

Encountering the wounded God

A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist, Chester Cathedral
On the Second Sunday of Easter, 11 April 2010
The Gospel: John 20.19-end

A barn owl flying straight towards me, not much above my head height, wings slow and silent, filling the small round world held by the lenses of my binoculars; eyes dark brown, seeming black, huge, looking deep into mine, till suddenly the bird registered my presence and swung away. A kingfisher flying beneath a small bridge on which I was standing, the blue of its back bursting into flame in the bright sun. A Wiltshire hillside on a still May evening, a nightingale in full song in one ear, and a second nightingale in full song in the other. The third row in a concert in the Town Hall, here in Chester, listening and watching as the Lindsay Quartet played the slow movement of a late Beethoven string quartet. They were playing with their eyes shut, and something happened which I can't describe, but if I say the music and their playing were 'divine', I am not using the word casually or in a colloquial sense.

I have a very long list of encounters with God that will stay with me, please God, until I die. Others, many others, concern people, rather than birds or music, but of these it is harder to speak. Sometimes I have been keenly aware of the presence of God at the time, at the moment of encounter. On other occasions I have come to my senses afterwards; the full significance of the event has dawned on me later. Always there is an element of surprise and of something new. Often I have stumbled upon God in my writing, and invariably it has been when my thoughts and my words have taken a turn I did not anticipate.

Yet these are all *my* experiences of God. When I saw that barn owl, or the kingfisher, I was on my own. There was no-one with me. There was a party of us on that Wiltshire hillside, but no-one else was sitting in the spot where I was, slap-bang on the boundary between the territories of two nightingales, each trying to show the female nightingales around that he was the greatest singer in all creation, with the voice not of an angel, but an archangel. Indeed, when God herself sings in the bath, she sounds like a nightingale. I could have sat there all night, listening to that song. I don't know whether anyone else in the group knew they were touching God at that moment. I didn't ask. They didn't say.

When I die, these memories will die with me, though I myself will take them to heaven and lay them out before God, and give her a hug for them.

There was one particular encounter with God that did not die with those who experienced it, but was held and treasured and shared, until it was recognised as the most significant moment in the whole of human history. A grief-stricken Jewish woman called Miriam had it first, at least if we believe the Gospels. We know her better by the Greek form of her name, Maria, or its English version Mary. She came from the fishing village of Magdala on the Sea of Galilee, and we call her Mary of Magdala. Paul says it was Cephas, or Peter,

who first had the experience. Then he speaks of five hundred people sharing in it, in one place, at one time.

One story in the Gospels makes it crystal clear what that experience was, and it is the passage from John we heard read as our Gospel a few moments ago. Thomas faces a figure he knows very well. It is a figure who bears upon his body the marks of crucifixion. Thomas knows why, of course. The crucifixion had taken place some ten days before. He was not there, but he knew some who were. He had spoken with them. He knew what had happened, and about the burial that had followed it. The figure who confronts him is that of his friend Jesus of Nazareth. He recognises him. But this is no ghost he sees. Nor is it a man who has somehow, miraculously come back to life. This figure is *God*.

Thomas's words of astonished recognition in John's story, 'My Lord and my God', number seven in John's Greek. Putting all the Gospel stories of the crucifixion together, we talk of the Seven Words from the Cross. These words of Thomas are the Seven Words from the Resurrection. In their small compass, they capture the truth of it all and hold it tight. When his friends met Jesus again after his death, met with him risen from the dead, they found themselves in the presence of God, and it was as if they knew him for the first time. They had not found God within touching distance before. At least, they *had*, in the hills of Galilee, in a boat on a lake, in an upper room, but they had not realised it. Now it was as if they could reach out their hands and touch his wounds. For yes, this was a wounded God! No such God had been seen in human history before. No God had come bearing the marks of crucifixion upon him, a God scarred by human fear and brutality. 'My Lord and my God.' 'My Lord and my God.' They, in their context, are the seven most important words in all human literature. None have had a greater or more enduring effect. Without them or their like, we would not be here in this Cathedral this morning. There would be no Cathedral, nor any Christian church, nor any Christian faith.

You and I cannot quite experience what Thomas did, what Mary of Magdala and the other women, what Peter and that crowd of five hundred did. For they had all known Jesus before his death. They had followed him from place to place. They had heard his stories, seen him wrapping round the sick in a rich garment of healing love, eaten with him, cheered him as he rode into Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey. Some of them, a handful of them, had been present at his crucifixion. How long all five hundred had been in his company, we don't know, but Paul's passage, written long before any of the Gospels, reveals that it is quite false to imagine Jesus going around with just a small party of men. Unlike them, you and I never knew the historical Jesus. We can only hear and ponder the stories we are told about him, and the things that historians, archaeologists, sociologists and others explain about the times in which he lived. So we can only imagine what it must have been like to have been with him before and perhaps during his death, and *then* to have met him as the wounded God. No wonder they were never the same again.

We are among those 'who have not seen and yet have come to believe.' I'm not sure I agree with John that we should get special credit for that. It's just different for us. And yet it is remarkably, and gloriously the same. For we too, like countless millions before us and around us, have met with the risen Jesus and found ourselves within touching distance of the God of the universe. We too have found ourselves in the presence of a figure bearing the marks of our brutality, and those same words of astonishment have escaped from our lips, 'My Lord and my God!' And we too have heard him say, 'Peace be with you,' and heard him call us to follow him in the ways of peace.

None of us, none of us have ever heard him calling us to join him in acts of vengeance for what was done to him. Too often we have taken it upon ourselves to perform those acts of vengeance on his behalf, but always then we have humiliated him, crucified him afresh. He calls us to follow not the ways of Pilate, nor the ways of the Jewish Temple authorities, but the ways he had established in the towns and villages of Galilee, in out-of-the-way places such as a village wedding, or a graveyard on the eastern slopes of the Sea of Galilee, where people could not go to honour their dead because of a madman who called himself 'Legion'; such as a deserted place, where five thousand men, plus countless women and children were gathered with no food, and of a sudden found themselves round God's table as God's family; such as a spot carefully chosen by the Roman authorities outside the walls of Jerusalem, reserved for crucifixion.

As someone has put it, we are called to be 'little Jesuses'. We have a job to do, you and I, this Eastertide!

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