in our lives when, perhaps prompted by this fundamental question that God poses through our conscience, we are led to ask another question: 'God, where are you?' We address this question to God: either we have faith in him and he is the object of our desire and our quest, or we question him with suspicion and mistrust. 'God, where are you?' is a question that sometimes springs from anguish in times of suffering, solitude or despair; at other times it arises from a loving, nostalgic desire for him whom we love but who remains invisible to us.

Every day, we have to overcome doubt, begin to believe again and renew our faith, thanks to the love we feel within ourselves for the Lord. Yes, love overcomes our doubts, our lack of faith, our incredulity. This way is not madness, it does not set aside or offend reason, but it is the breath of life: faith leads to love and love to faith.

The following pages, resulting from my close study of the Bible, seek only to echo stories of encounters between God and human

beings, between God and those whom he chose, called and loved because they had sought God, prompted, dare one say, by God himself. The stories are varied because God is met in various ways. They are encounters in which God shows himself unexpectedly, not as we are used to thinking of him: he is a God who surprises us, astonishes us, contradicts us and at times even seems to be against us. These biblical passages are sometimes dramatic, like a struggle between adversaries, and sometimes full of joy, like the union of marriage.

As we read these stories, we learn what Christianity is: we come to know a God who came to us in human form, who came among us by making himself one of us. Jesus of Nazareth is the image of the invisible God (cf. John 1.18; Col. 1.15); he is his face: a God made human, a man in whom the living God has lived and continues to live.

'God, where are you?' we cry.

'Where are *you*?' cries God.

In this dialogue of cries and questions lies our true identity: we are human beings called to become God.

1

The faith of Abraham

Rabbi Judah said: 'The whole world was going in one direction and Abraham was going in the other.'

(*Genesis Rabbah* 42.8)

Abraham . . . is the father of all of us, as it is written: 'I have made you the father of many nations' [Gen. 17.5] . . . in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

(Rom. 4.16–17)

Abraham had not received anything from God, yet he believed in the one who promised; that is the faith that is truly worthy of praise and renown. (Augustine, *Sermons* 113A.10)

Introduction

According to the Bible, the first human being who encountered the true and living God, heard his word and obeyed it, is Abraham. His story is told in the book of Genesis, chapters 12 to 25.[1] Abraham is the great father of the people of Israel, and indeed generations of Jews will call him *abinu*, 'our father'. This denotes father in the religious as well as the genealogical sense: father in the faith, so much so that God will be defined as 'the God of Abraham'.

What is certain is that various traditions have come together in the pages that tell Abraham's story. These were at first transmitted orally, then reread and edited and eventually given their final form in the book of Genesis at the time of the Jewish exile in Babylon in the sixth century BC. What, in short, does Abraham's story and

its position in the first book of the Bible tell us? It tells us that God wanted the world and the human race to be free; moved by his ecstatic love, God created, by his Word and his Spirit, everything that exists. In the creation stories (Gen. 1—2), the origins and the *telos*, the purpose, of the world and of humankind are revealed. From creation onwards, the manifestations of man's sin and failure emerge, real wounds inflicted on God's creative purpose. Adam and Eve do not accept their condition of creatures (Gen. 3); Cain kills his brother Abel (Gen. 4); mankind grows in violence and malice to the point of causing the flood (Gen. 6—7); the tower of Babel is built in the name of totalitarian political and cultural power (Gen. 11.1–9). The man and woman created by God, called to a task that should have borne fruit in a full life and in justice and peace, show their capacity for evil, demonstrating that the way they have taken is one that leads to death and so needs salvation.

In that prehistory of mankind, which has some of the features of myth, evil grows and increases rapidly. But in that same history, although death and destruction are possible, human beings bear 'the image and likeness of God' (cf. Gen. 1.26) imprinted on them by God at creation, and they 'search for God and perhaps grope for him' (Acts 17.27). Abel offers sacrifices pleasing to God (Gen. 4.4); Enoch's generation 'began to invoke the name of the LORD' (Gen. 4.26); Enoch 'walked with God' (Gen. 5.24); Noah 'found favour in the sight of the LORD' (Gen. 6.8), so much so that, after the flood, the Lord himself renews through him his blessing on all creation and establishes a covenant, a pact of life, with every living being (Gen. 9.8–17).

The God who in the beginning created the world with his word (Gen. 1.3, 6ff.) wants to begin history anew with his same word. He wants to start the history of salvation, in which he decides to make himself known and reveal himself to his creatures. This history begins precisely with Abraham, whom God calls, chooses and separates from other people, the children of Adam who have embarked on ways of death. It is through Abraham that God will offer mankind a way to return to him. If Adam is the figure

of totality, of unity (*omnis homo Adam*), Abraham is the figure of difference. He is a man, he belongs to mankind, he is at one with human history but at the same time he is called to be different. He is chosen and separated to make a journey that will bring everyone to God, carrying God's blessing, that is, life and peace, to all peoples.

Man, created by God in his image and likeness, is *capax Dei*, capable of knowing God, of being in relationship with God, even in the darkness of evil, and Abraham is the man to whom God turns, making himself known and meeting him. According to the Bible, Abraham does not emerge from absolute darkness but from a humanity that in its sin and ignorance had sought God in many religious ways, which were, however, tainted by idolatry. What is specific to Abraham, then, is his faith, his adherence to God who called him personally, a faith that shows itself first of all as a break with the idolatry of his fathers. Several centuries later, Joshua will see Abraham's story in this light:

> Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors – Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor – lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan. (Josh. 24.2–3)

Indeed, in the background of Abraham's story is the dispersion of the peoples that took place after Babel, but God, in his faithful love for man, desires to transform this process of dispersion and corruption into a way of communion and fullness of life. To this end, he calls Abraham, and this calling forth leads finally to communion. Abraham will be the father not only of the people of Israel but of all who believe in the true and living God.

'Go . . . to the land that I will show you'

In the Bible, Abraham's name appears for the first time in the genealogy of the flood, a genealogy that bears witness to the increase of mankind blessed by God through his covenant with

Noah. Among the descendants of Shem, Noah's son, it is written that Terah was 70 years old when he begot Abraham, Nahor and Haran (Gen. 11.26). At this point, however, the chain of generations appears to be interrupted because Abraham's wife Sarai is sterile, and so cannot give him offspring (Gen. 11.30). In a caravan led by his father, Abraham leaves Ur of the Chaldeans in lower Mesopotamia and migrates to the land of Canaan, crossing the territory of Haran on the way. At Haran, however, Abraham's father Terah dies (Gen. 11.32) and so the goal is not reached.

It is just after his father's death in the land of Haran that God calls Abraham. Thus the first encounter between Abraham and the living God takes place, not in the form of a vision but in that of a word. It is a sudden, unexpected encounter and the reader of Genesis recognizes in chapter 12 a true new beginning: the start of the history of salvation. 'The LORD said to Abram, "Go [*lekh lekha*] from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you"' (Gen. 12.1). One word from God resounds in Abram's heart. It is short, simple and disconcertingly sober, and at the same time it is new; it has never been heard before. It is a word that surprises Abram and shows that it was not he who had chosen to encounter God but God in his freedom and love who had wanted to encounter him. It is a word addressed directly to Abram, saying 'you' as when two human beings meet, yet it is God's word to man, God's first word to man in history, according to Scripture.

This word begins with an invitation: *Lekh lekha*, an expression which literally means 'go towards yourself'. It is an invitation to leave on a journey that is also interior, comparable in some way to the famous *gnôthi sautón*, 'know yourself', of traditional Greek wisdom. Abram continues his father Terah's migration but he is called to enter more deeply into the strange environment in which he finds himself, to travel further and in a sense towards a new destination. In obeying the command to 'Go!', he has first of all to make a break with three things:

- with the land from which he has come;
- with his idolatrous religious environment;[2]
- with his father's house, that is, with his kinship ties.[3]

The Lord's call is gratuitous, sovereign and free; it is motivated by love for humanity but it also represents a challenge because it asks for separations that are ever more deep and demanding. God asks us to 'leave for', to 'go from . . . in order to move towards'.[4] It is necessary to take leave of what is known and gives security, and go towards something new that involves risk: for a new life, a true life of communion, it is absolutely essential to free oneself from old ties, because 'without a clean break, a good communion is not possible' (Salomon Resnik). Yet how hard it is to understand this fact and what a temptation it is to go straight ahead, dragging the heavy burden of what lies behind, the past.

Here we can ask ourselves why exactly God chose Abram. The biblical texts give us no answer: it is not said that Abram was better than other men or that he was righteous and pleasing to God, as it was said of Noah. No, the call of God is due to nothing but his ecstatic love, which needs to go out of itself into someone else, a 'beloved': this call is not a response to the merits or virtues of the one called, nor is it a matter of destiny or predestination: no, the reason belongs to the mystery of God!

However, the most vital thing for us is that, in that personal call to Abram, the love of God for all human beings is revealed. For Abram, that call cannot be a privilege or a reward but only an assumption of responsibility in favour of all. Always the call of God first distinguishes, elects and separates from others, then shows itself as a call in favour of others. Election and universality are not contradictory but closely related: universality prevents election from becoming a privilege and, conversely, election prevents universality from disappearing into an anonymity that recognizes no personal responsibility. So, for Abram, his vocation means first of all believing in the word of God addressed to him, obeying that word truly,

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