

SEEK YE MY FACE

Christianity is a religion of paradoxes. The biblical statements contradict one another:

‘You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live. You shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen’. (Ex 33:23)

‘The Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to a friend’. (Ex 33:11)

‘And Manoah said to his wife, ‘We shall surely die, for we have seen God’. (Judges 13:22)

‘Seek the Lord and find in him your refuge: yea, seek his face constantly’. (Ps 104:4)

‘No man has ever seen God’. (1 John 4:12)

‘He who has seen me has seen my Father’. (John 14:8)

‘Lord of Lords, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has ever seen or can see’. (1 Tim 6v16)

‘Blest are the pure in heart, for they shall see God’. (Matt 5:8)

How can these antitheses be reconciled? What does ‘seeing’ mean?

A synthesis can perhaps be provided if we take the two quotations: ‘No one can see God and live’ and ‘Blest are the pure in heart, for they shall see God’. Therefore, the pure in heart are those who have ‘died’. However, what does it mean ‘to die’ in this context?

Here we go back to the creation story in Genesis 3 and 4. Adam and Eve were created in the image and likeness of God and were originally pure in heart, full of grace, for they saw and spoke with God in the garden. But they were not content to be creatures but wanted to be as God and so they disobeyed, fell from grace and lost their likeness to God, but not the image. They were naked. God in his mercy did not destroy them but ‘made Adam and his wife garments of skins and clothed them’ until such time as they would be reconciled to him – regain their likeness to him. He protected them from the full vision of himself, which in their sinfulness would have destroyed them.

From then on, all human beings have a ‘garment of skin’, which covers and obscures their essential being. We have lost our likeness to God and although we still have the image that is defaced. We have a distorted idea of what true humanity is; we are meant to become like God, but we don’t want to be human. We try to hide behind: 1) clothes, makeup. 2) association with a group. 3) non commitment. 4) self-improvement – house, job etc. But all of these are useless if we don’t start from reality. Mankind cannot bear too much reality, as TS Eliot said. We cling to our garments of skin; unless we remove them, or ‘die’ to them, we cannot see God.

Our tasks as Christians is to become real, to remove this cover, this false persona, and become authentic, and this is what is meant by ‘dying’. It is a circular movement though. If one ‘sees’ God, and I presume that have at some time had an experience of God which can be called ‘seeing’, then inevitably some part of our false self dies. And if through circumstances, we shed some of our falseness and become more ‘real’, then in some sense we shall see God. The vision of God changes us and when we are changed, our capacity for seeing becomes greater.

Purification of heart occurs as a consequence of following Christ, of becoming one with him. ‘It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me’. This presupposes the whole pattern of Christian ascetical practice that we try to live by, which if followed faithfully will gradually strip off the ‘garment of skins’ and turn us into the people whom God would have us be. The pure heart is the loving heart that enters into communion of service and obedience with Jesus Christ.

All this can sound very negative and austere but in fact, the Bible witnesses to the delight to be found in seeing God. ‘And when I awake and see thy likeness I shall be satisfied with it’. (Ps 17:16) Satisfied. What a lovely word with echoes of repletion, fullness, nothing more wanted.

TS Eliot's Journey of the magi gives an excellent example of the Journey we all have to make. The Magi, having made a long and arduous journey, arrive at evening, 'not a moment too soon, Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory'.

But then, having 'seen' God and been satisfied they return home and ponder the experience. The wise man asks, 'were we led all that way for Birth or Death? There was a birth, certainly; we had evidence and no doubt. I had seen both birth and death but had thought they were different; this birth was hard and bitter agony for us, like death, our death. We returned to our places, these Kingdoms. But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation, with an alien people clutching their gods. I should be glad of another death'.

There we have it: the vision of God is an unsettling experience. We can no longer go on living in our old heedless way, we are changed. To quote TS Eliot again: from the play 'The Family Reunion' where Harry, who has just been through a cathartic experience, says, 'Now I feel quite happy, as if happiness did not consist in getting what one wanted, or in getting rid of what can't be got rid of, but in a different vision. This is like an end'.

A different vision: that is what we will find happens to us if we seek God's face. We see things from a different perspective; something has died in us – part of the garment of skin has been removed. It feels at the time like a death and yet we find that it is life giving. It is satisfying; it makes us happy. There is joy; love increases. Death is followed by resurrection.

This is a task of all Christians. To follow in the self-emptying way of Jesus in order that we may become divinised – children of God. Our vocation is to be receivers of the fullness of the word made flesh; everything that Jesus is by nature we become by grace. Christianity is about the transformation of sinful humanity – it is not just a matter of becoming good but becoming God. So we actually receive what we tried to grab in the Garden of Eden.

So let us pray that today and each day we can honestly say, 'I am dying to see God!'