

The Reverend Geoffrey Howard

The Golden Mile at Blackpool is a stretch of the promenade devoted to the celebration of vulgarity. As a youngster, on my annual holiday at this Mecca of the north, after the golden sands the Golden Mile was the place I headed for. Its brash colours, raucous music, kitschy gift shops, its subtle aroma of candy floss and fish and chips, not forgetting its naughty postcards, made it irresistible. Most of all there were the side shows: the fattest lady and the smallest man in the world, the five-legged dog, the tattooed woman, Jesse James's Mummy – not his mother, but his remains, a heap of shrivelled skin and bones. One year culture visited this Vanity Fair. An enterprising showman purchased a famous but controversial statue; screened by advertisements that would have made the News of the World blush was to be found Epstein's statue of Jacob and the Angel – Epstein's visualisation of the wrestling match the patriarch had with a mysterious being by the brook Jabok. The statue is of two massive naked figures, one, Jacob, with his head thrown back, eyes closed, being held by the other in a grasp tight enough to squeeze the breath out of him. But who was the other? The Bible makes no mention of an angel. Jacob called the place of the encounter Peniel which means the face of God, *for I have seen God face to face*, exclaims Jacob as he limps into the dawn of a new day. God, says the Book of Genesis, is as close as that, as close as two men, skin to skin, eyeball to eyeball, wrestling for mastery over each other.

This is no isolated instance in Holy Scripture of God's intimacy with his creation.

We have hardly opened the Bible before we come across the story of God visiting Adam in the cool of the day, you can almost envisage the two of them strolling arm in arm chatting to one another, reminiscent of a scene any evening in an eastern city when everybody turns out for their stroll and to gossip with their neighbours in the pleasantest time of the day. And Isaiah even depicts God as a mother cuddling her child.

God, says the Old Testament, is as close to us as two men wrestling, two friends walking arm in arm, a mother nursing her child.

Surely this must be the last word on God's immanence.

But No! For to the Hebrews God was also the indwelling One: the inspirer of craftsmen who work in metal, stone and wood; of prophets, the channels through whom God's words flowed; of the nation's leaders who depended for their wisdom on God's indwelling spirit; and of the nation's warriors who were inspired to do great deeds by God's spirit within them.

Yet Isaiah who speaks of God's motherliness also says of that same God: *To whom will you liken me and make me equal, and compare me, that we may be alike?* Implying that this God is incomparable. One who cannot be expressed by the work of our hands or described by the words of our lips.

In Genesis there is an account of a strange religious ceremony in which Abraham is instructed to lay the severed halves of three animals opposite one another and to set beside them the carcasses of a dove and a pigeon. As night descends he falls into a deep trance, a smoking cauldron and a blazing torch pass between the pieces *and, lo, an horror of great darkness fell on him*. Abraham experienced God as utterly and terrifyingly Other. He was not

the only one to do so. The foundation story of Hebrew religion says the same. Moses sees a burning bush that is not consumed, a voice commands him to take off his shoes for the ground on which he stands is holy, *and Moses hid his face for he was afraid to look on God*. He asks the Voice to tell him its name and the reply comes, *I am that I am*, or, *I am who I will be*. He is confronted by that which is inscrutable, one whose being is impenetrable, whose name expresses his mystery. And, again, Isaiah sees the Lord, high and lifted up and cries in terror, *Woe is me*.

The transcendence, the otherness of the God they worship runs through the Hebrew Scriptures – the nameless, untouchable One, infinitely high, beyond the grasp of man's fingers or of man's mind.

But this immanent, indwelling, transcendent One whom the Jews experienced is indeed One God, not three. How do we resolve this paradox? The answer lies in that word *experience*: these stories are not so much concerned with describing God, the indescribable, as describing religious experience. There were those who experienced God as closer than a mother to her child, those who experienced God as possessing and filling them, those who experienced God as terrifyingly Other, and those who experienced God in all of these ways.

This is the threefold experience of God in the Old Testament – God beside, God within, God above. I cannot help thinking this is how all deeply religious men and women, of whatever faith, have experienced God. I know next to nothing of comparative religion but I suspect there are Islamic and Hindu texts which echo this Old Testament experience and that it may well be true even of the most primitive religions.

On Trinity Sunday, at least if you are like me, you may find yourself baffled by this central doctrine of our faith, even be tempted to regard it as religious hocus pocus. A Roman Catholic friend tells me that their bishops once sent out encyclicals to be read in church on Trinity Sunday in place of a sermon. They didn't want the priests to attempt to preach on the impossible, nor to fall into heresy if they tried. Most Anglican Vicars, I imagine, wish our bishops would do the same.

But the early Fathers of the Church in formulating this doctrine were struggling to express the religious experience of their community. It is the experience of God recorded by the monotheistic Jews who wrote the New Testament that this doctrine seeks to express. It is not primarily an abstract, theological hypothesis, but an attempt to make sense of the Church's experience, which is of the One who dwells in unapproachable light; the God in whom there is a deep but dazzling darkness which the mystics at times have found as terrifying as Abraham's God; the God who, though we call him Father, only speaks to us from the cloud. But also of the One who is beside us, the One who calls us his friends, our Brother who is touched by the feeling of our infirmities, the son of man and the Son of God. And of the One who indwells us, who calls us to beauty and creativity, to worship and to love – the Holy Spirit.

It is in that triune name, glimpsed, dare I say, in all religions, but only explicit in the Christian faith – one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; above, beside and within – that we have gathered here today to celebrate and to worship.

But having said all this one must add that even the most overwhelming religious experiences are but a flickering light, dimly illuminating a reality into whose depths no human eye can

penetrate and no human mind comprehend, so that ultimately, however profound our experience of that Being may be, we must say with Job, *These are but the fringes of his ways.*