

Divine Revelation & the Abundant Heart

a sermon preached on the

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1 Kings 17:17-24, Galatians 1:11-24, Luke 7:11-17

The spiritual search can be considered from two vantage points. From the point of view of the human side, all the great religious teachers and traditions agree that there is something inherently human to search for the ultimate, for meaning and purpose and fulfilment. Recalling again St Augustine's famous words: "Our hearts are restless, until they find their rest in you." Even the wealthy, the supposedly self-sufficient, and the apparently scientific-minded cannot ultimately resist the human search for meaning in what we could call the Ultimate. From the Divine point of view, religious teachers of all three Abrahamic faiths agree that the Divine seeks to reveal Divine self to humankind.

Of course, we need to remind ourselves that to say 'from the Divine point of view' is entirely hypothetical. We have no way of ever knowing, finally, precisely, what such a thing as 'Divine point of view' might be – and not even if there is such a thing at all. We can only know about something we call the 'Divine point of view' as a consequence of what we humans observe coming from beyond ourselves. Our tradition calls the data which we observe coming from beyond ourselves 'revelation'. Christianity is one of the so-called 'revealed religions', along with the other Abrahamic faiths – and in contrast to the more ancient pagan religions, which being closer to the earth tend to be called 'natural religion'. For us 'revelation' is central to the faith experience. We only know what we know about God through God's self-revelation. God has revealed God-self in many ways, but for Christians the supreme self-revelation of God is to be found in the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ.

At first, this self-revelation was focussed on the memory of the historical person Jesus, based on the oral story-telling of his life, death and resurrection – and only in the context of one instruction he gave to the community of believers, his sacred meal, the sharing in his Body and Blood in the Eucharist. Later, in order to settle the inevitable disputes and the proliferation of interpretation of these stories and the multiplying practices it was inevitable, we can suppose, that the church decided upon the need to make an authoritative collection of writings. And it's not surprising that this 'canon' of scripture soon became closed shut tight – revelation increasingly thought of as contained exclusively within the pages of this Biblical canon. And so it's not surprising that, with the passing of the centuries and the expanding distance from the historical Jesus, that we find ourselves now constipated with a rigid and backward-looking attitude towards revelation.

Thus, the church is now a very long way from the Jesus who counselled us that the work of God's self-revealing would be an expanding and infinite process under the influence of the Holy Spirit who blows where she will. Revelation, which is the work of the Spirit who will lead us into all truth, has been locked up, shackled, nailed down. In short, we have done our best to make revelation safe and predictable and manageable.

Now the problem for us is that because God's self-revealing cannot be so constrained by fearful and anxious humans with a need for security, it keeps breaking through and breaking out. God's breakout has taken many forms down the Christian centuries – one of the earliest being the conferring of the Spirit upon females and uncircumcised males, one of the later being the overthrowing of slavery which had previously been Bible-justified. And of course in our own time God's self-revealing continues to make itself uncomfortably known in breakouts of the present era which seem to threaten the Biblical revelation. And not surprisingly, this ongoing Divine self-

revelation cannot be accepted by some and is fiercely resisted by the old claim that revelation closed with the fixing of the Biblical canon.

Equally unsurprisingly, for every new 'convert' to this regressive closed revelation offering religious certainty, there are at least another ten who reject the Christian tradition altogether for the very reason that it is so regressive. And in all our talk about 'mission' and 'evangelism' we have yet to face up to this fact honestly. Nearly forty years on, John V Taylor's *The Go-Between God*¹ remains prophetic, and disregarded by the very missionary organisation of which he was the General Secretary.

It is helpful to remember that in our Lord's day there was an equally-certain assumption that God had revealed Godself through the Law and the Prophets, and that nothing new, apart from the coming of the Messiah himself, could change that. This is the central motif in all Jesus' running battles with the religious leaders. At the end of his teaching, Luke's 'sermon on the plain',² he declares: "The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks."³ And after finishing all his teachings he proceeds to embody what he has been talking about, beginning with the healing of the highly valued slave of a Roman centurion – both centurion and his slave being 'unclean' persons it needs to be remembered. Soon after this, in the village of Nain, he restores to life the mother's only son, evoking Elijah's prayer on behalf of the broken-hearted widow of Zarephath.⁴ It is his embodied teaching, out of the abundance of his heart, which evokes the crowd's response: "A great prophet has risen among us! God has looked favourably on God's people!"⁵

What's happened here is that the crowd have experienced God's self-revelation, through the incarnation of the God-man Jesus – good treasure from the Good Heart. Revelation is compelling, and overwhelming: "Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God."⁶ Revelation is not a collection of words in a book, but an experience, a living encounter – *from* the Abundant Heart, received *by* an abundant heart. And as St Paul declared to the church at Galatia, revelation is not from 'human origin' but directly an experience of the Divine: "For I want you to know... that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation (*αποκαλυψεως apokalypseōs*) of Jesus Christ."⁷

God's self-revealing is always and at all times the work of the Living Christ through the Holy Spirit who blows where she wills and who leads us into all truth. It is a living experience which cannot be locked up in any book, not even *the* book. We can revere the Biblical texts, we can hold them as Divine revelation, without doing that kind of violence to them. Indeed, the ancient Chinese master's saying is worth keeping in mind: "If the wrong man uses the right means, the right means work in the wrong way."⁸ Christian history, we must honestly confess, amply illustrates the tragic fact that the Bible, the right means, has so often been used in entirely the wrong way.

Divine self-revelation is a living experience, an experience of *the* eternally-Abundant Heart – which can only be received *by* a restlessly-searching abundant heart. It is a living experience which breaches our self-constructed walls of expectation and fear – even speaking the words of life to that which is assumed to be dead! "I say to you, get up!"⁹

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¹ Taylor J V, *The Go-Between God: The Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission*, London: SCM Books, 1972.

² Luke 6:12-47

³ Luke 6:45

⁴ 1 Kings 17:20-21

⁵ Luke 7:16b

⁶ Luke 7:16a

⁷ Galatians 1:11-12

⁸ quoted in Wilhelm R (trans), *The Secret of the Golden Flower: A Chinese Book of Life*, San Diego: Harvest Books, 1962, p83.

⁹ Luke 7:14b