

where did this man get all this?

a sermon preached on the
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the lections: Ezekiel 2:1-15, 2 Corinthians 12:2-10, Mark 6:1-13

Mark the Evangelist tells us that when Jesus taught in his hometown synagogue the people asked in astonishment: “Where did he learn these things, and what is the wisdom that has been given to him?”¹ The reader will notice that this astonishment is not only a hometown matter. At the very outset of the gospel Mark tells us that in Capernaum ‘they were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching, and with authority!”’² Where *did* Jesus get all this? What is this *new* authority? Where *does* this wisdom come from?

Of course everyone who has the benefit of 2000 years of Christian teaching knows the doctrinally ‘correct’ answer: Jesus gets ‘all this’ as God’s Son, because he’s the Second Person of the Trinity. Those within the frame of the gospel story itself don’t have that benefit. From their point of view Jesus’ ‘authority’ is observed as teachings and deeds that defy standard religious practice, different from those who can quote chapter and verse from the Scriptures. Jesus seems to have access to *another source*.

What is this source? What is it that enables Jesus to both stand firmly and faithfully in his Jewish tradition, and yet embody it in ways so different from the religious rule keepers?

Mark tells the reader that the moment Jesus was baptised the Spirit drove him into the wilderness, to be tempted by Satan, to be with wild beasts. When he emerges from this wilderness experience he has an announcement, ‘good news’.³ Jesus is no longer merely reading *about God*, as mediated through the collective wisdom of the Scriptures: he now has immediate, direct experience of the Divine Mystery. He has *experienced* something. The experience itself is never described, of course – just as Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the unpronounceable Divine Name.⁴

Likewise as we also read this morning of St Paul’s indescribable encounter: “I know a person in Christ who... was caught up into the third heaven – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know: God knows... and I know that such a person... was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.”⁵

Paul’s spiritual intuition is worth a moment’s reflection. It begs two obvious questions: How is it that Paul does not know what his experience was? And why does he place a ban on speaking about it?

On the first question we are reminded of those great emblematic biblical encounters: such as Jacob at the river Jabbok;⁶ Moses at the burning bush;⁷ Elijah on Mount Horeb;⁸ Ezekiel transported to the Divine throne room;⁹ and, of course, Jesus in the wilderness forty days, in the Garden of Gethsemane, on the cross. An encounter with the Holy, with the Divine *Mysterium Tremendum*, cannot be ‘explained’. As expressed by one of the great spiritual teachers of the Christian tradition: “Mystical experience, by which the soul has knowledge of [God], can only come after a progressive shedding of all forms of human knowledge until the Absolute alone remains.” ‘It (God) has its centre everywhere, but its circumference nowhere’.¹⁰

¹ Mark 6:2

² Mark 1:27

³ Mark 1:14

⁴ Exodus 3:14

⁵ 2 Corinthians 12:2-4

⁶ Genesis 32:22-31

⁷ Exodus 3:2

⁸ 1 Kings 19:11-13

⁹ Ezekiel 1:26

¹⁰ Clifton Wolters, ‘Introduction to Dionysius’ Mystical Teaching’, in Clifton Wolters (trans.) **The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works**, London: Penguin Books, 1978, p201.

On the second question, we are reminded of those gospel encounters which conclude with Jesus forbidding people from speaking about what they have experienced.¹¹ They do not yet understand what the experience means. To speak is to risk speaking nonsense – quite possibly even to speak erroneously. They will confuse the Divine presence for all manner of human constructs and ego-centric desires. That, for instance, would be the Peter’s error upon first perceiving Christ’s status as anointed: though he has experienced something in the presence of Jesus, he is completely wrong in his interpretation of what it means to be ‘Messiah’.¹²

The spiritual life does *not* consist in reading about other peoples’ experiences. It is not the keeping of religious rules and regulations. It is confined to neither the pages of Torah nor Bible. It does not consist in getting the words of prayer all correct. Nor is the spiritual life merely the comfort and familiarity of belonging to the hometown family – it is *not* tribal or national or ethnic or parochial solidarity. That is the ignorance and error of the Nazareth hometown family – and the church at times. Rather, God can only be reached through experience, actual encounter.

Archbishop Cranmer embedded this spiritual intuition into the first Book of Common Prayer in that most uniquely Anglican of all prayers - which has survived barely altered in all subsequent liturgical revisions as the ‘Collect for Purity’. Cranmer, the faithful Benedictine monk, would have been very familiar with the well-known spiritual treatise ‘The Cloud of Unknowing’, written around 1370 CE. The unknown writer’s spiritual advice is formally entitled: *A Book on Contemplation, called The Cloud of Unknowing, in Which Cloud a Soul is United with God*. The prayer with which writer begins will sound immediately familiar to Anglicans everywhere:

God
unto whom all hearts are open,
unto whom all wills do speak,
from whom no secret thing is hidden,
I beseech thee
so to cleanse the purpose of my heart
with the unutterable gift of thy grace
that I may perfectly love thee,
and worthily praise thee.
Amen.¹³

Our deepest desire – our ‘naked intent’, as the writer of *The Cloud* puts it – is this quest to penetrate the cloud of unknowing in order to experience the Holy. The spiritual life is about direct, raw, lived encounter with the Holy, the ‘Mysterium Tremendum’. All Scripture, doctrine, and liturgy point beyond themselves to the Reality – whose centre is everywhere, and circumference nowhere.

This central teaching of Christianity has been somewhat obscured in the West, but has remained the focus of Eastern Christianity, which teaches of the possibility of the soul’s union with God, and the consequent deification, or *theosis*, of humankind. This can only be ‘achieved’ by “putting aside all knowing obtained through reason and the use of the senses and by its entry into a ‘cloud of unknowing’”.¹⁴ We see in all the great Hebrew prophets, in Jesus and in Paul, and in the Collect for Purity, the heart’s overwhelming desire to penetrate this ‘cloud of unknowing’ – in order to experience the God who transcends all that can be thought and said. This is Jesus’ true ‘source’ and his ‘authority’ – which those who are stuck in religious rule keeping and family-tribal identity, and stuck too much in the head, don’t get.

Everything we do as church is for *this* purpose: to foster and encourage in every person this direct encounter, this lived reality. The church has no other purpose – that could not otherwise be accomplished by any other social organisation – apart from fostering access to this Source. Our capacity for true communion with each other, our capacity for being sent out for mission, depends upon this communion with God.

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¹¹ Mark 7:36, 9:9

¹² Mark 8:27-37

¹³ Clifton Wolters, p50.

¹⁴ Clifton Wolters, p202.