

## "WHEN GOD SEEMS HIDDEN"

"Holy, Holy, Holy! Though the darkness hide Thee,  
Though the eye of sinful man thy glory may not see"

INTRODUCTION There it is - leaked out and publicly exposed in one of the best known and best loved hymns of the Christian church. The lines suggest that even for believers God, at times, seems hidden.

The atheist, by definition, cannot know the torment of the hiddenness of God. Nor can the theist whose God is some impersonal law or force or quality. Nor, apparently, can the Christian secularist, whose friendship with the world makes the question of friendship with God irrelevant. But the hiddenness of God can be painfully real to those who hold that God is personal and who have tasted of the joy of communion with Him.

What Christian, standing in the Biblical tradition, has not suffered a spiritual power failure - a blackout, a loss of picture and of sound, a sense of distance between the soul and God. Many know only too well what the woman meant who came to Dr. Paul Tournier and said, "I cannot pray anymore, I've lost God's address".

DEVELOPMENT There is some comfort to be found in the fact that the men and women of the Bible frequently experienced an eclipse of God. It was the fear of such a happening that prompted the psalmist to write:

"Hide not thy face from thy servant; for I  
am in distress. Make haste to answer me."

Words such as light and darkness, near and far, hidden and found when used of God are admittedly anthropomorphic. Surely, they say more about man than God. But isn't this just the point! None of us can experience the Almighty with the evenness of piped in stereo. There are ups and downs, breaks and continuities, days of light and nights of ambiguity, times of speech and times of silence. God is not functionally simple like a clothespin, nor is our response consistently faithful.

HAZE OF INDIFFERENCE "Though the darkness hide Thee". Sometimes that darkness is nothing more than the haze of our indifference. It may result from our inattention to the needs of the inner man. Any friendship - human or divine - can so easily be dimmed by neglect. Association and communication are required in order to maintain a friendship - human or divine.

William Allen White was a good personal friend of Warren Harding. When the President learned that the Kansas editor was going to Constantinople he asked him to look up a friend of many years. When White got to Constantinople, he learned that the President's friend had been dead for two years. Said White,

"When I came back to Washington, Mr. Harding sent for me and learned for the first time of his old friend's death. In the sad moment that followed, he said, 'God, have I been that busy, that I let him die without knowing it! What a life!'"

One of the "in" things these days in the American church is social action. And to my eyes, this is a welcome sight - seeing Christians up and down the land plunge into the critical problems and controversial issues of the day, taking sides, trying to make their presence felt.

But, occasionally one fears that this action may be sustained at the expense of conscious union with God. For instance, Ernest Campbell tells of a civil rights meeting some years ago when he attended in a church in the city of Ann Arbor. After all who were present that night had been briefed on the strategy, an elderly black resident asked, "Shouldn't we pray before we go out?" The young man who was leading the meeting was impatient and quickly brushed to one side the suggestion. The elderly saint was heard to say, half to himself, "What a pity if we should gain our civil rights and lose God!"

I suppose it is possible to have so much fire on the ground that we cannot see the stars. Someone has said, "To forget God is more fatal than to deny Him". The passion to do the works of God must be inspired and controlled by a strong and deep belief. If that vital, living center of belief is neglected or discarded, it won't be long before that scaffolding of good works will be in danger of collapse!

#### OVERCAST OF OUR TRANSGRESSIONS

"Though the darkness hide Thee". First, the haze of our indifference may be part of the reason, and then second, there are apt to be other times when the darkness that hides the Lord is nothing more than the overcast of our own transgressions. Our doubts can, indeed, be intellectual, but one suspects that our doubts are more often moral than intellectual. Nothing cuts down the visibility of God so much as our own waywardness, willfulness, and disobedience. We first raise the dust by our own conduct and then complain that we cannot see.

In the oldest story of all, a portion of which was read earlier, you'll remember that man and his Creator had intimate and pleasant communion, suggested to us in Genesis by reference to God and Adam walking together in the garden. Following the first transgression, what was once harmony and unity became discord and separation. Far from enjoying God, man now runs away, and so God is forced to ask Adam, "Adam, where are you hiding?" Our sins can cause us to think of God in terms of distance and alienation.

Remember this was Isaiah's word to his people, "Your iniquities have made a separation between you and God, and your sins have hid his face from you, so that He does not hear!" And Jesus in the Beatitudes should have settled it for us once and for all in those words, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God". Here, he was establishing a correlation between what we purpose to be and how far we can see. Martin Buber reminded us of this in his book, The Eclipse of God.

And so if our deeds or mis-deeds have formed a barrier of darkness between ourselves and God; if we have allowed ourselves to drift into wrong relationships and wish to see them maintained and established; if we have turned our backs on life and chosen death; there is nothing for us to do, but - in Biblical terms - to repent, confess, and receive. In those words taken from today's Psalter selection:

"Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.  
Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence. Restore to me the joy of thy salvation".

#### SMOKE OF OUR OWN RESENTMENTS

"Though the darkness hide Thee". By the haze of our indifference, then by the overcast of our own transgressions, and finally, this darkness that's hiding God from our sight may be the smoke of our resentments of His providence. It may simply be a resentment about the way he manages or mis-manages the world at large, or the way he deals with individuals. There may be unconscious resentment in the hearts of some toward God, toward faith these days especially on the part of people in the western world who

feel that the center has given way, that order is being overrun by chaos. As times we say facetiously and yet, not without meaning, that God just doesn't seem to know which side he's on!

Such protests usually come in those periods of history when God seeks to uncouple our faith in Him from some idolatry that has become a rider to the faith. We have a way of assuming that God and some way of life are indissoluble. And when we feel that such an arrangement is being threatened, we are prone to feel that God's forsaken us, copped out. These resentments make him see further way. It may be that he is only trying to shake us loose from our idolatry so that our worship might be of Him alone.

We tend to couple our belief in God with a belief in a particular economic system, and when God seeks to unshackle us from the necessity of that combination, we become distressed - we question His providence, lose sight of him in our doubts, in the darkness and uncertainties of our own musings.

Tennyson had it right and says it for many Christians in those lines from the second hymn:

"Our little systems have their day;  
They have their day and cease to be:  
They are but broken lights of thee,  
And thou, O Lord, art more than they".

But I suspect that most of our resentments against the providence of God do not rise from his governance of the world at large, but rather from His part in our own personal and particular experiences. Any man on the receiving end of a heavy concentration of set backs and reverses can find it hard to keep God in sight. Some stunning blow: an illness, a loss of a job, a death - these can do it!

And there is really no point to having a minister rush in like one of Job's comforters with ideal talk about this knockout punch being a long-run blessing in disguise. What was it Winston Churchill said back in 1945 after defeat in the election. His wife tried to cheer him up by saying, "It may well be a blessing in disguise". To which he replied, "At the moment, it seems quite effectively disguised".

To be sure, we often grumble and complain about the ways of providence that have put us in a particular place or difficult situation. We need to learn and practice the art of living without knowing at certain times in life. And when we are beset with resentment and bitterness, try to find a capacity for gratitude. It's not easy, but the grace of gratitude in a life can help clear the air, and it can help restore God's visibility. The mystics are virtually one in telling us that an accepted disappointment or sorrow is one of God's choicest gifts. The art of acceptance. The grace of gratitude - these can help in restoring God's visibility.

TWO THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND "Though the darkness hide thee". When we know this dark night of the soul that's hinted at in this much loved hymn, there are two things to try to keep in mind.

First, don't try to work through the problem by yourself. Seek some help. I wish, more and more, that we American Protestants could grow to understand that the church is not an optional or marginal extra in our lives. If we could only see that God threw us together in a community of faith so that the faith and strength of one might be available to the weakness of another. And yet, so often, we try to go it alone!

D. T. Niles, a pastor in Ceylon as well as a leader of the world church, once told of noticing a woman member of his parish who had not been in church for a long time. He asked her where she had been and she answered that she had been terribly discouraged of late, that God had seemed so remote, so far away, and so she had not bothered to come to worship. In reply, he said to her:

"You are going to have times of discouragement - almost everybody does. There are going to be times when God does seem far away. The trouble is you have been trying to hold on to God alone".

I came across a quotation in a book called Revelation and Response this past Summer which says in so many words the same thing.

"Convictions do not always remain vivid and self-authenticating; instead of the soul in touch with God, we may have only memories, impressions and results of that communion. It follows, therefore, that great importance must be attached also to the experience of the community. The church is the guarantee that the individual's faith will not always fluctuate with his own private vision of God".

And then the second suggestion is this: begin again with the vision of God given to us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and work it out from there. I have always been fond of that Old Testament benediction that goes: "May the Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you".

God, of course, does not have a face. But the yearning of the Hebrew soul was that God might make known his benevolent purposes to His people and purposes, of course, are best read, seen and disclosed in the face. And this is the good news of the Gospel that we come to celebrate: that out of what we imagine to be the darkness that surrounds God, God's face - His purposes, His intentions, His disposition toward men - have been seen most clearly in the person of Jesus. Centuries ago Origen said: For the Christian, God is visualized as something more than

an infinite grey mass of tapioca.

"Suppose there was a statue so immense that the eye of man could not take it all in at one look. Obviously, the best way of conveying to man the lineaments of that statue would be to present man with a small copy of it in which all features would be represented on exact, smaller scale. And this is what God has done in Jesus. He has made himself intelligible by offering us a miniature of his own being. He shows us what he himself is like within the bounds of finiteness".

It was in the strength of such a faith that an unknown man who was hiding in a bunker in Cologne during World War II wrote upon the wall:

"I believe in the sun even if it is not shining; I believe in God even if he is silent; I believe in love even if it is hidden".

"Though the darkness hide Thee" It can happen to any of us, and it hurts when it happens. But was not C. S. Lewis close to the truth when he said:

"This hunger is better than any other fullness; and this poverty better than all other wealth".

PRAYER

Our hearts are restless, O God, until they find their rest in Thee. Leave us not to the devices of our own hearts, O God, when through indifference, disobedience, or impatience with thy ways, Thy face is hidden from our sight.

Fonfirm us in the faith. Cleanse us of our sins. Restore our vision. And make us thankful that beyond thy countless gifts thou hast given us thyself, through the same Jesus Christ, Our Lord. Amen

feel that the center has given way, that history no longer makes sense, that order is being overrun by chaos. At times we say facetiously and yet not without meaning, God just doesn't seem to know which side he's on!

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This was the case with Israel when God chose to move the people from the Promised Land. The identity of God with that land had been so consistent and cherished that it was hard for many of the Hebrews to believe that God could still be God even though they were in Babylon or Assyria. When the Temple was destroyed by the intruding Babylonians, there were some who found it hard to think of God apart from that place of bricks, stones and mortar. There were then and are today people who believe that prosperity and God are so intertwined that you can't have one without the other. A voice out of the Psalms talks about his prosperity and then recognizes that God will not sustain it:

"As for me, I said in prosperity, 'I shall never be moved'.  
By thy favor, O Lord, thou hast established me as a strong  
mountain; thou didst hide thy face. I was destroyed".

Perhaps this is why America's involvement in southeast Asia is so disquieting. Some find it hard to believe that God can still be God even though we have not been able to come off with anything that looks like a military victory. Perhaps this is what disturbs some about the changes that have been taking place in American capitalism. We tend to couple our belief in God with a belief in a particular way of life or a particular economic system, and when God seeks to unshackle us from the necessity of that combination, we question His providence, we lose sight of Him in the doubts, the darkness, and the uncertainties of our own musings.

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LET US PRAY

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Confirm us in the faith. Cleanse us of our sins. And make us thankful that beyond thy countless gifts thou hast given us thyself, through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord. In his spirit we ask this. Amen



Martin Buber has reminded of this in his book,  
The Eclipse of God:

"When there is an eclipse of the sun, nothing happens to the sun itself.....something occurs between ourselves and the sun"

And so if our deeds, or mis-deeds, have formed a barrier between....

What is it that we read in the Arabian:

"I cried because I had no shoes, until  
I saw a man who had no feet".

We must search and find some capacity for  
grace of gratitude.