

The human face of God

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In a very strange way we get the truth from sources we don't always want to hear it from. And I feel that there is only one question that answers the human face of God, and that really is the question, because we're all people, I hope, "listening?" And if we hear a voice, I think we can identify God.

St Benedict at the beginning of his Rule is very determined that one of the spiritual arts, if that's the right word, of his monks should be the ability to listen. And he goes on about it a great deal. "Listen, my son, to the precepts of the master, incline the ear of your heart". So St Benedict sets up a particular rule, probably at a particular time for a particular set of people. But it has been, as you know, shaping much spirituality in Europe and elsewhere over the last fifteen hundred years.

What is he trying to do by his rule? It's a method; it's a method that must recognise, although within Community, the call of each individual by God. It's a method for what? Ultimately it's a method by which one listens. But I believe it to be a particularly remarkable Rule because within it he's able to talk very strongly about the community and how important the Community is, but also how important the individual is within that Community. And one of the things I love about him is when he says that the Abbot, the father of the Community, a pivotal person, if not *the* pivotal person of the Community, the Abbot must give "the strong something to strive after, but he mustn't allow the bruised reed to be broken". And that is the voice of God, it seems to me; the voice of God through the father of the Community whom St Benedict tells us to look upon as Christ.

If we see Christ (this is the next question)... if we see Christ, are we seeing the Father? It is one of the simple answers. My learned friend here was telling me about Bishop Robinson who wrote a book, which I hadn't heard of, I have to admit, called *The Human Face of God*, in which he said God is beyond us—so just look at Christ. We have to be very careful not, it seems to me, to approach any form of worship through a communal acceptance.

Now, coming from a Roman Catholic Benedictine monk, that does not sound like a man vowed to obedience. It's very important that we approach God as ourselves, and the variety of approaches is extremely important. And rightly do we come together as an ecumenical pilgrimage because that in itself is a witness that we are at least on the same path together.

But it seems to me we should not be as concerned about unity but far more about truth. And all of us are on a path to God; we've been called by God, and if we're true to ourselves it is vital that we don't, as it were, say that others are wrong. Very few of us at the moment have any real

understanding of Absolute Truth. We could all say together that Christ is the Son of God, we believe in one God, a Trinitarian God; why can't we leave it at that? And pray together, worship together, but accept that we are individually called in our own ways, so long as we are practitioners of the one law that binds us together, which is the law of love: God, our neighbour and ourselves.

The difficulty comes when all of us are trying to discern what is The Truth, trying to discern how to find God. My own path, if I have found him, I think I'm searching, is a very strange one. My paternal family, nearly all of them, were Anglican clergymen. My father, however, was the first eldest son for four generations not to become a clergyman and found himself in the end an agnostic moving fairly rapidly towards atheism. My mother came from an Anglican family as well, was converted to Catholicism, but found herself spurned by most of her family, one of whom is an Anglican nun, one of whom is a theosophist, one of whom is a humanitarian, another of whom is a communist. That is the influence on me, and I am delighted by it all. And in all those people, even though I disagree and passionately argue with them, and with some are in friction, real friction, I find God. Because I know that God is in every person, that we are uniquely made and uniquely representing him.

How do we find God? Yesterday in the reading for our Mass, or was it Sunday, we had Moses looking at the strange sight of the burning bush. *I must go and look at this strange sight*. And the voice says, *Take your shoes off, you're on holy ground*. And Moses is sent to the captured people of Israel to tell them that he has been sent.

And who do I say has sent me? I am who I am.

The burning bush was, in one sense, a vision of God. What about hearing God in the still, small voice? What about wrestling with God as Jacob did? Do we ever actually see God? And if we do see God— how? Moses had to turn his eyes away because God was too brilliant, too terrifying, too awesome to look at in the face. So when we look at each other, are we looking at God? When we look in the mirror, are we looking at God? Is it merely the pot that has been made by the potter? If so, what can we tell of the potter? Well, knowing some of my friends, very strange men. But it is extraordinary how we do believe in the manifestation of God in each person. Not only in each person, but as the Christian Church and other religions are beginning to realise, in nature itself.

The Bishop of London was very effective in the few minutes on the radio this morning, talking about his desire to have the Anglican Churches of London made green. And he said that there are two things: one is we are stewards of His creation, we're not owners of it, and we have to nurture it for the next generation, care for it for God; and secondly, he said, we have to be aware that if we don't save our planet or if we continue to live the way we do, we are actually going against one of the great precepts of the Christian religion, which is caring for the poor, because by consuming more, they are suffering. And he seemed to imply that everything that we did not only affects ourselves and our neighbour, but also had an effect on God Himself. Does God weep over Jerusalem as Jesus did? But can we look at God in the face? No, of course we can't, until He allows us to. But we can't and

therefore what can we do, how can we know God? We hear again and again His call, and we're answering, "yes, Lord", and asking Him to tell us what He wants us to do.

There is, and there always has been, a great discussion about whether God can suffer. Does He suffer, through Christ? But if He's absolute and unchanging and unchangeable, can He suffer? If His Son suffers, does He suffer? And if we know God or are asked to know God or are called to Him, how do we interpret what is being said to us? And how do we know that it is God calling us?

Mary, obviously awe-struck by the angel, and thank God, like Moses, asked questions. It is not out of order to ask questions: *how can this be, I'm not married?* And Moses: *Who do I say has sent me?* So Mary discerned in the Angel, and the shock to her family must have been enormous. I think we underestimate sometimes the real humanity of her, and indeed, of her Son.

Paul, persecuting, was blinded, heard the voice which no-one else heard. How did he know that it was the voice of Christ?

How do we see God? We are told that we can, even if it's through a mirror darkly. Is it like the disciples walking to Emmaus and in the Breaking of Bread? And if we talk theologically about the Breaking of Bread on an ecumenical pilgrimage, what would each one of us say? Would we see God in the Breaking of the Bread? Do we see God in the breaking of His Son on the crucifix? Where do we see the face of God? Mary Magdalene didn't recognise the Risen Christ, but recognised the voice and her name.

So how do we know Him except in our own capacity? You and I are being called, we're being called daily. And if we hear the voice, and I'm sure we do, and I sometimes worry that the Christian tradition separates too distinctly what I suppose I would call the humdrum mortals such as ourselves from the mystics. I think we're called daily. I think the voice of God can be heard daily by each one of us. But we have to attune to it. We have to know that He loves us so much He sent His Son, and we're worth the death of a son. He must talk to us daily. Why is it that in Genesis they could walk with God and talk with Him, it seems, in the cool of the evening? Why can't we? Or am I simply being a little bit too anthropomorphic?

I was talking to a couple of friends in the parish the other day, saying that I was coming to talk here, and I said, "What would you say about the human face of God?" And one said, "I find it almost impossible to think of God because I was so frightened as a child that I couldn't do this and I couldn't think that, that I have a terror of him, and fear punishment constantly because I am not worthy." There is a young lady who needs, it seems to me, to listen; but she's so drowned out by what she has learnt from others, heard from others, from you and me or the likes, that she can't think of looking at God. And the other one said, "Well I'm not entirely sure that God has a human face, for the simple reason", he said, "that if He did have a human face, we would truly love everybody". I don't know.

What is the image we have of God? Is it an image that needs to be shattered, a prejudice that needs to be broken? Do we need to clear our minds in such a way that we can actually see God? So we walk with God in the cool of the evening at the beginning of Creation. The extraordinary thing

of Creation is that God has asked us, as it were, to run it for Him, to co-operate. He can not go on. Recall that wonderful prayer of Teresa of Avila that we are His hands, we're His feet. We're all of it. He can't work in this world without us, except possibly in the miraculous, and even then I think it needs the faith of His beloved people to work miracles.

So, if we can't walk with God or don't seem to be able to walk with God, and yet He's asking us to co-operate with Him, to manage, rather to care, for his creation, how do we recognise Him?

Without getting New Age, this whole idea of the beauty of nature, the god of wind, the god of fire, the god of earth is relevant. It's not literally a god, it's sheer beauty, it's God expressing, showing Himself in finite form to us. And God is there. And, of course, ultimately the full co-operation comes with the Incarnation –the Incarnation at a specific time, specific place, specific culture and a specific woman. And only at that time, place and culture because that woman gave her consent truly to do the will of God. I find it difficult to believe that there haven't been other people called for exactly the same, and indeed I would put my neck out and say that we are all called to bear Christ, not obviously in the way of Our Lady, but obviously in the way that we are at a specific time, place, person and culture, and we are the incarnation of God at this time.

But how do we discern? How is it that we can find God and say categorically that we're offering Him to others? We disagree. A lovely story: I was born in Jordan in Amman. My father was working there as a banker, and my mother, who has sadly been ill for ten years, is a very devout woman and always supports her local church which, as a priest, I must say I hugely appreciate. There was a Monsignor running the Catholic Church in Amman. I think it was in 1954, and he had been asked to go to see King Abdullah to get permission to build a bigger church, to knock down his church and expand it because there was such a growth in Catholicism, mainly Italians, I think, coming in and quite a few Christian Arabs. And he was very nervous because King Abdullah was a great Muslim, a remarkable man of deep spirituality and at peace. And he told my mother that he was frightened of going to present the plans because, in the plans, one of the mosques was going to be knocked down, which happened to have been built on land belonging to the Church. I don't know how or why. Anyway, he went to King Abdullah and King Abdullah gave him an audience, remarkable man, and at the end of a talk he said, "Show me, Monsignor, your plans". So the Monsignor, trembling like all good Monsignors, opened the plans, and King Abdullah obviously had already found that it was going to knock down one of the mosques and he said, "Monsignor, I see that in your plans you want to knock down one of my mosques." And the Monsignor sort of said "Yes" rather nervously, and Abdullah said to him, "When all you Christians can agree, come back and you can build your church". So in one sense I started with saying I don't know how scandalous disunity is. I'm not sure that it is: disunity in one sense is not scandalous, as long as we're seeking the truth. But it is scandalous when we are not prepared to listen to each other. Not to see in each other a genuine honest attempt, path, pilgrimage to truth, to the holy mountain and the burning bush. But do we recognise in each other, in our differences, do we recognise God? Are we a scandal? It's a question we must ask ourselves. If we're not a scandal, why is it that so many in our culture are prepared to attack other religions?

I happen to have a deep affection for many Muslims because I had a nanny who was one when I was in Amman for eight years, a wonderful woman with whom I was in touch for many years, who sadly was murdered in Iraq by Saddam Hussein, but that's another story. And I have a huge admiration for Muslims. And yet they do scandalise me by the way they fight Sunni against Shiite, extreme against extreme, and yet they claim to be doing the work of God. Are they the human face of God? Who are we to say that they're not? Who are we to judge? I don't know. You and I would claim, I hope, that we know that we are of God, that we are of His Son, that we have the truth although we haven't explored it and got to know it yet. But how can we claim that others who say exactly the same, how do we claim not to see the face of God in them?

We always claim that Christian martyrs were people of peace. Yes, perhaps they were, but martyrdom is a remarkable thing and is it simply "wrong" that the Muslim martyrs who blow themselves up believing truly—even if brainwashed—believing truly that they are doing the work of God? The human face of God, do we see it in evil? If we do see it in evil, where do we see it in our own lives? Is evil a personification of a being created by God? And if we see "that Being" created by God, as many believe, thrown down to hell, if God created the Devil, do we see God in the Devil? Very difficult questions. But they're questions that must be taken seriously for the simple reason that we are dealt a certain pack of cards. We are in a certain time, place and culture; we have what we have; we are of our own parents and whatever that suggests, and we are the face of God now. Are we going to say that the face of God is not to be found in evil?

When we see somebody in great pain? One of the hardest things moving from education, from a headmaster to a parish priest, is in one sense having to deal with some of the more terrifying experiences of being human. And one of the first I had to deal with was of a child dying of cancer. What do I say to the mother who asks me "Where is your God now?" And I tried to quote the woman who was in the Holocaust who wrote that diary afterwards. She was in a crowd, I think it was in Dauchau, as her family were being hanged on the gallows, her father, her mother and her young son. The father and the mother died fairly rapidly because they were heavier than the child who, slowly over about forty-five minutes, choked to death. And a voice said in the crowd—and she recorded a voice saying in the crowd—"Where is your God?" And another voice said after a while, "In that child dying".

These are stories, and they're important stories, because our whole life is part of the story of God's revelation. We are revealing God not only to those around us, but to the next generation. That's why Bishop Chartres was so right about the importance of stewardship of the planet. We are revealing God, and we are revealing God in our weakness, as St Paul says, "When I am weak then I am strong". Do we reveal God in evil, or is evil merely the absence of God? I don't know. But we are the story; we're the story that God's compassion began, as it were, beyond Creation, when Adam and Eve sinned. It was only through disobedience, the great cry of Easter, of course, the Easter prayer, only through the Great Fault that we were given Christ. But it says that Adam and Eve—they were protected by God. It was then that He clothed them, it was then that He promised really to look after

them. They would have been blissfully happy in His kingdom but he actually showed His real further human compassion when sin had occurred. And the whole story of our lives, which is inherited from our forefathers, is the story of God's compassion. His overflowing love could not help but create. His overflowing love means that He will do anything for creation, even give up His own Son.

But that story is important, that story of which we are a part. And I confess for the first time ever I went to a Seder meal two weeks ago, which was put on by a group of my confirmands. I'd never been to one, but I feel deeply humbled not to have been. But I don't know how accurate it was, but there was that lovely moment, and I'm sure you know it, where the father of the family is asked questions by his children. Why? And he unfolds the mystery of God through the Jewish people's history. It's only when they are in slavery that God can show His grace all the more in Moses. It is only when we are without hope of salvation that He can send His Son, once he has Our Lady giving her *fiat*. So it is almost as if the human face of God is seen truly in weakness. Because was it Christ who was there for Adam and Eve? Was it Christ who was working through the Old Testament prophets and sinners and saints and poets? Or was it the Father, the Father making Himself known through those prophets and servants of His, who finally made Himself fully known in His Son, who has made himself fully known to us, with His Father, through the Holy Spirit.

So, yes, the Son reflects the Father, but do we see ourselves reflecting the Son? If we are his brothers and sisters, do we see the face of our brother, Christ, in each other? I don't know, I don't know. But what I do know, at least I think I do, is that the great saying of Christ, which I quote far too frequently I'm told on Thought for the Day, is if you "do it to the least of these, you do it to me": feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the prisoner. If you are doing it to the least of these, you are doing it to me, so perhaps this whole talk is a waste of time for the simple reason that everything is God in some way. I don't know.

Our knowledge, it seems to me, now—today—of God, as we know Him, demands certain things. It demands that we take seriously the commandment to love, it demands that we stand up for that commandment. And by that I don't mean taking necessarily a high profile, what I mean is living our lives to the full. I see Christ so powerfully in the happy family, in the mother caring for her child as she's sick. I see him in the person who's struggling to get up in the morning, they're in such pain. I see him in the lonely person who cries because nobody has visited them for weeks, and all of us are carrying that cross. And it is therefore in the pain, as the Papal Nuncio said today, about our lives, our joys and our pains, it is almost in the pains that we see God because it is then that we need to turn to Him and talk by Him or through Him. But what you and I must do, and I mean this seriously, we must continue God's creative work, we must realise that we are part of the story and future generations will look back and say "What did they do?"

And what are we doing? It seems to me that we're not standing up sufficiently to what is happening in our own immediate society. I mean that in our own families and our own communities and churches, but I certainly mean that in a world that, to me--and I'm sure every generation has said—

but every generation has also answered it and stood up to it—we're in a world where culture in the West really does seem to be going the wrong way. I may be wrong, but you hear it again and again this idea of celebrity culture. I know I don't like statistics, but 78% of children in a survey of 5,500 up to the age of sixteen all said that what they wanted in life was to be famous. Not a famous cricketer, not a famous singer, they just wanted to be famous. The superficiality of that is terrifying. The idea of the glamorous and the rich and the rest is dispensable. The culture in which birth control and abortion, the old and the handicapped are in one sense disposable. We have to push them aside. And I've seen ten years of the horrendous things that can happen to an old, sick person, my mother. How she can be robbed and absolutely treated in the most abominable fashion by people who simply don't seem to care, who would prefer that she was dead. And once, sadly, when she tried to kill herself, the nurse was heard by my late elder brother saying, a pity she didn't succeed.

These are the things that are happening in my life, and I'm sure you can also give me stories of it. But it is terrifying. We are secularist, there is no longer a god in our society; it is the law that tells us how to behave, it is the classes on how to be a citizen that tells us how to behave, not the God inside us, the holy temple, the spirit that truly reveals Himself through us and each person. And what are we doing about it? Well we're trying to fight, but it seems as if secularism is taking over. A “tick box” society,

I have never forgotten some years ago, when I was in Ealing at a series of conferences doing a study, I'd gone out one evening with an old boy of Downside, who for some reason seemed to be grateful for the education I'd helped to give him. And he took me to a very expensive restaurant and I, not having to pay, chose the most expensive thing on it and had some lobster. But God has His little joke, and I poured most of it down my habit. I was therefore very nervous of returning to the monastery, one because I hadn't got permission to go out, but I'd been to confession so it's okay. I hadn't got permission to go out and I thought that the Abbot might notice the *lobster thermidor* fallen down my habit. So I took my habit to be cleaned at Sketchleys and had the most fascinating conversation for half-an-hour with a young lady as to whether it should be cleaned as a military uniform or a ball gown because those were the only ticks. Being a mean man, I went for the cheaper, which was the ball gown, and much regretted it when the *Daily Mail* a few years later found the receipt: “Antony Sutch, one black ball gown cleaned”.

But it is, I thought a tick-box society: if it doesn't fit in, God's face doesn't fit. One of the lovely things we used to do was to go on a pilgrimage with the Order of Malta Volunteers. The young used to run it, boys, sixteen and above, could go on it, and we went with a whole lot of other boys' and girls' Catholic schools throughout England. And about four hundred went with about a hundred truly sick people. And I remember persuading a particularly bolshy young boy in my house of seventeen, who really made every religious study class incredibly difficult, who preferred to spend two hours in a filthy lavatory rather than go to church on Sunday, a very difficult, extremely talented young man. For some reason he went, and I can see him now: he was about six foot four. I can see him trying to get into a bus, taking one of the sick who was an eighteen-year-old boy, older than he was, but was only two-foot in height, and had an illness that meant that all

his nerves were exposed, every single nerve, so just jarring him was like a tooth being drilled. And I can see this boy carrying him so gently and carrying him with real love and tears in his eyes. And the next term he said to me, "Do you know that did me a lot of good that pilgrimage", and I said, "What do you mean, Henry?" He said, "I saw God in Arthur", and that was the little, the old boy, eighteen, he was carrying. "I saw God in Arthur."

Do we see God when our eyes are open? Is the human face of God simply us finding Him wherever He is? Does He hide from us? I don't know: we hide from Him, I know that, but does He hide from us? He does want us to speak up. He wants us to talk about war and the Third World debt and the hungry and those without water. He wants us to talk about the disabled, the mentally handicapped, the sick, the aged. He wants us to be His arms and His eyes and His ears and His mouth. And I think the human face of God is everywhere. All that is needed is for us to clear our eyes and to be able to see Him. We all do it in our own way following His Son or the path we discern to be that of His Son, because in the Son I think God was also fully exposed, totally, literally, on the Cross, stripped of everything. We see our God naked before us, and yet we cover ourselves.

I remember some years ago a very interesting debate about the Abbey Church at Downside. At the end of the church we have the Blessed Sacrament, the choir, then we have the altar and then we have the rest of the nave. And I remember there being a discussion as to whether we should put some curtains to be drawn across so that the Tabernacle could be, as it were, cut off from us when we turn to the altar, and therefore put our backs to the Tabernacle. And I remember Father Bede getting up and saying, "I find this incredibly difficult", he said "Not only do we have a veil over the Tabernacle, we have the Tabernacle itself, which has three layers, it then has a veil inside it. We then have the Blessed Sacrament in a ciborium which itself has a veil over it, and the Blessed Sacrament is itself a veil for Christ. Do we really need to put another one up? Is it just us because we haven't the courage to look God in the eye and to accept that we do sometimes turn our back on him and feel guilty?" I don't know.

But I do know that I long to see God fully. I do know that I have had the privilege of glimpsing God-like actions in people, and I do know that He's calling me by my name. But I have to admit I sometimes don't want, as St Benedict says, to incline the ear of my heart, because He demands of me everything and I'm not sure I'm capable of giving it even though He has given Himself utterly to me.

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