



St. Augustine by Justus van Gent



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Thomas Cranmer by Gerlach Flicke

In the readings and prayers for today, there is an interesting bare-bones outline of just what religion truly is. Cranmer hints at this in the Collect for today which leads us out of the season of Revelation [Epiphany], and into the season of Contemplation [Lent]. Cranmer’s statement that we behold by faith the light of Christ’s countenance (his faith) – that we can only really see Christ’s face through faith in him – that is what another great scholar of Canterbury had already discovered 500 years earlier. Anselm of Canterbury was a renowned scholar and philosopher born in 1033. One of his most famous positions was his definition of religion as “faith seeking understanding.” He wrote “I do not seek to understand in order that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand.” This had already been thought of 500 years before that, when St. Augustine said, “Credo ut intelligam) “I believe so that I may understand.” All of these great Christian thinkers, to whom we owe so much, knew that reason must be preceded by faith in order to truly see God, and this faith cannot be solely a belief in science, and certainly not a belief in ourselves, but faith, a convicted trust in God. This is what the author of Hebrews was writing about when she penned the great “Hall of faith” passage from Hebrews Chapter 11 and 12 by proclaiming , “By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command.” (Heb.11:3 – NIV)¹

What Moses experienced on the mountain became quite a focus of theologians in the late 19th and early 20th centuries of what religion really is. In that period, the encounters of Christians with other religious faiths was expanding through wider travel and more advanced communication technology, and scholars were trying to come up with a modern world view of what religion really is. German theologians were at the forefront of so much of that has happened in the Protestant churches in the last two centuries, and one of those great German thinkers, Rudolph Otto, came up with a statement that described what religion really is. He said, again using a Latin phrase, that religion is *Mysterium Tremendum, Mysterium Fascinans*. We might translate this in English as saying that true religion is a terrifying mystery, and yet an endearing mystery)².

Now the first part of that statement about the “Terrifying Mystery” in knowing God is this: Those who truly come to a religious faith experience something “Wholly other than human,” an experience of wondrous mystery that is divine – but at the same time it is an experience which is terrifying in its scope and majesty.

¹ See <https://carpediemcoramdeo.wordpress.com/2009/05/19/i-believe-in-order-to-understand/>. ² See <http://www2.kenyon.edu/Depts/Religion/Fac/Adler/Reln101/Otto.htm>.

The Christian poet and writer Annie Dillard, has thought quite a bit on this. She writes: “On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke [in our worship services]?” She goes onto quip that if the God we so casually name on Sunday morning were actually to turn up in his glorified form, then we would all need to be “wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews.”² That is the awesome presence we seek and worship on Sunday.

And surely, this is what is happening to Moses on the mountain-top, when he is enveloped in the cloud of glory... Ah, but do you remember the reaction of the Israelites when he came down the mountain? Because, having spent some quality time with God his face was so radiant with God’s reflected glory, that the Children of Israel were terrified. And whenever Moses went to chat with God in Holy of Holies, he had to wear a veil over his face when he came out, just to make sure that when Israel’s children beheld even the mere after-glow of God’s reflected glory they didn’t wet their pants! Yes indeed God is *Mysterium Tremendum*, a terrifying mystery. Surely this is what we read about in the opening of today’s Psalm “The Lord is King; let the people tremble; he is enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth shake. The Lord is great in Zion; he is high above all peoples. Let them confess his Name, which is great and awesome; he is the Holy One.” (Ps.99:1-3 – NIV)

In the Epistle this morning, Peter mentions this awesome and terrifying reaction to being in the presence of God when he talks about his experience on his own mountain-top. And in fact, in the account of the Transfiguration in Matthew’s Gospel this morning, when Peter, James, and John beheld the cloud of glory and heard the thundering voice of God, they were so terrified they fell to the ground. Had I been there, I bet I would have as well. *Mysterium Tremendum* indeed! The heart-stopping majesty of God is more than enough to make people fall prostrate and senseless.

But here’s the thing. This breath-taking, awe-filled wonder we feel when we are in the presence of the Holy - that wasn’t really enough to change the course of human salvation. You remember what the Children of Israel were doing while Moses was on the mountain-top don’t you? There was that business of the golden calf that Moses returned to, the episode where even after having witnessed God’s awful power with the plagues on Pharaoh, the parting of the Red Sea, the pillars of cloud and fire, the manna, the quail, water from a rock and so much more, the Children of Israel were still rebellious enough to make for themselves an idol to worship, just because Moses went on vacation for a few weeks.

Oh, and even the awesome presence of glory on the Mount of Transfiguration, the appearance of Moses and Elijah representing the full authority of the Law and the Prophets, not even the dazzling glorified form of The Son, nor the thundering voice of The Creator God himself, not even all **this** was enough to change the hearts of these men. Two chapters later, James and John who had been right there with Jesus in his glorified form – James and John would seek the prideful places of privilege nearest to Jesus in his Kingdom. That’s not the indication of a heart that has been humbled by God. And even after seeing Christ in his glory, and having heard the voice of thunder on the mountain-top, even after having been shrouded in the dazzling cloud of God’s presence, Peter would still deny His Lord three times before the dawn broke on Good Friday.

No. It seems that no amount of awestruck fear, no amount of quaking in our boots is enough to really transform the likes of you and me. *Mysterium Tremendum* is not enough. And that is where the other part of God’s character comes into play: *Mysterium Fascinans*, the sweetly endearing part of God’s divine being.

² See <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/170797-on-the-whole-i-do-not-find-christians-outside-of>.

What was needed to set the world back on course, what was required to right the ship of salvation after the U-turn made with the fall in Eden, what we required you and I was something so wondrously beautiful, something so pitifully lovely that our hearts could not help but be moved.

What was needed to redeem you and me was nothing less than the perfect Son of God going to an agonizing torture and death, and then rising inexplicably from his grave, just so that we could meet Him again, both in this world and the next. What was needed was a Lord who would not turn back from inhuman torture and pain, but go through it right to the bitter, bloody, bile-soaked end, pleading even with his dying breaths pardon and mercy for us, begging God for our forgiveness, because we didn't know what we were doing to him. You see, we needed the sacrifice of a heart so beautiful, so perfect, so loving so that our own hearts could finally be broken open to receive the love that truly does pass human understanding.

The Collect for today is the perfect prayer to lead us out of Epiphany, the Season of God's revelation and into the Contemplative season of Lent. It's a prayer that connects the Transfiguration of Jesus to our faith "Grant to us Lord that by beholding by faith the light of your son's countenance, we may be strengthened to bear our cross, and be changed into his likeness from glory to glory." It is by faith that we truly behold Christ's face in a way that was impossible before his passion. To come to stand in the presence of the Holy, and contemplate both His awesome power and his Limitless love. This is the true reason for Lent, so that we may come to understand and bear our cross, and be changed into his likeness, transformed, transfigured, from glory to glory.

I close this sermon with something written a thousand years ago, with the Confession of St. Anselm, who knew that a true faith in Our Lord is that faith which does give us some understanding of this world and its maker.

I confess, Lord, with thanksgiving, that You have made me in Your image, so that I can remember You, think of You, and love You. But that image is so worn and blotted out by faults, and darkened by the smoke of sin, that it cannot do that for which it was made, unless You renew and refashion it.

Lord, I am not trying to make my way to Your height, for my understanding is in no way equal to that; but I do desire to understand a little of Your truth which my heart already believes and loves.

I do not seek to understand so that I can believe, but I believe so that I may understand; and what is more, I believe that unless I do believe, I shall [never] understand.³

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.

JWB+ 2-14-17

³ See <https://carpediemcoramdeo.wordpress.com/2009/05/19/i-believe-in-order-to-understand/>