

## Between God's Glory and the Human Economy – Brian Hartley

Exodus 33:12-23; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22

The reality of coming home never quite measures up to the anticipation that precedes the event. Things inevitably change—whether it is the loss of the glories of old Hogue Hall or the moment of epiphany when we stand across the road from the house we imagined as once being enormous, only to now realize that from the perspective of adulthood it is actually quite small. Perhaps no time of the year reminds us of this paradox in quite the same way as does the full-throated onset of the liminal season we know as autumn. On the one hand, the warmth of the sun still remains with us and provides enough illumination to set the maples and birches on fire with their pageantry of reds, yellows, and oranges. And, yet, the sharp nip in the air reminds us that we are actually living on borrowed time—that old man winter is just around the corner and it is time to break out the winter coats, chop the wood, and seal up the cracks around the windows and doors lest we get caught unawares as the snow comes racing across the plains towards us.

Today's texts invite us into such a juxtaposition as we find ourselves caught up in the tete-a-tete of dialogue in both the Old Testament and Gospel lessons, as well as listening to the apostle Paul's thanksgiving for the Christian assembly planted in the port city of Thessalonica—a place full of competing voices. And perhaps nowhere is this tension quite so prominent as it is in the anatomical contrast we get between the first and the last lesson as we alternate between the picture of Caesar's profile laid alongside the Lord God's backside.

In the latter story, Moses is still anxiously trying to navigate the people's relationship with the deity in light of their orgiastic behavior around the golden calf. Having been betrayed by his brother, Aaron, and by the people he had been charged with leading, Moses now finds himself at something of a distance both figuratively and literally from both God and the Israelites. Throughout the dialogue which frames today's lesson, the prophet desires, more than anything else, to simply "know" the nature of God's guidance and, perhaps even more, God's intrinsic nature (Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, 504).

In light of this natural desire, it is clear from the cryptic nature of the Hebrew text that the full-scale epiphany which Moses desires is not in the offing. This is made even clearer when we realize that the Hebrew word, *panim*, is functioning here via a two-fold referent for both our word, "presence," and "face." To put it in rather crass terms, Moses is acting here like any good Pentecostal worshipper by raising his hands to the heavens and asking God to touch him directly—to provide him with what the scholar, Robert Alter, calls a full "frontal revelation." This is what is meant in verse 18 when he vociferously emotes, "Show me your glory, I pray." This man who first encountered the God of Israel through the medium of a burning bush has grown

tired of trying to parse the ineluctable grammar of the Almighty and simply wants to Know (with a capital K).

But God refuses to cowtow to Moses's desires and instead of showing him his KAVOD (his "glory"), he proffers only his "backside." Now, given the fact that we are about to encounter what some scholars have described as the first "divine mooning," it would probably not surprise you to know that "volumes of theology have been spun out of these enigmatic words," (Alter, 506). While you might wince at the portrayal of God in such anthropomorphic fashion, the Hebrew language seems quite content with this kind of concrete manifestation in which the deity bears resemblance to humans not only because of his "face," but also because of his, ahem, posterior profile. What better way to let us in to the dynamic mystery of the nature of God—that while his intrinsic nature may remain inaccessible or even intolerable, to our finite minds, something of his attributes may yet be glimpsed by humans (Alter, 506). And yet, whatever insight we may gain is always somehow shielded from a full-on hubristic posture.

In stark contrast, the picture presented of Augustus Caesar in today's gospel lesson provides us with the emperor with his best profile towards us. This narrative comes to us in a lengthy section in Matthew's gospel where Jesus is continually being "tested" by various authorities who are attempting to trap him into saying something that will go viral on the first-century Palestinian oral-driven Internet. They know that they have boxed him into a conundrum. No matter what he says, he is destined to lose at least some of his admirers. If he opts to stand over against Roman culture, he will be accused of insurrection by siding with the likes of the Zealots or, perhaps, the Essenes who see corruption everywhere and advocate either violence or withdrawal. If, on the other hand, he opts for the more conservative approach by encouraging payment to the Romans, he will be accused of selling out like the Sadducees to the powers-that-be and, thus, lose the populace bent on revolution.

Jesus' approach here, though, is worth paying more attention to. Instead of falling prey to the wiles of an "either/or," he skates the thin ice, the more difficult way, of maintaining a leg in both worlds. This is a model which the late John Stott wrote about so eloquently when he portrayed preaching as straddling two worlds. I early on adopted this language to try and address the difficult posturing of the Christian community called to live out a vision of the Kingdom of God while, at one and the same time, living in the very difficult circumstances of a somewhat twisted culture. The best analogy I could ever come up with was the tenuous existence of "riding the barbed-wire fence" in which openness and vulnerability are the necessary accoutrements.

Living out this kind of "both/and" calling proved extraordinarily difficult for the earliest Christians. For evidence of this, we need look no further than the mission outposts established by the apostle Paul primarily in urban centers throughout the Mediterranean world. In his classic study from the last century entitled, *The First Urban Christians*, Wayne Meeks says that these nascent communities of faith experienced social contradictions and included "in intimate fellowship persons of a wide mix of social levels," (191). The relationships that they had outside in the larger culture "stood in tension with the *communitas* celebrated in the rituals of baptism and the

Lord's Supper. . . Those odd little groups in a dozen or so cities of the Roman East," he concludes, "were engaged, though they would not have put it quite this way, in constructing a new world," (191-192).

This certainly seems to be the case in the portrait we get this morning from Paul's first epistle to the church at Thessalonica. In this opening section, he praises them for their exemplary behavior despite, as he puts it, their being persecuted. This congregation, housed in a city committed to the cult of Cabirus, struggled especially with those who wished to denigrate the present in light of the future eschaton. In a later letter, he will have to take to task a group who, apparently, had left their daily chores behind and were camping out on a hill waiting for the advent of the New Age. Their inability to rise above cultural expectations led to their sliding off the fence because they were unable to maintain the tension involved in living between God's glory and the human economy.

No one better captures living in this tension in the history of the church than does St. Augustine. The Bishop of Hippo points out that while "our hearts are restless till they find rest in thee," we are prone to becoming prey to those who know how to trade in what we really need for what we claim we want. Sometimes, in fact, we fail to distinguish between the two. Perhaps Steve Jobs, or St. Steve as he has been portrayed these days by various politicians and the press, can serve as a helpful lesson for us here. Despite his slave-driving approach to the manufacture of products, his less-than-perfect family life (including the denial for several years of his daughter, Lisa, born out of wedlock), and his egocentric role as chief engineer of the culture of distraction, he still managed to achieve canonization in a culture which prides itself on an entrepreneurial and capitalistic spirit. And, yet, it was not until his own confrontation with mortality that he began to get even an inkling of priorities in his highly-celebrated life. Like Caesar two thousand years before him, his Apple brand profile represents power and achievement wherever it is to be found and he knew how to design devices that appealed to all of the senses in ways that bordered on hysteria and addiction. If Moses could only dream of reaching out and touching the Divine, Steve Jobs could emulate that desire through the mesmerizing hallucination of self-divinization brought on by the touch of the screen of one's iPhone or iPad.

And yet, it would be wrong to view his many positive contributions only through such a jaded lens. For behind each invention, no matter how skewed the worldview that informed it, stood the desire that each of us shares "to know and to be known." And, to confine both Augustus Caesar and Steve Jobs to the so-called dirty ditch of evil politics and economics would be to distort the reality that each of us must find in learning how to navigate the more difficult desires of the heart in a fallen world in which both economics and politics are no less a part of God's world than are theology and church history. In fact, at least with the former, some would say, there is less pretense involved in hiding behind pious posturing and God-talk.

This morning's texts refuse to allow us to either retreat to a spiritual hothouse or to fully lose ourselves in the glories of the moment. Instead, they remind us that there is a God and we are not He. And though we may not be privileged to the full-frontal epiphany that we so ardently

desire, the occasional momentary glimpse of God's "hinder parts" that we experience whenever we are confronted with the preached Word or gather at the Eucharistic Table we discover is more than enough to sustain us. And though the world changes and coming home never quite lives up to our expectations, still and all, even in its disappointments and in its brokenness, we realize a partial joy in seeing old friends, revisiting old haunts, and remembering yet again that through them we have been privileged to discover our place in the story and in God's world. For, finally, it is this vision which will provide sustenance as we return to the task before us of working and parenting, of laughing and loving, of honoring the old and rejoicing in the new, as we take up our places, once again, in living the tension between God's glory and the human economy.