

God comes to us

Psalm 24

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Jesus, in one of his prayers to God, spoke deep words. “Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”

If we want real life, life of the highest quality, and of eternal length, then Jesus tells us the way: we have to know God and Jesus.

Because He is the Creator and the Redeemer of life in general, and of you in particular. He is your God; and He is your brother.

David, in Psalm 24, seemed to know God. In extravagant language he praised God for being the almighty creator on the one hand, and for being every so near to us on the other hand. Our God and our redeemer

1. God of heaven and earth

David sings:

The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof,
the world and those who dwell therein,
for He has founded it upon the seas
and established it upon the rivers.

God created the world and He owns it. Therefore, we are urged in this song of 3000 years ago, to worship God. To adore him. That is why we are here, together, in church.

As Christians, we love to think of ourselves as people who are close to God; we like personal language of intimacy, don't we?

But even in the most intimate prayer that we do often pray, the Lord's Prayer, where we address him as our Father, we immediately locate him where? Our Father who art... Yes, in heaven.

He is so high above us; He is God. To pray to God and to specifically locate Him in heaven is a warning against the domestication of the creator of heaven and earth.

If we would only talk of God as our friend, we would be in grave danger of molding him in our own image. Of making him 'user-friendly'. Of creating a golden calf.

But God is not user-friendly. He is not the one we like him to be. He is in heaven, distant from us; different from us. The completely 'Other One.'

The Bible, when speaking of God and heaven, uses metaphors, of course. How else could we think and talk of that Almighty Being.

In Biblical times, in their worldview, heaven was located up there, high above us, beyond the clouds.

I guess nowadays most of us, when we give it some thought, might prefer to say, for instance, that God fills another dimension and permeates all reality. But still, He is far beyond our own tangible world.

Whether we see heaven as up there, or as another dimension, it is in any case distant from us. God is high and lifted up. And we are so small and just down here.

This is important to underline. God is, as the Swiss theologian Karl Barth used to say, *Der Ganz Andere*. 'The totally different one.' He is the Creator, we are his creation. He is up there and we are down here.

And to locate him far away, in heaven, is important.

But that Almighty eternal God did express himself in our creation. He did put something of himself in all we see around us. If we are aware of God's eternal greatness, we can actually see something of that reflected in the world. We see his greatness, his power, his might, in what He made.

But if we lose track of his complete Otherness, we are in danger of making him into a such a generalised pantheistic sort of presence that He evaporates.

If God is present in every flower, in every stone, in every place, then it is very tempting to actually so enjoy that every flower, every stone, every place, than it is easy to no longer need to think of God as something different from our reality.

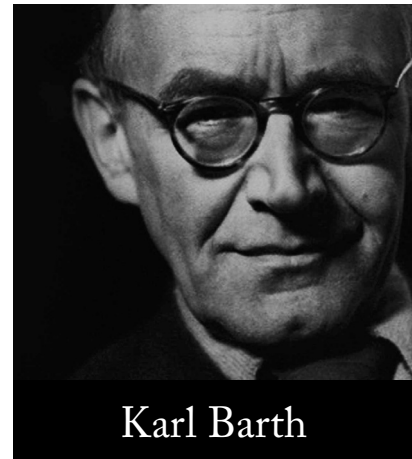
He is then no longer the very different, almighty, Other One who stands opposite us, but he has become, well, the grass we step on, my feelings, anything I imagine, the birds in the sky. And when the bird flies away, God flies away. When I do not feel Him, I am lost.

The Hebrew worldview does not go along with this. It underlines, in the Bible, again and again: God is the creator who is very distant and very different from us. Whether we feel or believe that or not.

2. Who makes himself known on 'his hill'

Yes, that is one side of the Biblical view of God. There is another one. David, after praising God as the Great Creator in heaven, next locates God on earth! He asks:

Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place?



Karl Barth

Israel had a place where Almighty God revealed himself. He was present on his holy hill, in his tabernacle, and later in his temple, in Jerusalem.

This is the stumbling block of the Biblical faith: The idea that the Almighty one who is so different from us, whom we cannot see or know, that He would have taken residence in a small building, made by human hands.

Why there? Why not in a temple in Egypt, or in India, or in Peru? God chose, for reasons that we do not need to go into now, God

chose to be linked to that one temple on a hill in Jerusalem. With the people there; with their history, with the liturgy He gave them to celebrate.

Yes, God is Almighty, in heaven. Even the one who built the temple in Jerusalem, King Solomon, in his dedication prayer of the temple, recognised that God cannot be contained in a building, and that He as the Almighty Creator, fills the heavens and the earth.

But for knowing God, for having a glimpse of who He truly is, God did reveal himself in that one particular place.

He gave his laws to that one nation; He promised to bless that one nation; He connected his name with that one nation. And it is exactly because of this particularity of God, that we can actually know Him.

Who can worship God? That is the question.

Who can worship that eternal being? People who go up God's holy hill, and who have clean hands and a pure heart.

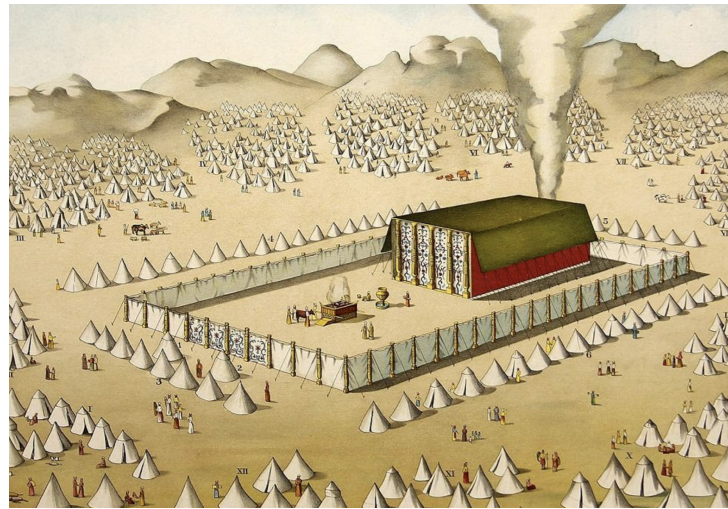
Those people will be blessed. Those people will be saved. These are the people who seek the face of the God of Jacob. The God of Israel. The God in his particular revelation.

God is not generic. He is not what we all like him to be. He is not therapeutic, or just a filler of every need we experience.

He is as He revealed himself in his relationship with Israel.

Israel sometimes forgot that God is the God of the world, not only of them. They sometimes forgot that all nations are created by God. That He fills the whole earth with his glory.

If we lose track of how Almighty and how All-different He is, we are in danger of treating him as our pet; as the one who is exactly what we want him to be.



Then he can become our national God, the God of Israel, or of the USA, or our denominational God.

He is not Anglican, let me assure you that.

Or we make him the God who puts his rubber stamp on whatever viewpoints we have. But our God is always greater than that, different from us.

But if we only see him as that totally different one, and we forget that He truly revealed himself to Israel, then we are also in danger of losing track of Him; of who He really is.

We need this continuous tension in our heart and in our mind between God as the Totally Different, Almighty One, and the One who came to Israel in all particularity. If we forget one or the other, we lose track of who God is.

3. God comes to us

We actually celebrate this tension in church. Almighty God, the Totally Different One, has come to us. He has revealed himself to us, in Jesus Christ. This is for many the most ridiculous idea, the greatest stumbling block of Christianity.

Our contemporaries can believe in some vague pantheistic concept of the divine, but how in the world can you believe that the Almighty became a baby. A teenager. A man. And then he died on a cross on a hill in Jerusalem.

Our Creed underlines both aspects of who God is:

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.

And:

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, for us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate, was made man.

Yes, God is Almighty. And yes, He came so close to us.

Scholars believe that David's Psalm was written to celebrate that the Ark of the Covenant was taken into the tabernacle.

That tiny box, the Ark of the Covenant, represented the King of Glory, the God of Heaven and earth. How strange. How particular.

The one who arrived at the tabernacle or the temple in Jerusalem, was God. The gates are too low for him, too narrow, so the gates are asked, poetically, to raise themselves up.



Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. He is the King of glory!

These magnificent 3000 year old verses have deep meaning. God, the creator of heaven and earth, enters into his temple.

When God entered into his temple, Israel worshipped.

When God entered into the human temple of the virgin Mary, Zacharia worshipped.

When the disciples saw how God was present in Jesus, they worshipped.

The Almighty connects himself with humankind. He does not lose his eternal divinity. And the humanity God adopted never lost its humanness. But God and man became one in Jesus Christ.

And that is why we, small human beings, can also meet with God.

He made you into his temple.

St Ambrose of Milan, the fourth century church father, connected the words of the gates and the doors that must be lifted up, to his fellow Christians. In his exposition of Psalm 24, he wrote:

We know that the soul has its gate, the one to which Christ comes, and where he stands and knocks. Open up then, for he wishes to come in; He wants to find his Bride waiting for him. (Expositio Psalmi, 118, 14)

The same words, Lift up your heads, O gates, And be lifted up, O ancient doors', are therefore also often used in the liturgy of the holy Eucharist.

Conclusion

We ask Jesus Christ - God from God, Light from Light, to be present in bread and wine, and to come to us.

God the Almighty, the one who reigns in heaven, comes to us in the smallest, most particular way. In bread and wine.

This is the scandal of the Christian faith. The Eternal One comes to us in Jesus Christ in an incredibly tangible way. To bless and to save those who receive him in worship.

As you receive him, see Him - High and Lifted up, immeasurable.

As you receive him, see Him - Jesus Crucified, so weak and tangible.

“Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”

+ Amen