

Thought for the Day: 28 September – 4 October 2020

by Pat Nicholls

MONDAY

Meekness and majesty, manhood and deity in perfect harmony, the man who is God.

St Augustine is reputed to have said 'He who sings, prays twice', but there are times when it is good to concentrate entirely on the words. So, let us look at the opening words of this well-known hymn: can we get our heads round what they are saying?

They present us with a paradox, sometimes defined as *something beyond teaching or beyond opinion*. If we can accept paradoxes, we have the ability to live with contradictions without making them mutually exclusive, but rather something enabling us to realise that some things can be 'both and' rather than 'either or'. Surely, Jesus must be the living proof of that.



I spent many years teaching, helping children to 'understand' things – how to do long division (before the days of calculators), the rules of punctuation - especially the uses of the apostrophe (so often a losing battle!) - how to plan an essay, and so on. But my greatest pleasure came from introducing children to the 'truths' to be found in a good story, the beauty and truth in poetry and the once-a-term sessions when we spent a whole morning investigating the inter-relationship of music with different forms of literature and art and the natural world. As the children became attuned to the world of creative mystery, they found things were not in separate boxes but all formed part of a wonderful whole. There is so much more to life than provable and understandable 'facts'.

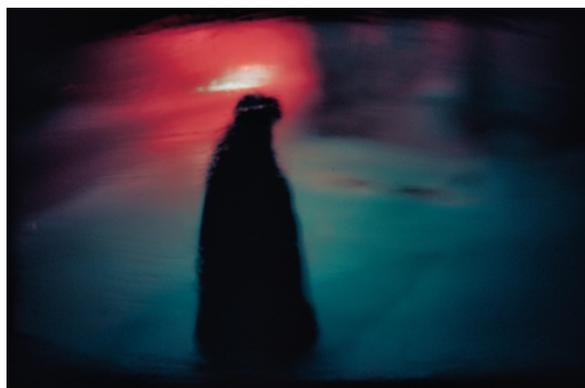
*O, what a mystery, meekness and majesty,
bow down and worship, this is our God.
This is our God.*

TUESDAY

Lord of Eternity dwells in humanity

To a non-Christian, that could not possibly refer to a Divine Being because, they would reason, that cannot be how 'God', if he exists, would behave.

But that's exactly how he does behave! In the person of the historical Jesus of Nazareth 'the Lord of Eternity' came to do just that. Once again, we have a 'both and' situation which, to the purely literal and rational mind, cannot seem possible.



Can we get our heads round that concept of God, the Lord of Eternity, being willing to come and live as a human being? We are confronted with something we cannot understand. But I don't believe we are required to do the impossible and 'understand' it with our logical minds, but rather to learn to live within its embrace.

Sadly, over much of the past 600 years or so, the church has undergone horrendous times of persecutions and wrapped itself in all sorts of prohibitions and requirements, thereby becoming increasingly less in touch with the teachings of its founder. The need for certainty and control seems so often to have replaced faith.

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WEDNESDAY

Kneels in humility and washes our feet

For the agnostic, this is surely one step too far! Well, it was almost one step too far for the disciples – for one, especially.

On the last evening of his human life, Jesus acted out something at the core of his teaching when, humbly girding himself with a towel, he took on the role of a slave and washed the feet of his close followers. Their reaction? Doubtless they were all shocked and confused, but, unsurprisingly, it was the impetuous Peter who declared himself unwilling to allow such a thing. Three years in the close company of Jesus, hearing his teaching and witnessing his compassionate care for people, and still Peter did not really understand his master and Lord –nor did he understand Jesus' response to his initial refusal. Was he too proud? He still had so much to learn – as do we all. Do you find it easy to allow people to do intimate things for you?



Many of us will have spent a life largely caring for others; for children and for elderly relatives, visiting people in hospital, driving people to appointments, responding to phone calls in the night to go to an elderly neighbour who, having fallen, was unable to get back to bed. It was good to be able to help - but now? Well, now

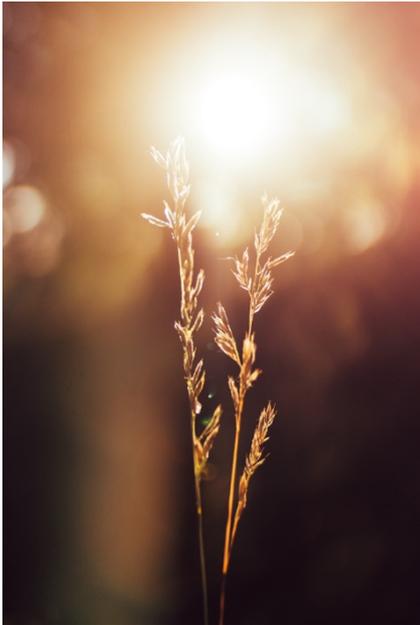
the boot is on the other foot and in old age we have to have the humility not only to accept help from others – with gratitude – but to be ready to ask for it. Be ready to allow our feet to be washed. Not something I always find easy!

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THURSDAY

Wisdom unsearchable, God the invisible

What does '**wisdom unsearchable**' mean? Surely we are meant to search for wisdom - so does it mean that when we find it we shan't understand it?



Wisdom is identified as female in the Bible and in the Wisdom of Solomon (a book in the Apocrypha) we read: *'Wisdom is a spirit intelligent and holy - free-moving - loving what is good. She is the radiance that streams from the everlasting light, the flawless mirror of the active power of God and the image of his goodness - herself unchanging, she makes all things new; age after age she enters into holy souls and makes them friends of God'*.

This is only a small fraction of one chapter but, if you have the Apocrypha in your bible, you might like to dip into that book.

'**God the invisible**' reminds me of a poem by Francis Thompson:

O world invisible, we view thee,
O world intangible, we touch thee,
O world unknowable, we know thee,
Inapprehensible, we clutch thee.

We are back in the world of paradox again but, as so often happens, poetry has the ability to express the inexpressible far better than prose. Surely that is telling us that, with the eye of faith and help of wisdom, we can know that we are, indeed, held within the arms of God.

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FRIDAY

Love indestructible, in frailty appears

Paul wrote to the Corinthians: *'The folly of God is wiser than human wisdom and the weakness of God stronger than human strength'*: it is only His Spirit in us that can enable us to begin to live within such a seemingly contradictory spirituality.

From our earliest years we are taught the need to be strong and self-reliant. Sadly, this has often become equated with the need to be right, and so we developed a need for certainty. Unfortunately religion has so often become more about morality than being the result of Divine Encounter. Too often it has ended up being no more than an attempt to be in control, to maintain a moral high ground rather than any attempt to follow the manifesto Jesus set out for his ministry when he quoted from Isaiah in the synagogue at Nazareth, let alone a search for truth or love – for God.



I do not recall Jesus ever saying we needed to know we were 'right' His agenda was about justice and honesty, caring for others, whoever they are, growing in faith, hope and love - and the Biblical notion of faith is **not needing to know** but learning to walk in trust. According to the great spiritual teachers, ignorance does not result from what we don't know but from what we think we do know – for certain!

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SATURDAY

Lord of infinity stooping so tenderly

In the opening chapter of Genesis we can read that tremendous poetic prose description of creation. But God seems very 'other' and really rather out of our reach.



In chapter 2, however, we find a very different picture of God, one who, with gentleness, shapes a man from the dust of the earth, puffs life into his nostrils and then places him in a garden. He talks to the man, explaining what is permissible and what is not. Sensing the man is lonely, he creates animals and birds from the soil of the garden to try and relieve the man's loneliness. Soon God realises they are not the answer but then he has the brilliant idea of creating a complementary human from the substance of the man. Success! The man and woman are very happy and live contentedly in their garden.

Then God disappears from the scene for a while and we meet the serpent. We are all very familiar with what happened next. When God re-enters the scene, walking in the garden in the cool of the evening, he calls to his friends. Embarrassed by their nakedness, of which they are now aware, they try to hide from him. The man's answer tells God what must have happened and one feels the sadness with which this loving and intimate God has to explain the inevitable outcome of their transgression. However, he still does what he can to help them by making some warm clothes for them to wear in the harsh world outside the garden. He also ensures that they cannot get back in and be tempted to eat of the tree of life – eternity in their fallen state would be too cruel. I have always felt this is a movingly beautiful example of the tender intimacy of our God in his care for all his creation – would that we were not in the process of devastating it.

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SUNDAY

Lifts our humanity to the heights of his throne

God the Artist

Thou takest the pen – and the lines dance.
Thou takest the flute – and the notes shimmer.
Thou takest the brush – and the colours sing.
So all things have meaning and beauty
in that space beyond time where Thou art.
How, then, can I hold anything back from Thee?

These words were written by Dag Hammarskjöld, a Swedish economist and diplomat, who served as the second Secretary-General of the United Nations, and at 47 was the youngest person ever to have held the post – tragically he died in an air crash in September 1961.

A very private man, he combined great action with a deeply mystical awareness which found expression in service to others through his contemplative life. Contemplation is not an esoteric practice only within reach of the few, but rather a pathway into the deep silence of God where chronological time is irrelevant. For the most part one is aware of nothing. Once again it is poetry which most clearly allows us to realise that something has taken place, as TS Eliot wrote:

“I can only say that there we have been: but where I cannot say where. And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time.”

Not infrequently, however, following a time of profound silence one becomes aware of what one might call some ‘divine nudging’ going on; a springboard enabling us to go on to serve others in whatever way God intends.



True contemplative spirituality can't be taught, it can only be caught - by opening ourselves to the wind of the Holy Spirit.

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Meekness and Majesty (This is Your God), Graham Kendrick
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