

DIVINE EROS

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Readings: EXODUS 3:1-6. MATTHEW 17:1-8

Eros for God

God created us to be erotic beings. That is, He created us to desire Him - not just to follow Him, but to be united to Him. Put another way, we are called not only to behold Christ transfigured, but to be transfigured ourselves. This is the meaning of Pentecost, which we celebrate in two weeks. After the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in us, we no longer know the Lord as the God beyond, but as the very ground of our being, closer to us than we are to ourselves. We become gods by grace. The apostle Peter, who himself witnessed the Lord's transfiguration, wrote that God has given us many promises, that by them we might become "partakers of the divine nature." (2 Peter 1:4).

Gods eros for us

We desire God, but God also desires us. And His love for us is not merely as pity for pathetic creatures. He has created us as beings of profound richness and depth, worthy to be loved by the Divine, worthy even to die for. As the Psalmist says: "You are gods, all of you, sons and daughters of the most high" (Psalm 82:6).

Our dignity

We have of course distorted our God-given beauty, but we remain, nevertheless, beings created in God's image. The 4th century saint, John Chrysostom, compares Christ's outgoing ecstatic love for us to a man madly in love with a lady, whom he is willing to seek out wherever his search takes him, even to Hades. Chrysostom writes: "God desired a harlot...He does not send to her any of His servants...He Himself comes down to earth...and is not ashamed... He espouses her to Himself, and gives her the signet ring of the Holy Spirit as a seal between them."

The relevance of our studies

What then do our studies at university have to do with this journey to find our Beloved, and Him to find us? Most of our studies are about this created world – maths, biology, literature, psychology, or whatever. How can these help us be united to the uncreated One?

The three stages

Saints of both the East and the West describe the journey towards God as having three stages: purification, illumination, and union. Let us ponder these three phases in the light of the readings that we have just heard: Moses'

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encounter with God in the burning bush, and Peter, James and John's encounter with Christ transfigured.

1. Purification

First, purification. What precisely do we need to be purified of? The conversation between the serpent and Eve as recorded in the book of Genesis gives the clue. It reveals the two fundamental mistakes that are, it seems to me, the source of all others: firstly, to accept as true a false image of God, and secondly, ingratitude.

a) Slander

The serpent first convinces Eve that God is mean, that He doesn't want her to be like Him. The serpent insinuates to her that God doesn't want her to eat of the fruit since then "your eyes will be opened, and you will be like gods..." (Gen. 3:5). In fact, God had already made Adam and Eve like Him. The Church Fathers suggest that He planned them to become even more like Him when, at the right time, they could partake of the Tree of Life, who is Christ.

The word repentance – *metanoia* in Greek – can be translated as a change of how we see, a change in our nous, for *nous* is best understood as the eye of the heart. So the first step of repentance is to see God as He is, and ourselves as we are, and not as the devil tells us we are. The devil is the slanderer of both humankind and of God.

Purity is ultimately not just the absence of impurities, but the presence of just one thing. St Macarius the Egyptian prays for his disciples that they "become all eye", contemplators of God in all places and at all times.

b) ingratitude

Once Adam and Eve believed the serpent's slander, they no longer saw paradise as an expression of God's love, but merely as a source of pleasure and power. They did not receive the fruit; they took it. Likewise, by our grasping and grabbing it, creation loses its face. It becomes opaque. We see it no longer as a gift, but as a thing, no longer as an engagement ring, but as mere gold.

When, however, we do receive creation with thanksgiving, it becomes life for us, it becomes Spirit bearing. Writing in the 8th century, St John of Damascus explains the ultimate role of the material world:

When God says: "Of every tree of paradise you shall eat," He means, I think: "By means of all created things you will be drawn up to me, their Creator, and from them reap the one fruit which is Myself, who am the tree of life. (Orthodox Faith 2.11.)

This surely is why the Eucharist, the service of thanksgiving, is at the heart of the Christian life. Thanksgiving reverses the fall, for it acknowledges that every part of our life is holy ground, a place of encounter with Christ.

The life of Moses perfectly illustrates this process of purification leading to illumination. Before he could see the bush burning, Moses needed to be purified. He had tried to do God's will in his own way and strength, when he killed an Egyptian who was beating up a fellow Hebrew. He consequently fled to the land of Midian, to "live as an alien, in a foreign land". But by the end of his exile he had become very meek, "more than all men that were on the face of the earth", the Book of Numbers tells us. Only then could Moses enter the second phase of his journey, illumination, when he beheld God's glory burning in the bush without consuming it.

Peter, James and John likewise would not have been able to behold Christ transfigured had not they first been made clean by the word Christ had spoken to them (John 15:3,4).

2. Natural theology/Illumination

We come now to the second phase of our journey: illumination, or natural theology as it is called in the Orthodox Church. In this stage, we begin to see creation not just as a bush, but as a burning bush, no just as cloth, but as Christ's garment. Put another way, we begin to hear the words or *logoi* of God speaking through each created thing. Each thing, from atom to rock to human to angel, is created by a word of God, and is directed towards its fulfilment through by that divine word.

Each thing and being, no matter how seemingly insignificant, has its place in God's cosmic orchestra. In this way we encounter God in all the things and circumstances that we meet – be they people, the wonder of creation, the subjects we study at university – and even failure.

In his Hymns on Paradise, St Ephraim the Syrian understands the tree of knowledge of good and evil as the whole created world, which, if partaken of in the right time and in the right way, "acts as a sanctuary curtain hiding the Holy of Holies, which is the Tree of Life higher up". It is something "through which we pass to enter the holy of holies", he writes.²

The burning bush is just such an encounter with God through a created thing. The bush hadn't changed: Moses had. Having been purified, Moses was ready to see the bush as it always had been, burning with God's presence. But this time he sees it, and he turns toward it: "I must turn aside and look at this great sight," he says. He stops what he is doing, and takes time to look. His *nous* is opened, he sees, and his body follows.

It is at this precise point that God can speak to Moses:

"When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush. "Moses, Moses!"

² See Ephraim the Syrian, "The Hymns on Paradise," in *Hymns on Paradise*, ed. Sebastian Brock (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990), especially 3:5, page 92.

The important thing for us students is therefore that we experience our studies as a personal encounter with God. God spoke to Moses “out of the bush” and not as a voice from the heavens – although, if Moses were an astrophysicist, God probably would have spoken to him from the heavens!

Ultimately, we are not studying dry facts, but a poem of love written for us and to us by the Personal God. He is calling to us by name. Even if we are studying the works of fallen man, we are still studying beings who are made in God’s image.

So, let us never lose wonder, the sense of awe at the miracle of the world in which we live. This child-like wonder was the great charisma of the writer and thinker G.K. Chesterton. He was even so bold as to suggest that perhaps God Himself wonders at the splendour of His own work. Perhaps, Chesterton writes, the sun does not rise each day because it has to, but because God, like an awestruck child, says, “That was wonderful – do it again!” This surely is the meaning of the Sabbath, a time not just for us to rest, but to look and wonder and give thanks.

The transfiguration event as well as the burning bush attests to this second phase of illumination. Our Gospel reading told us that not only did Christ’s face shine like the sun, but also His clothes. They “became dazzling white”, St Matthew writes. Now these clothes were just inanimate linen, but they shone with divine, uncreated light, proving that matter can be grace bearing. The material world and a study of it is not therefore an impediment to our relationship with Christ, but can be a mediator of it.

The Greek word for the material world is *cosmos*, which also means adornment. We can therefore understand Christ’s garments, which adorned Him, as an image of the whole material world. Christ has wrapped the universe around Himself and made it to shine with uncreated light.

I have been a professional icon painter for over thirty years, and one of my tasks in this ministry is to show the world in this transfigured state. That is why we find unusual perspective systems in icons, and why we don’t find shadows created by a single source of external light. Instead, the light shines from within all things, especially from the saints, and surrounds all things: “In God we live and move and have our being”, said the apostle Paul. This explains why icons are not naturalistic. But they are realistic, for the way they are painted indicates creation as it really is in God, a bush burning with the Lord’s presence.

We may also ask, why may we not go straight from purification to union with God? Why do we have to pass through this middle stage? Perhaps it is because God wills to gather up the lowly things in our move toward Him. He wants us to be humble and depend on lower things to gain the higher.

Also, in His wisdom and gentleness He knows that the shock of a sudden encounter with the living God would be too much for us. Instead, we accustom ourselves to Him shining through the created world as through a veil, just as the Israelites saw the shekenna glory shine through the veil over Moses’ face.

In the icon of the Transfiguration, the disciples are shown falling over, unable to behold Christ's face, but they can just behold His shining garments. By the time of Pentecost, however, the disciples are ready not only to behold God but to receive Him into their very being.

Union/Mystical theology

We come now to our final stage: union with God, otherwise called deification, theosis or mystical theology. Through illumination, we have been following the footsteps left by God. We now come to the walker Himself. We have turned and drawn close to the burning bush, and now God turns to us and calls us by name. The many facts that we have been amassing in our studies have begun to form a poem to us. Now we meet the Poet.

When we began our search for God, we felt confined within creation, and God seemed beyond. But now, through the Holy Spirit who dwells within believers, Christ is within us and creation is in Him, and wrapped around Him. For Christ came not just to save our souls from hell. He came to gather up and reunite the whole material world in the Church. Paul writes to the Colossians that "Christ is before all things, and in him all things old together" (Col 1:17) and that the Father was pleased to 'reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven.'" (Col 1: 20).

On Thursday you will celebrate the Ascension. Christ's Ascension was not an afterthought, but the penultimate fulfilment of all the work that He had done before. For Christ ascended to heaven not just as God, but also as man. Our human nature is now forever united to God. Paul tells us that the Father has "raised us up with Christ, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:6). Believe it or not, we are now seated in heaven.

To make this fact real for us, the Holy Spirit has been sent to us at Pentecost. Through the indwelling Spirit, we ourselves can be transfigured. Thus begins for us another leg of our journey, never-ending, as we pass from glory to glory, further and further into the inexpressible richness and depths of God's light, life and love.

Amen.