

# THE SEA IS ALL ABOUT US

JUNE 2001

*The river is within us, the sea is all about us*  
T. S. ELIOT, *THE DRY SALVAGES*

Some years ago, when I was training for ordination, I found myself in one of those conversations which one tries hard to avoid - pinned down by someone whose thoughts seem to have no connection with each other, exhibiting a peculiar logic of their own. We were standing on the pavement not far from our house; the conversation took another abrupt turn, and she asked: 'Can one have authentic knowledge of God?' Poised as I was on the kerb - how is it that these people always seem to get you into a vulnerable position? - I stumbled into the gutter with surprise at the directness of the question, and some inadequate words of reply stumbled from my lips.

Can one have authentic knowledge of God? Can one know what God is like? - the answer must be 'Yes', but as St Paul says, in this life our knowledge can only be partial; it is in the life to come that fullness comes:

Now we see only through a glass darkly, then we shall see face to face. My knowledge now is partial; then it will be whole, like God's knowledge of me.

1 CORINTHIANS 13.12

God has, of course, disclosed himself to us in human form through the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. What we see in Jesus is authentic knowledge of God, but even this supreme revelation is partial. It is a mistake simply to equate Jesus with God. He is not God; he is the expression of God in human form. If the infinite, ineffable God is expressed in human form Jesus is what you get. We may think of Jesus as the human face of God, but if we approach God solely through a human image we run the risk of limiting him to the human. God then simply becomes superhuman, rather like the gods of the Greeks, subject to all-too-human desires and weaknesses. Seeing God as a superhuman lies behind the

explanation of death, often heard when a young person has died, which says that God loved them so much that he wanted them for himself. It sounds comforting, but the image of God it paints is grim. A God who takes someone simply because he desires them, causing overwhelming anguish and grief, is a capricious monster, devoid of all moral character, unworthy of love and worship. The human image needs to be supplemented by other images.

When St Paul spoke to the Athenians he described God as 'the One in whom we live and move and have our being.' (Acts 17.28) Here is an understanding of God for which the human image is inadequate; instead we need an image that takes us beyond the finite to the infinite. God, says St Paul, is beyond form and time; he is the ground of all being; it is because he *IS* that all else can exist. It is not that God is beyond time and space; he is time and space; it is in him that time and space exist. One image which the Bible uses to express this understanding of God is eternal wisdom:

The Lord created me at the beginning of his work,  
the first of his acts of long ago. ...  
When there were no depths I was brought forth ...  
Before the mountains were shaped,  
before the hills, I was brought forth ...  
When he established the heavens, I was there,  
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep, ...  
then I was beside him like a master worker...

PROVERBS 8

Another image is offered by the poet T.S. Eliot. In his poem, *The Dry Salvages*, inspired by a group of rocks off the coast of Massachusetts, Eliot explores the timelessness of God. Like the *Book of Proverbs* he uses the sea as an image of the timeless, unknowable God. Hearing the bell of a whistling buoy (one that emits a warning sound as it rises and falls with the swell of the waves), Eliot glimpsed eternity:

The tolling bell  
Measures time not our time, rung by the unhurried  
Ground swell, a time  
Older than the time of chronometers, older

Than the time counted by anxious women  
Lying awake, calculating the future . . .

*Time not our time ...* Like Eliot I have stood on the shore looking at the ocean, just one among countless others who have gazed in fascination and fear at the waters of the deep - gazed on a scene which was there to be seen millions and millions of years before there were people to see it. So Eliot says,

We cannot think of a time that was oceanless.

The sea is both in time and beyond time. Ever-changing, yet ever the same, it speaks to us of the mystery of the God who is always active within his creation, yet eternally the place of rest, underlying and enfolding his creation as the waters cover the earth and embrace the land.

I stand at the water's edge absorbed in the ebb and flow of the waves - sometimes a gentle lapping on the shore, sparkling with light, at other times angry, overpowering and destructive. The sea speaks of both life and death; of creation and destruction. So Eliot speaks of

The menace and the caress of wave that breaks on water ...

The *menace* and the *caress* - the sea speaks to us of the God who is both love and power, creator and destroyer, redeemer and judge. But beyond its different faces the sea is one; there may be a storm on the surface, but in the depths there is calm. To know the sea we have to hold its paradoxes together. It is in God that all paradoxes are resolved; in him all opposites are reconciled: finite and infinite, time and eternity, past and future, creation and destruction, striving and stillness, mercy and judgement. Or as Eliot put it:

Here the past and future  
Are conquered and reconciled...  
Time the destroyer is time the preserver.

One of my favourite places is Cuckmere Haven on the Sussex coast, where the Cuckmere river runs into the sea. As the river in its gentle estuary spreads out over the sand it becomes one with the sea; there is no longer river and sea; there is no duality, instead a perfect unity; river and sea are one. So Eliot speaks of the union of the creature and the creator:

The river is within us, the sea is all about us . . .

Our journey is towards the God who is both known and unknown, both within us and beyond us; and the end of our journey is not extinction but union. Our life now is from God, then it will be in God, as the drop is of the ocean, the river of the sea. And the goal of all our striving is to arrive, like the river, at the place of our beginning, where we shall know our beginning as our end, time taken up into eternity. As the river is within us, so the sea is all about us. This spiritual experience is not unique to Christians. When the Buddha was asked about Nirvana he replied:

There is no measure to him who has gone to rest...  
He is profound, hard to fathom, deep like the ocean.

Nirvana, which Christians know as eternal life, is an expansion of the consciousness, from time to the timeless. It is not so much the drop rejoining the ocean as the ocean invading the drop. St Paul talks of 'God's love being poured into our hearts'. (Rom 5.5) At the end of our journey all that we are, all that we shall become, will be filled with the life of God, and we shall be lost in wonder, love and praise.

Can one have authentic knowledge of God? The answer must be 'Yes!' Maybe, like me, you have sat by the shore and gazed at the horizon, seeing now what men and women have always seen, yet endlessly absorbed as if seeing it for the first time. Maybe you have sat and watched the ebb and flow of the water, felt the power of the tide through your toes, been overawed by the breaking of the waves on the rocks, or heard the running of the pebbles as they are endlessly rearranged by the waves. Maybe you knew this as an experience of God. Or, maybe, as Eliot says,

We had the experience but missed the meaning.

Reliving the experience restores the meaning. God works through his creation to make himself known, as Wisdom puts it:

He has made everything beautiful in its time.  
He has set eternity in the hearts of men.

ECCLESIASTES 3.11

Authentic knowledge of God is within us.

Men's curiosity searches past and future  
And clings to that dimension, But to apprehend  
The point of intersection of the timeless  
With time, is an occupation for the saint -  
No occupation either, but something given  
And taken in a lifetime's death in love,  
Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender.

To the God who is, and was, and is to come, be praise and honour and glory and power, now and for ever. Amen.