

Face of Mystery

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Text: Matthew 22.15-22

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, 'Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?' But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, 'Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.' And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' They answered, 'The emperor's.' Then he said to them, 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.' When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Exodus 33.12-23

Moses said to the LORD, 'See, you have said to me, "Bring up this people"; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, "I know you by name, and you have also found favour in my sight." Now if I have found favour in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favour in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.' He said, 'My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.' And he said to him, 'If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favour in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth.'

The LORD said to Moses, 'I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favour in my sight, and I know you by name.' Moses said, 'Show me your glory, I pray.' And he said, 'I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, "The LORD"; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But', he said, 'you cannot

see my face; for no one shall see me and live.’ And the LORD continued, ‘See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.’

May God bless to our understanding these words from the Holy Scriptures.

Last week was such a grand occasion, with so many visitors and friends, and the splendid music and dance, and such a privilege to have Margaret Atwood with us to reflect on – really, on the history of religion, and how humans have almost always understood that our sense of the divine and our sense of the natural world are connected. She traced in broad terms the way this connection has been expressed in different eras and places, different languages, different concepts. [Pillars as tree trunks.] She lamented that over the past two hundred years or so, our own Christian tradition seems to have stepped away from the religious bond with the natural world, toward a God who is abstract and immaterial, remote from the world and from us. In the Question and Answer period afterwards, Margaret Atwood stressed that a third element that underlies religion is the arts – that the essence of humanity is to be found at the place where artistic creativity, spirituality, and our apprehension of the natural world meet. She encouraged us to be part of the *re-connecting* that is going on. Urged us to participate in the knitting together of awe and skill, insight and compassion that makes faith viable.

So it seemed completely obvious that what we should talk about today would be theology and doctrine. Or maybe not. [I am kidding of course.] For most of us the prospect of discussions about theological doctrine are the last thing we would want to spend time on. How many angels can dance on the head of a pin? Really, who cares? The Council begged me not to drag them into it. But quite apart from Margaret

Atwood's compelling reflections on spirituality, the arts and nature, the church has a doctrinal matter before it. Let me try to give a capsule version.

At the time when the United Church was founded, 85 years ago, the founders incorporated a statement of beliefs which even then they recognized as approximate rather than precise. Ministers in the United Church have to declare just essential agreement with those articles. Since then, as times and context change, a number of expressions of faith have been prepared for the church, to offer both new insights and contemporary language. In this congregation we are probably most familiar with the "New Creed", which we say together every Sunday. A more recent and more comprehensive statement of faith is called the Song of Faith, approved by the General Council in 2006.

But because these more recent statements do not form part of what is called the Basis of Union, they do not have the same standing as the original articles. It's as if the United Church, with all its embrace of progressive thinking and attentiveness to the contemporary world, had locked itself to an expression of faith suitable for the 1920s. An expression that had complete integrity at a time when ladies wore hats and gloves to church, and communion was served by men (only men) in morning coats. Much less resonant today.

At the most recent General Council it was proposed that the Articles be removed from their central status in the Basis of Union – and then someone said, that's ridiculous, this is a church, we have to have *something* in the Basis of Union that describes our beliefs. Then someone else said, wait, why not add the others, so that we keep and honour a record of our best thoughts through the decades, and also to mark our belief that nothing we can say is the final word on God.

It turns out that this is not so radical – other denominations have handled the same problem this way – by letting expressions of faith accrete, and build into a composite picture of the theological history of the people. But because it is a significant change for the United Church, it needs to be ratified by a majority of congregations across the country. So that's what the Council has to do.

What this really points to is the notion that the way we understand and talk about God changes over time and must change over time. Because our understanding is always incomplete. The practice of faith actually *is* the practice of grappling with big questions – what is the divine reality like? And what does that mean for our lives? What *is* the connection with nature, and with human creativity? Our whole service today celebrates this ongoing effort. Our hymns reflect different moments in the church’s history and thought. The anthem – the 4th century Nicene Creed proclaimed in the buoyant spirit of the Enlightenment. As David pointed out to the choir on Thursday, Haydn’s music gives us a perfect picture of the watchmaker God that Margaret Atwood described. Today our Call to Worship and Unison prayer came from the United Church document Song of Faith. And we are going to end with Holy, Holy, Holy. Our faith is many layered, and many-voiced.

It is important to read the Bible this way too. Important to receive it as a record of the struggle to say something of God, while knowing that everything we say is inadequate.

In the passage from Matthew that Bridget read, the Pharisees and Herodians attempt to trap Jesus by pinning him down on a theological point. It isn’t really about taxes or coinage – they are asking him, do we belong to God or to Caesar? Jesus sidesteps, tosses off an answer that went down in history. Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s. But surely this is not truly a clarification – for what do we imagine Jesus would say does *not* belong to God? The world isn’t split God/Caesar – it’s more complex than that. Theology is not meant to tie down but to open up. That is what Jesus does with his answer.

Moses’ encounter with God in Exodus has the same quality of theological layering – we can see that the writer is wrestling with the largest possible questions. Can we really grasp the divine reality? Can even Moses, the greatest of all the prophets, see God? The setting is naturalistic – Moses’ ongoing conversation with God, ‘as one speaks to a friend’, as we are told. Of course, they are on Mount Sinai, and there is a pillar of cloud, and a racket of thunder and lightning, God’s glory, and we *get* the symbolism of that. But it does seem to be the conversation of old friends,

repetitive, affectionate, sometimes querulous. I am not going if you aren't coming with us, says Moses, of the proposed trek to the Promised Land. *I am coming*, says God. My presence will always be with you. I do know your name, and I will tell you mine – a certain sign of intimacy and trust.

And then Moses expresses that longing that humans have uttered since time immemorial, through art and music, in cave painting and cathedral building, in dance and poetry and prayer. Show me your glory, he says. Let me see you. We imagine a long silence.

I will pass by, says God. I will keep you safe and you will have a glimpse of me, of my presence – but no one can see the face of God and live. Human beings are not constituted in such a way as to be able to perceive the entire picture of reality. In an image of Anne Lamott, if reality is a huge tapestry, we are looking at one tiny square of it, from the back!

And so, thousands of years later, we find ourselves together, here at Bloor Street. Here because we do know something of God. Here, knowing that we have seen something precious, that our faith contains powerful stories and insights and truths. But we are here also because, like Moses, we know that what we see is only a glimpse. Like his, our Song of Faith is unfinished. And so we keep on singing. Amen.