
Anselm: I Believe In Order To Understand

**An Evensong meditation by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
Observing the Feast of Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury**

I salute Anselm of Canterbury today! Here's to St. Anselm, "faith seeking understanding," "Fides Quarens Intellectum!"

Like many an archbishop in the 11th Century, Anselm of Canterbury did not always enjoy an easy relationship with whomever was the King of England. Anselm was exiled first by King William II, in 1097, as they disputed the king's right to be involved in church matters (a recurring event in the Church in England!). Exiled for three years! Then, after William died, Anselm was exiled again, by King Henry I, from 1103-1106, for the same sorts of reasons.

But it is Anselm's creative scholarship that I admire (except that I do not admire his atonement theory). Anselm sought to reconcile faith and reason in the Christian life. He used the phrase "Fides Quarens Intellectum" to describe that theological work: "Faith Seeking Understanding." The intellect was important to him, but it was important because faith inspired it.

He is known for composing a distinctive, if curious, argument for the existence of God, an argument that depends upon thought and intellect alone. By defining God as "that than which nothing greater can be thought," Anselm reasons that God must exist. It is called "the ontological argument" for the existence of God. Here is, generally, how it goes:

1. The fool understands the phrase "something than which nothing greater can be thought."
2. Hence, "something than which nothing greater can be thought" exists at least in the fool's mind.
3. It is greater to exist in reality than to exist in the mind alone.
4. So if "that than which nothing greater can be thought" existed only in the fools' mind, it would be possible to think of something greater (the same thing existing in reality)
5. But this would be a contradiction, since it is impossible to think of something greater than "that than which nothing greater can be thought."
6. Hence "something than which nothing greater can be thought" must exist both in the fool's mind and in reality. God exists!

The argument has logical fallacies, but I don't care. I love it. Its genius, for me, actually lies in its definition of God. God is greater than anything we can think of. Whatever we can imagine, God is greater. The argument does not exactly *prove* the existence of God, but the argument does *describe* the existence of God!

Anyway, Anselm also gave us an ongoing principle on how faith and reason go together: "I am not attempting, O Lord, to penetrate your loftiness, for I cannot begin to match my understanding with it, but I desire in some measure to understand your truth, which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand in order that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand." Faith seeking understanding.

Finally, Saint Anselm was a man of prayer. He was not merely obsessed with the role of reason in faith. I close with this prayer, titled, "A Song of Anselm," striking in its use of feminine imagery for Jesus, even back then!

A SONG OF ANSELM

Jesus, as a mother you gather your people to you:
you are gentle with us as a mother with her children;
Often you weep over our sins and our pride:
tenderly you draw us from hatred and judgement.
You comfort us in sorrow and bind up our wounds:
in sickness you nurse us,
and with pure milk you feed us.
Jesus, by your dying we are born to new life:
by your anguish and labour we come forth in joy.
Despair turns to hope through your sweet goodness:
through your gentleness we find comfort in fear.
Your warmth gives life to the dead:
your touch makes sinners righteous.
Lord Jesus, in your mercy heal us:
in your love and tenderness remake us.
In your compassion bring grace and forgiveness:
for the beauty of heaven may your love prepare us.

AMEN.

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