

Show us the Father

The Holy Father

Readings:

Exodus 3:1-6; Acts 10:1-29.

Preliminary

Before we begin, I want to make a comment on the way we understand things and in particular the things of God. We don't often hear the things that are said. It may not be that we are inattentive, though that may be a reason. There is a particular problem in hearing and understanding. We have a grid or framework in our minds and whatever we hear and try to understand, we have to fit that new information into that grid. Now, when we do not have a framework to fit that in, we discard it or we may alter the information in such a way as to make it fit – a square peg in a round hole. When we do that we distort the information and that means we really have not absorb what has been told to us.

We need a new grid or framework in order to hold what is new. Jesus taught that to us in the parable of the new wine in old wineskin. The new wine will burst the old wineskin. What is needed is a new wineskin, i.e. a new framework in our minds. That is the work of the Spirit of God. Firstly, the Spirit has to destroy that old framework and secondly, create a new framework in order to enable us to hold on to the things of God. That is the miracle of God as Forsythe wrote.

The true supernatural is not the miraculous, but the miracle for whose sake miracles exist. It is not prodigy in nature but the grace of God in history. It has no direct relation to natural law. Miracle is not a scientific idea but a religious. An event is a miracle not by its relation to law but to grace.¹

That is why the cry, 'Abba, Father', has to come from the Spirit within us, otherwise, it would merely be merely an emotional outburst to an image of our expectation from some earthly fatherhood.

Resume

Let's run through briefly where we have been so far. We have seen that we should not merely focus on what Jesus came to do, though that is important, but to see that He came to reveal to us the Father. It is important to know the Father as He is the one from whom the directives for redemption came. In saving the lost, the real work of the Triune God is in the restoration of our being so that it conforms to the image of the Godhead. It is in this restoration that the communion with the Triune God is re-established. The material blessing is not the primary issue, though this may result. Our culture focuses on the 'doing' and not so much as on the 'being'. There are other ways of expressing this, and that is, the 'how' and the 'who', or the 'indicative' and the 'imperative'. It is the indicative that determines the imperative, or the 'who' determining the 'how'. We need a mind that is restored in order to know the Father. We need a holy mind in order to know the Holy Father.

The framework of holiness

¹ P T Forsyth, *God the Holy Father*, (NCPI:South Australia, 1987), 7.

To begin with, we need to look at our framework for holiness. The whole understanding of holiness has been distorted to fit in with our human aspirations to reach out to God. We saw this last week.

Holiness has been misconstrued. We've come to see it as something other than what has been revealed. In our ignorance we see it as something that we have to perform ourselves. But holiness as performance is simply not true! Holiness is being done unto us, not by us.²

Why is this so? We will look at two narratives from the scriptures. The first is from Exodus.

¹ Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. ³ Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." ⁴ When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." ⁵ Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." ⁶ He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. (Exodus 3:1-6)

This is an important event, not only from the point of view of the calling of Moses, but because it forms a framework for our understanding of holiness. It is a well known story of Moses who was called before the burning bush. God called Moses and the voice came from behind a bush in the desert. Moses was told to take off his shoes because the ground that he was standing on was holy ground. Why was the ground holy? The answer is simple. Because God's presence was there. Question: was the ground holy before that incident and was it holy after that incident? Of course not. You see, holiness is not a property of the created. It is all that God is. We cannot even consider it to be a property of God. God is holy and there is no holiness away from the person of God.

The second narrative is the story of Peter at the house of Cornelius in Acts 10.

¹ In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. ² He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. ³ One afternoon at about three o'clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius." ⁴ He stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" He answered, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. ⁵ Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; ⁶ he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside." ⁷ When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him, ⁸ and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.

⁹ About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. ¹⁰ He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. ¹¹ He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. ¹² In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. ¹³ Then he heard a voice saying, "**Get up, Peter; kill and eat.**" ¹⁴ But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." ¹⁵ The voice said to him again, a second time, "**What God has made clean, you must not call profane.**" ¹⁶ This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

¹⁷ Now while Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision that he had seen, suddenly the men sent by Cornelius appeared. They were asking for Simon's house and were standing by the gate. ¹⁸ They called out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was staying there. ¹⁹ While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Look, three men are searching for you. ²⁰ Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them." ²¹ So Peter went down to the men and said, "I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for your coming?" ²² They answered, "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say." ²³ So Peter invited them in and gave them lodging.

² Theme of the book by J Haughey, *Housing Heavens Fire: The Challenge of Holiness*, Loyola Press.

The next day he got up and went with them, and some of the believers from Joppa accompanied him. ²⁴ The following day they came to Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. ²⁵ On Peter's arrival Cornelius met him, and falling at his feet, worshiped him. ²⁶ But Peter made him get up, saying, "Stand up; I am only a mortal." ²⁷ And as he talked with him, he went in and found that many had assembled; ²⁸ and he said to them, "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. ²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?" (Acts 10:1-29)

In the vision, Peter would not touch the meat given to him because that was not in keeping with the Mosaic laws. Then the voice said, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane' (Act 10:15). What is holy or unholy is not what we have done or achieved. There used to be taught in the past that we must not associate with bad people because that will make us unholy. Yes, we can be influenced by them and be tarnished by the association. Associating with a sinner does not make us unholy unless we allow them to take us over. On the contrary, Jesus ate with republicans and sinners, much to the consternation of the Jewish leaders.

The Holy Father

In talking on the Fatherhood of God, we need to deal with two themes, that of authority and holiness. I spoke on the authority of the Father last week. As God is Triune, we need to see that there is the authority of the Son and the Spirit as well. The authority of the church is the authority of the Spirit, but it is not an authority in the church's own right. The Spirit is the Lord of the church and unless that is so, then any authority exercised by the church becomes a contested issue. Any authority that we exercise in the church must be conferred by the Spirit of God in the forms of gifts given to us for the work of ministry, i.e. the gospel for the restoration and the building up of the people of God.

I did not deal with a related theme to authority last week and that is authority and submission. We saw that there is only the authority of the Father and all other authority is a derived authority. Even our Lord Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, 'Not my will but thine be done'. Authority and submission are the flip sides of a coin. For us they go hand in hand. I may have the authority of preaching this morning, but I need to acknowledge the authority of the musician because of the gifts that God has given to her. I may have the authority as pastor of the church, but I need to acknowledge the authority of others whom God has called and gifted for the ministry. That is why in writing to the Ephesians, Paul said, 'Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ' (Eph. 5:22). There is no absolute authority in the human situation. Any authority in the human scene is God-given and related to His presence, i.e. the presence of the Holy Spirit. And when Paul said in the next verse, 'Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord' (Eph. 5:22), he is saying that in the context of a mutual submission. Now submission does not equate with subservience. The Holy Spirit is the Lord of the church and of our Christian communities and families.

The Spirit of God is often referred to as the Holy Spirit. This is because the Spirit is the effector of the holy presence of God. Our God is Triune and all three persons of the Godhead are referred to as holy.

And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. (John 17:11)

And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth. (John 17:19)

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, (Matt. 28:19)

We do not talk much on the theme of holiness nowadays. There are two reasons. One is that the theme of holiness is much skewed in Christian thinking. It smacked of asceticism and doing things for God. The messages that are often preached goes something like this. God has saved you and now you must live holy lives – do this or that, and refrained from this or that. In so doing God will reward you. It all sounded quite contractual. Yet, these attitudes are not to be shunned as we should live simple lives and avoid the indulgences of high living. However they are not to be equated with holiness even though they are the expressions of Christian life. Holiness is not something that we do. Rather, holiness is what has been done to us. And again,

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The other reason is this. We cannot talk of holiness in isolation. There is a fundamental rule in Christian theology – 'a doctrine of God which is only a doctrine of God is not a doctrine of God'.⁴ What is meant by that statement is this. We cannot talk of God in isolation because God is in the midst of His people.

I will not execute my fierce anger;
I will not again destroy Ephraim;
for I am God and no mortal,
the Holy One in your midst,
and I will not come in wrath. (Hos. 11:9)

Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion,
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel. (Isa. 12:6)

Therefore, to talk about God or to talk about His holiness, one must engage the creation that God has made. Holiness is not an abstract concept. It is the sum total of who God is and what God does.

An analogy has been made to assume that holiness is like white light from which the colours of the rainbow emanate. Grace and love are but the radiant colours of God's holiness. Love is not love unless we come to love by way of holiness.

It is quite difficult to talk on holiness as an abstract concept, but we cannot deny that it is an abstract concept. The Holy Spirit knows it and hence the scripture helps us with a few incidents or we may call them narratives to help us to capture something of what holiness is. We have seen that in the two narratives above.

This teaching of Paul emphasises that holiness is conferred and not achieved. For the same reason Jesus said,

¹⁹ And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth. (John 17:19)

¹² Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. (Heb. 13:12)

³ Theme of the book by J Haughey, *Housing Heavens Fire: The Challenge of Holiness*, Loyola Press.

⁴ J. Webster, *Holiness*, (SCM Press: Great Britain, 2003), 53.

Jesus is holy and through Him, we are made holy. We are made holy by His blood. We do not achieve holiness but are made holy by being in Christ. To be holy is the work of God because the Triune God is holy. So again Paul said,

²³ May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this. (1 Thess. 5:23-24)

The holiness of God is the foundation of religion as Forsyth said.

The grace of God cannot return to our preaching or to our faith till we recover what has almost clean gone from our general, familiar, and current religion, what liberalism has quite lost - I mean a due sense of the holiness of God... This holiness of God is the real foundation of religion ... Love is but its outgoing; sin is but its defiance; grace is but its action on sin; the cross is but its victory; faith is but its worship.⁵ (Cruciality of the Cross, p. 22).

Let me highlight the quote this way as I have done before.

This holiness of God is the real foundation of religion.
 Love is but its (holiness) outgoing;
 sin is but its (holiness) defiance;
 grace is but its (holiness) action on sin;
 the cross is but its (holiness) victory;
 faith is but its (holiness) worship.

If all we see in the cross is simply a matter of personal salvation then we have not yet come to know the Father. Our love, whatever you may call it, will simply be loving those who love us. We need to know the Holy Father. We need to see that the love and grace of God flows from His holiness. Otherwise, we will only be creating a religion of our own making.

We have spoken much about love, but the love of God (*agape*) is shown in His holiness, not in a sentimental way or towards someone good. The latter would merely be a contractual relationship. His love is shown in His grace towards us sinners who have wronged Him. This is His holiness. We have mentioned in the past that holiness is not simply moral perfection though that is part of it. We have said that holiness is relational, but have not spelt out the details of that relationship. How did Jesus address His Father? It is 'Holy Father'.

And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. (John 17:11)

We have said the Lord's prayer many times.

⁹ ... Our Father in heaven,
 hallowed be your name.
¹⁰ Your kingdom come.
 Your will be done,
 on earth as it is in heaven.
¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread.
¹² And forgive us our debts,
 as we also have forgiven our debtors.
¹³ And do not bring us to the time of trial,
 but rescue us from the evil one. (Matt. 6:9-13)

⁵ P T Forsyth, *Cruciality of the Cross*, (NCPI: South Australia,), 22.

When Jesus taught us to pray, as children of God, we are to address our heavenly Father. Straight after that we are to acknowledge the holiness of God. The address is not 'our dear loving heavenly Father' or 'our gracious Father', but 'Our Father in heaven, holy be your name'. God is holy and everything He does flows from His holiness. He is not holy because He loves, but He loves because He is holy. We may talk of the love of God, but we should realise that it is God's holy love. He loves because He is holy. We really do not fully understand love (*agape* or God's holy love) until we come into the holy presence of God and embrace the cross of Jesus Christ.

Note that God's holiness precedes the coming of the Kingdom. It is His holy nature that determines all His other actions. When Jesus prayed to His Father in the garden of Gethsemane, He said, 'Holy Father'. That is the essential nature of God, the Holy Father.

'Hallowed by your name: your kingdom come'. God has ushered in His kingdom, i.e. His holiness has come to us and we are continuing to try to get to God's kingdom. We kept saying the Lord's prayer without truly knowing what it means.

We often think of holiness as doing something good. We love and do acts of charity and presume that is holiness. No. Holiness is what God is. His kingdom has come. We cannot be holy apart from being in God. We cannot obtain His holiness as if it is something that we subsequently own. Once apart from God, we cease to be holy. Our holiness is the result of union with the Father and that is done for us by Christ and the Spirit.

What I mean is that we make too little of the Father when we do not rise beyond *love to grace—which is holy love, suffering hate and redeeming it*. The true supernatural is not the miraculous, but the miracle for whose sake miracles exist. It is not prodigy in nature but the grace of God in history. It has no direct relation to natural law. Miracle is not a scientific idea but a religious. An event is a miracle not by its relation to law but to grace. The Incarnation would be equally a miracle, however Jesus entered the world. It is not nature that is the true region of the supernatural, but history; and history not as a chain of events, but as the spiritual career of the soul or of the race. That is the true region of the supernatural. It lies in the action of God's will upon men's wills, not upon natural law. It is the work of God's grace upon men's sin.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ J Webster, *Holiness*, (SCM Press, 2003), 53

⁷ P. T. Forsyth, *God the Holy Father*, (NCPI,) p. 7.