

YOU CANNOT SEE MY FACE

Sung Eucharist

Trinity XVIII

St Michael, Cornhill

Sunday October 19th 2014

On the very last day of December 1879, that is *Old Year's Night* as the Scots would call it, Thomas Edison made the first demonstration of the incandescent lamp. With dramatic showmanship he lit up an entire street in Menlo Park in New York, the district in which his laboratories were situated. The demonstration was an enormous success. Thousands of people were bussed out to see this new wonder of the world; lights twinkled in a dazzling way. Perhaps the most remarkable fact of all was that it seemed like something out of nothing. After all in the past, light came from candles or oil burning. Even lighting came from a substance you could smell – or even hear hissing. But Edison produced light from electricity – you could not see, smell or hear it. You had to take it on trust almost that it was there.

In the past century and a half, with the rapid development of modern science many similar reflections abound. Albert Einstein's work on relativity showed matter and time to be related: $E=mc_2$ is the great equation, with insights that led to the harnessing of nuclear energy. James Clerk Maxwell helped us understand electromagnetic radiation – and others indicated that light radiation can be measured as both a wave formation and a particle. When one tries to measure it, light morphs from one to the other – wave to particle, particle to wave and so on. All these discoveries have induced the best philosophers of science to a greater humility in understanding scientific theories. Theories are effectively the best hypotheses for explaining our experience and observations with the evidence we have available at present.

But in some ways none of this humility, or uncertainty is new in our understanding of our world. Our three fascinating readings are clear indications of this. We began with Moses ascending the holy mountain in the hope of a vivid, perhaps even a visual encounter with God. We have been up that mountain with Moses already in the past few weeks. But our reading today was very explicit. Let me remind you:

‘Moses said: “I pray thee show me thy glory.” God’s reply to Moses sets the scene for all generations: ‘And God said: “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you my name...But *you cannot see my face*; for man shall not see me and live.’”

There is no doubting the power or presence of God in the story. Far more dazzling than Edison's lights in Menlo Park! But Moses learnt that God is not just one other being like one of us. Any attempt to make God so leads to the road of idolatry. St Paul sharply but positively proclaims this in our second lesson. Addressing his Thessalonian friends, he reminds them of ‘how they turned to God from idols, to serve a true and living God.’ The implication is plain. The true and living God cannot be described in human terms. That is the road to idolatry.

Throughout the Old and New Testaments the nearness of God is proclaimed, but our God is a God who hides himself. Mark's Gospel, the earliest gospel in the New Testament, has Jesus, time and again, talking in terms of secrecy. Even when the women discover the empty tomb and learn

of Jesus' resurrection, we read: '...trembling and astonishment came upon them; and they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid.' Dramatically these four words conclude Mark's Gospel: 'for they were afraid.' What an ending to any story!

Over the Christian centuries, there grew up a noble tradition of accepting what we could *not* know of God. Only by analogy, only by using imagery could we come close to saying something of God. There even grew up theological terms to describe this truth. So called *apophatic* theology focuses on the unknowable aspects of God. This approach was given the name, the *Via Negativa*, the way of negation. The greatest mediaeval theologian, Thomas Aquinas, who produced millions of words about God, on his deathbed, said of all he had written: 'I count all this as so much straw.' What an extraordinary pronouncement! What can be said about God, then?

But what seems at the outset to be minimalist, even discouraging, turns out to be the very basis of theology. For this requires us to find image after image, picture after picture to refer to God. The Old Testament does so continuously - from our reading today about Moses - all the way through the Psalms and the Wisdom literature. In the New Testament, the teaching of Jesus about God is so often in parables, in *stories* telling of the ways of God.

The danger of seeking a precise picture of God is very great. We reduce God to an inflated human being. So in the Gospel story, Jesus tells the Jews to render unto Caesar the things of Caesar and to God the things of God. This is not just about money. It goes far deeper. For Roman religion was Emperor worship. This church is built on the site of such a temple. It was idolatry, worshipping Caesar. Jesus shows God to be beyond all imagining. When the Romans conquered Jerusalem, they entered the Holy of Holies, in the Jewish Temple and found it to be an entirely empty room. God is greater than all this.

We began with science and our inability to trap an electron or picture a light wave. How remarkable it is to see that our understanding of the reality of God parallels and even underpins a proper view of modern scientific theory. God said: 'I will be gracious to whom I am gracious but *you cannot see my face.*'

Amen

Readings:

Exodus. 33. 12-end.

Thessalonians. 1. 1-10.

Matthew. 22. 15-22.

Exodus. 33. 12-end

¹² And Moses said unto the LORD, See, thou sayest unto me, Bring up this people: and thou hast not let me know whom thou wilt send with me. Yet thou hast said, I know thee by name, and thou hast also found grace in my sight.

¹³ Now therefore, I pray thee, if I have found grace in thy sight, shew me now thy way, that I may know thee, that I may find grace in thy sight: and consider that this nation *is* thy people.

¹⁴ And he said, My presence shall go *with thee*, and I will give thee rest.

¹⁵ And he said unto him, If thy presence go not *with me*, carry us not up hence.

- ¹⁶ For wherein shall it be known here that I and thy people have found grace in thy sight? *is it* not in that thou goest with us? So shall we be separated, I and thy people, from all the people that *are* upon the face of the earth.
- ¹⁷ And the LORD said unto Moses, I will do this thing also that thou hast spoken: for thou hast found grace in my sight, and I know thee by name.
- ¹⁸ And he said, I beseech thee, shew me thy glory.
- ¹⁹ And he said, I will make all my goodness pass before thee, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before thee; and will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will shew mercy on whom I will shew mercy.
- ²⁰ And he said, Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live.
- ²¹ And the LORD said, Behold, *there is* a place by me, and thou shalt stand upon a rock:
- ²² And it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a clift of the rock, and will cover thee with my hand while I pass by:
- ²³ And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen.

Thessalonians. 1. 1-10.

- ¹ Paul, and Silvanus, and Timotheus, unto the church of the Thessalonians *which is* in God the Father and *in* the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace *be* unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.
- ² We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers;
- ³ Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father;
- ⁴ Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God.
- ⁵ For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake.
- ⁶ And ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost:
- ⁷ So that ye were ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia.
- ⁸ For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak any thing.
- ⁹ For they themselves shew of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God;
- ¹⁰ And to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, *even* Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come.

Matthew. 22. 15-22.

- ¹⁵ Then went the Pharisees, and took counsel how they might entangle him in *his* talk.
- ¹⁶ And they sent out unto him their disciples with the Herodians, saying, Master, we know that thou art true, and teachest the way of God in truth, neither carest thou for any *man*: for thou regardest not the person of men.
- ¹⁷ Tell us therefore, What thinkest thou? Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not?
- ¹⁸ But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, Why tempt ye me, ye hypocrites?
- ¹⁹ Shew me the tribute money. And they brought unto him a penny.
- ²⁰ And he saith unto them, Whose *is* this image and superscription?
- ²¹ They say unto him, Caesar's. Then saith he unto them, Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's.
- ²² When they had heard *these words*, they marvelled, and left him, and went their way.