

Perceiving God (Luke 24.36-49)

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This past week, I've been doing some reading about the 'spiritual senses', exploring the question of how human beings encounter God. How can finite humanity encounter the infinite? How do creatures perceive and 'meet' their Creator? In the biblical literature, sensory language is widely used to express this human-divine encounter – 'taste and see that the Lord is good' (Ps 34.9; 1 Pet 2.3); 'hear the word of the Lord' (Isa. 1.10; Hos. 4.1). Jesus promises that the 'pure in heart will see God' (Matt. 5.8); Paul writes that the faithful spread abroad 'the fragrance that comes from knowing' Christ (2 Cor. 2.14); and the witnesses of the resurrection speak of 'touching with their own hands' the Word of Life (1 John 1.1).¹

As theologian Sarah Coakley remarks: These biblical passages seem to point to the possibility of a kind of perceptual, sensory contact with God. But how should we understand this language? Is it purely metaphorical – drawing on the language of the senses, without really being 'sensual' – just as we say: 'I see your point', or 'Let me touch upon a subject'? Or does it suggest that there is some kind of sensory capacity – spiritual senses – that are especially attuned to perception of God?²

Well, these are fascinating questions. And it strikes me they could be related to issues raised by the strange dynamic of Jesus' resurrection appearances. Because what seems to be a pervasive feature of these stories is, on the one hand, the risen Jesus' determination to connect with his disciples, to communicate himself and all

¹ Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley, *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p.1.

² Gavrilyuk and Coakley, *The Spiritual Senses*, p.6.

that his resurrection means, together with the profound difficulty of the disciples in ‘getting it’ – in recognising Jesus and understanding what’s happened.

So let’s have a closer look at our passage from Luke’s gospel. The story follows immediately from the famous walk to Emmaus, which tells of the risen Jesus joining two of his disciples on the road, hearing of their distress at the events of the last few days, and then opening the deep meaning of the Scriptures as they relate to himself. Strikingly, and even though Jesus is the subject of their conversation, the disciples recognise him only when he breaks bread with them, and immediately he vanishes from their sight. They recall, then, that their hearts had been burning within them (notice the sensory imagery) while he’d been expounding the Scriptures, and they rush back to Jerusalem to tell the others. Engrossed in amazed discussion of these events, the disciples are startled and terrified when once more Jesus stands among them, saying ‘Peace be with you’, and inviting them to ‘look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see ...’.

So what’s going on here? What’s with the disciples’ persistent failure or slowness to recognise Jesus – their inability to bring him into focus? They thought he might have been a ghost. It doesn’t help to belittle their difficulty, as if they were simply particularly obtuse representatives of our species, and complacently assume we’d have done better. To do that is to miss the theological point, which I think has to do with how we recognise the God who is radically Other.

Sometimes Scripture speaks of the difficulty of perceiving God using the metaphor of ‘hiddenness’. You cannot see my face and live, God tells Moses (Exod. 33.20), and we understand that God is hidden, veiled from our sight, not because God is avoiding us, but because we can’t bear the light. We are mercifully being preserved from annihilation.

In the resurrection appearances, it’s not quite the same as that. Jesus is asking to be seen, directly, but still the disciples struggle. Some theologians appeal here to

the metaphor of ‘saturation’. Jesus is not so much ‘hidden’ but too ‘full’, too ‘overwhelming’ to receive³ – an intensity of presence that occurs for us as an absence (he ‘vanished’ from their sight). It’s as if he overflows our ‘inbox’ and is just deleted – our receptive capacities inadequate to the reality.

And yet, despite this limit in natural perception, there’s an understanding that we are capable of *growth* here, of waking up, of opening our eyes and ears, of cleansing the thoughts of our hearts and so to receive him. All of this is a call to prepare ourselves, to condition ourselves for encounter with God. In the resurrection stories in Luke, Jesus is frustrated with his disciples’ inattention and obtuseness, with their failure to be ready: ‘Oh, how foolish, how slow of heart you are to believe’. It’s an echo of the prophet Isaiah’s complaint: ‘The people’s hearts have grown dull, their ears hard of hearing, they have shut their eyes ...’ (Acts 28. 27; Isa. 6.10).

Jesus wants us to grow our capacity to recognise and receive him. For Luke, all this matters because (a) he wants us to know deeper communion with God and (b) we’re called to be God’s witnesses. And you can’t proclaim what you haven’t experienced. If we’re to fulfil our calling, we must grow our capacity to recognise and receive him. So how?

Well, Luke is clear that seeing God is *not* a matter of leaving behind our ordinary lives and retreating onto some esoteric, so-called ‘spiritual’ plane. Remember it’s a resurrection *of* the body. ‘A ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have’, Jesus says. The body is important, and labouring the point ever so slightly, he eats a piece of broiled fish.

We live in the body and likewise our deepening perception of him happens in the body – the personal and the communal body. It’s not about leaving behind ordinary forms of life in search of some out-of-body experience. Jesus comes to the

³ Brian D. Robinette, *Grammars of Resurrection: A Christian Theology of Presence and Absence* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2009), p.69.

disciples in the midst of their confusion and fear. God is perceived in the midst: ‘heaven in ordinarie’.⁴

So if we’re going to perceive him, we need to prepare ourselves, to grow our capacity – to awaken and deepen our senses. And this happens in the ordinary, with bodily practices, in everyday time. That’s why we have practices at the heart of our gatherings at Benedictus – silence, meditation, communion. That’s why we have a Spiritual Practice Group and L’Chaim – gatherings, which are themselves practices, for deepening our capacity to perceive him in everyday life – our everyday life.

Because God is always present – loving, forgiving, revealing God’s self – if only we could perceive ... receive ...

We’re tempted to think of God as being elsewhere – and so there’s somewhere else I need to get to, preferably starting from some other life than my own. It’s true God is radically Other – not containable and not fully definable – Jesus’ risen presence reveals that much. But Otherness does not mean Elsewhere-ness. ‘In prayer we discover what we already have’, Merton said. ‘You start where you are and you deepen what you already have, and you realize that you are already there. We already have everything, but we don’t know it and we don’t experience it. Everything has been given to us in Christ. All we need is to experience what we already possess.’⁵

That’s what the spiritual life is about. We heighten our spiritual sensitivity through practice in the ordinary, never quite ideal conditions of daily life. And as we perceive him, why wouldn’t we share it? How could we not? It’ll be written all over us!

⁴ George Herbert, ‘Prayer’.

⁵ From a talk that Thomas Merton gave at the Cistercian monastery, Our Lady of the Redwoods, as recorded by David Steindl-Rast - September, 1968 (accessed http://www.gratefulness.org/readings/dsr_merton_recol.htm, 11 March 2015).