

My youngest daughter Charlotte, age 8, is not only a whirlwind of energy, but she often humbles me with insight. So Charlotte, I asked, how do we know that God is there for us and loves us? Well, daddy, she said, speaking to me as if it were a bit of a silly question, we pray to God so we know that God hears us and loves us. Sweet, cute even, but it's this all assumption and no argument: We pray to God, so we know that God hears us and loves us. But Charlotte's answer is more subtle than that. We often privilege a model of knowledge derived from natural science. We want an experiment, or a kind of data, which is available for all to evaluate and assess. But some kinds of knowledge cannot be summed up with neutral facts and figures. Imagine a person whose only experience of love would be to subject any romantic interest to a shrewd analysis. There is a place for thought and for the will in affairs of the heart, but the person who always keeps at a safe and objective distance is unlikely to know much about falling in love. Or, could we learn about human vulnerability or suffering by suppressing empathy and avoiding involvement?

Pusey House was founded in memory of E. B. Pusey, Regius prof of Hebrew until 1828 to his death in 1882. Falling in love was important to Pusey's appointment. When he was 18, fell in love with Maria Barker, but their parents forbid them to marry. During the 10 years it took for them to change their mind, Pusey buried himself in work, acquiring an exceptional knowledge of Hebrew, Syriac, Arabic, and Chaldee. At time of his death, he was known as a leader of Oxford movement or, for some, as a backward scholar who refused to learn from advances in biblical scholarship. Some emphasize his austere spirituality, others his teaching about participation in the divine life through the sacraments.

At end of 18th beginning of 19th c, one of the most common kinds of theological writing was evidence writing – the producing of evidences to support claims of Christian faith. In one sense this approach involved an attempt to bring to certainty and objectivity of natural science to the study of the Bible. In a well-known example, William Paley imagines a man who discovers a watch while out walking. From this discovery, he infers that there must be a watch-maker who made the watch with a particular purpose in mind. According to Paley's argument, the world is like a watch in that it also shows evidence of purpose and design.

Turning to the Old Testament, Paley asks how we can that Isaiah's description of one who 'was wounded for our transgressions ... bruised for our iniquities' is a prophecy of the suffering of Christ? He proposed 3 tests:

1. Would the people who heard the prophet know that they were hearing a prophecy?
2. Can we see it fulfilled with certainty in NT?
3. Can we be sure that there was no way of prophet making this prediction apart from supernatural revelation?

Paley and others like him believed that this kind of argument gives us clear and definite evidence whether or not we have faith.

Well, what is the problem here? For Pusey, not only did this approach run contrary to both how OT is read in the NT, and in the early Church, but it amounted to trying to put God under the microscope. Pusey argued that treating the contents of the Old Testament this way is like dissecting a dead body in order to find the life which once animated it: 'the Deity, [he writes] ... which men prove to themselves, by such means, is very little better than a dead idol and "work of men's hands" ... very different from the "living God" who is "a consuming fire"'. (L5)

When this dead idol fails us or displeases us, we cast it away or turn against it. One of reasons that orthodoxy matters, that right belief matters, is that false gods always disappoint or confuse us.

Pusey's criticisms seemed shocking in his day – wasn't he attacking the champions of Christianity? (Here we see Pusey the romantic who was on the side of Coleridge, who described Paley as 'the tutelary Genius of modern Idolatry'.) I have not distinguished between different kinds of argument about the existence of God. Suffice it to say that when philosophers and theologians look back at Paley today they often agree with Pusey. We see in Paley an approach which owes as more to the Descartes and Locke than the Bible. The conception of an autonomous human reason which evaluates revelation in this way does not sit well with the tradition which embraces St Paul, Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas and Julian of Norwich.

Standing in this tradition, Pusey argues that 'awe, wonder, the absorbing sense of infinity, of purity, and of holiness, infuse conviction more directly than reasoning ... The chance sight, so to say, of a flower illumined by the sun's rays, or of the starry heavens, the moon and the stars which God has ordained, impress the feeling of God upon the soul more than any artificial reasoning from final causes ... Like the centurion by the Cross we are awed into belief.'

Genuine knowledge of God will always include an acknowledgement of what is hidden, of the great gulf between our way of knowing and God who is known: 'our highest knowledge must be our indistinctest; for that which is most elevated must most surpass our comprehension'. (L2)

In the search for clarity and certainty, we lost the capacity, Pusey and colleagues argued, to fall in love, to say with the bride in the Song of Solomon, 'I am sick with love'. This is a kind of knowledge that one cannot get by standing back and keeping a distance, or only admitting what is in our control. Knowledge of God is the response of the whole person to some knowledge or experience of divine things. In the Song of Songs, the divine bridegroom is like a hart, like a deer, who stands behind the wall of a garden. He looks through the windows and through the lattice work, but his presence is only fleeting. He is like the Risen Lord who comes and goes from His disciples: "a little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me." In the tradition, knowing God will always have something of the character of the search of the bride in the Song of Solomon "I will seek him whom my soul loveth." To be risen with Christ is to be invited into this exchange of love between Bridegroom and Bride.

Alongside clear statements about God and His ways, the Bible also communicates by symbols and poetry. These images in word or deed offer a kind of knowledge which

cannot be grasped once and for all or exhausted of meaning, and which address our affections as well as our intellect.¹

We see this kind of revelation in both our lessons this evening. In OT, the prophet Zechariah sees a golden lampstand with seven bowls. It was like the lamps that burned in the first temple before it was destroyed. But this lampstand has a perpetual source of oil flowing from two olives trees into a golden bowl and then to each of the 7 lights.²

Zechariah had returned to Jerusalem with the community of Israelites who had been in exile in Babylon.³ The returned exiles set about to build a new temple, but they faced hostility from people of the land. Zechariah's vision includes a promise to Zerubbabel, the governor of Jerusalem, that the temple will indeed be rebuilt despite conflict and struggle: **4.6 Then he said to me, "This is the word of the Lord to Zerub'babel: Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts.**

The oil which flows from the olive trees into the lamps is a symbol of God's Spirit and of the super-abundance of divine grace by which the work will be accomplished. With this divine assistance in the midst of failure and discouragement, the mountain of impossibility will become a level plain, and the headstone of the temple will eventually be put in place.

When the early Christians read this passage, they heard there also a prophecy of the work of Christ to establish and build a new Temple. In the book of Revelation the seven lights become seven lampstands picturing the universal Church built through the superabundant grace of the Spirit.⁴

There is a great risk in offering these blunt conclusions. The way in which the Bible communicates with image and symbol as well as clear statement embodies principle that however much we know about the goodness and mercy of God, there is still more to feed and delight the soul.

It is difficult to be patient with a kind of knowledge which cannot be grasped or controlled. But if we are willing to linger with awe and wonder, to search and to be found, to persevere in loss and darkness, then we may also have confidence that the God who is both revealed and hidden will be our guide.

Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts.

¹ However much we know about God, there is more to be communicated. Whatever we know of the goodness and mercy of God, there is more to delight the soul than we can know or grasp. This something more and something higher is often communicated through image and symbol.

This is part of the significance of the poetic passages of the Bible, or the symbolic passages.

² The questions of the angel who shows Zech the vision seems to emphasize that knowing what the vision reveals is a divine gift.

³ In the second half of 6th c. the city was still in ruins and the temple had been destroyed.

⁴ Christ in Rev. 1 is both God, 'with hair ... white as snow; ...and eyes .. like a flame of fire', but who is also 'a son of man'. In St John's vision, the God-man moves among the lamps, both distinct from and at one with the Spirit which gives life and light and power to the universal church symbolized the 7 lamps of Rev, and the 7 Churches to whom St John writes.