

PUZZLING ASPECTS OF GOD'S PRESENCE.

When Solomon spoke and prayed at the dedication of the new temple of the Lord at Jerusalem, he said, "The LORD has said that He will dwell in a dark cloud." We usually think that, when God was present, people saw bright, dazzling light. That was so on this occasion, too. The writer of 1 Kings has just written, "When the priests withdrew from the Holy Place, the cloud filled the temple of the LORD. And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled His temple" (1 Kng 8:10-12).

There had been the same puzzling combination of darkness and light when God manifested Himself to Israel at Mount Sinai and at the tabernacle in the wilderness. Just before the LORD gave the Law at Sinai, He told Moses, "I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, so that the--people may hear Me speaking with you" (Ex 19:9). When God gave the Law, the mountain blazed with fire to the very heavens and lightning, and there was also black cloud and deep darkness over Mount Sinai. Smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace. These are characteristics of fire and smoke. One is bright, and the other is dark. Yet there was this paradox in God. He both showed His glory and hid it. Immediately after God gave the Ten Commandments, the people asked God not to speak directly to them, but through Moses. They trembled with fear when they heard the thunder and the trumpet, and saw lightning and the mountain in smoke. Then Moses approached the thick darkness where God was. (Ex 20: 18-21). Both revelation and veiling came together. Must we imagine dense cloud as bright outside and dark inside? Or is it paradox?

Soon after this, Moses went up on the mountain again, and there was the same combination of darkness and, brightness. The cloud covered Mount Sinai, and the glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai (Ex 24:15). Moses entered the cloud as he went up the mountain, and stayed on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

When the tabernacle was made, Moses used to go to it outside the camp as the people watched. When Moses went into it, the pillar of cloud used to come down and stay at the entrance. There the LORD spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend. Again there is the same combination of revelation and concealing (Ex 33:10-11). When Moses took the second pair of stone tablets that he had chiselled out up Mount Sinai, the LORD came down in the cloud, stood there with Moses, and proclaimed His name, the LORD. Hidden in cloud, The LORD revealed His nature as a compassionate and gracious God (Ex 34:5-6).

When God established the ritual for the important Day of Atonement, Aaron, the High Priest, was permitted to enter the Holy of Holies only once a year. Aaron could not go behind the curtain, in front of the mercy seat, whenever he chose, or else he would die. Again there is the same combination of cloud and God's appearance: "because I appear in the cloud over the mercy seat."

Similarly in Psalm 18 we see a similar combination of opposites: "He spread out the heavens and came down, with darkness under His feet. He rode on a cherub and flew, and He soared on the wings of the wind. He made darkness His hiding place; His canopy around Him consisted of dark water, and rain-clouds. Out of the brightness in front of Him His clouds passed over with hailstones and coals of fire. The LORD caused thunder in the heavens; and the Most High was uttering His voice, with hailstones and coals of fire (Ps 18:8-13).

In the theology of the Orthodox or Eastern churches there is strong emphasis on what is called "apophaticism." Negative statements about God are considered more profound than positive statements about Him. However, negative statements often have a positive thrust. For example, when we say that God is immense or immeasurable, we are at the same time making the positive assertion that He is very great.

In Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the new temple, there is another combination of opposites, this time transcendence and immanence. God had His particular dwelling place over the mercy seat, under the spreading wings of the two cherubs that Solomon had made of olivewood and covered with God. When Israelites could not be at Jerusalem, they prayed facing Jerusalem, where the temple was. They thought of God as there in particular. However, though God manifested Himself within the temple courts, Solomon stressed that no temple could contain Him. God did not guarantee His presence with the Israelites there no matter how they lived. Moreover, although He dwelt with His people in a special and localised way, He transcends everything in His creation. Besides being in His creation, He is infinitely beyond it as well.

There are similar paradoxes about seeing God. John wrote, "No one has ever seen God: the only Son, who is God, who is in the lap of the Father, has made Him known." At Sinai, the elders of Israel went up Mount Sinai with Moses, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and saw the God of Israel. However, they must have been facedown before Him, because all they described was the pavement under His feet. Isaiah saw the Lord in the temple (Isa 6), but He was high and lifted up, and the temple was filled with smoke. However, in the perfection to come, Jesus has promised that the pure in heart will see God (Mt 5:8).

We see similar paradoxes in Jesus Christ. When Jesus dwelt as in a tabernacle in human nature on earth, His disciples saw His glory, the glory of the Father's only Son (Joh 1:14). They saw it especially in His miracles. However, Jesus did not want people to believe in Him only because they saw miracles. Though He was Lord of all, Jesus lived on earth in poverty. He was revealed through His incarnation, but His human nature masked His true glory as God and Lord. He faced rejection and contempt and disgraceful crucifixion. John makes a special point of saying that Jesus was glorified in His death on the cross. When Jesus said that the Son of Man would be lifted up, "lifted up" had a double meaning, crucified, and exalted to glory. We look for true spirituality in Christ's cross.

Throughout our lives as believers we are confronted with paradoxes. Wherever two or three gather in Jesus' name, He is present with them, yet not visibly present. Though the Lord has risen, we do not see the risen Lord. Though He is present throughout His creation, and especially present to His church on earth, He is present with His disciples in a special unseen way as He feeds them with His true body and blood. Christians begin to walk in newness of life when they are baptised (Rm 6:4). If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature. However, this new creation is often not very obvious. The old, which shares in the sin and death of Adam, is still very much with them. They walk by faith, not by sight. However, their newness will become apparent in eternal life, in the New Jerusalem, when they see their Lord as He is, are like Him with glorified bodies, and sing the new song. What is important for now is what Paul wrote: "For it is God, who said, 'Let light shine out of the darkness,' who has shone in our hearts, in order to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the person of Jesus Christ."