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The Second Sunday in Epiphany

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THE AIR WE BREATHE (I)

A sermon preached by Fr Ralston on the First Sunday after the Epiphany in 1991.

The Collect: "O Lord, we beseech thee, mercifully to receive the prayers of thy people who call upon thee; and grant that they may both perceive and know what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to fulfill the same".

Whether we notice it or not, there is a kind of spiritual logic to our lives, something all-pervasive. It is like the air we breathe, unnoticed until it turns bad, or suddenly very sweet. We simply use it, or go along in it. The Collect for this Sunday embodies that kind of thing: a logic of the spiritual life so absolute that we live by it without being aware of it.

I

The premise is God, as it must be in all prayer. The phrasing is interesting. We beseech God to receive our prayers, knowing that He will, for it is His nature to do so. But we do not presume on Him. This is one of those phrasings in the Prayer Book that some people want to get rid of. They think it bears too much the stamp of an older frame of mind, when there were kings and queens, and one addressed them circumspectly. Modern, democratic, self-affirming and self-determining man evidently should just stand right up to God.

This misses the whole spirit of the wonderful balance in the way the Bible everywhere speaks of God. The Biblical Jews would indeed speak very plainly to God. Abraham asks, "Shall not the judge of the earth do right?" And Job and Jonah confront God almost to his face. But the Old Testament never lets us forget God's majesty, His remoteness, His inaccessibility, His mystery, and His power, and the people of the Old Covenant never lost their awe of Him. At the very watershed of the Old Testament there is Isaiah in the temple: "Holy, Holy, Holy...the whole earth is full of his glory".

I think we do well to mind our liturgical manners with God. It may be a matter of taste, but matters of taste are not unimportant. We call upon God to receive our prayers; we beseech Him; "thy people", we name ourselves. We do this with confidence, but – as it were – only by divine

permission and authority. That God is the kind of being we know Him to be is something He has shown us about Himself. We would not dare assume it otherwise, nor should we ever presume it. It is exactly the idea conveyed in the Communion service. "And now" – not by right, but "as our Saviour Christ hath taught us, we are bold" – that is, both confident and forward – "to say, Our Father." No human being can call God "Father" by natural right. Only because we have been taught by Jesus dare we say, "Abba, Father". So we start in the Collect with God, as all true life in the Spirit must start. Without God, prayer is psychological trickery. It is meaningless.

II

The next phrase is crucial. We ask for both perception and knowledge of the things we ought to do. That is, we ask that we not only see the obligation, recognize it, which is perception; but also that we take the measure of it, comprehend its nature, understand it, and bind it to ourselves, which is knowledge.

This petition has in it the essential meaning of Epiphany. God is the light of the minds that know Him, the source of all the knowledge that we have, whether we recognize Him that way or not. So we ask for the illumination of our minds, of our imaginations, both to be able to see and perceive, and also to comprehend what we see, to know it. This is what is meant by learning to love God with all our mind.

We all know what it is to perceive something, to look at it for a long time, and then suddenly to see it for what it is, to have knowledge. Every time Toscanini played a piece of music, music of which he knew every note by memory, he would nonetheless pore over it again, trying to see it. And he would say to his orchestra, "Last time I was stupid, no? Now we see." And some things he was sure he never saw, and he said so. But the obligation to go beyond perception to the true vision which is knowledge was for him the primary article of his musical faith.

Astonishing revelations of this sort come from our contacts with human beings – something perplexing about a person that all at once makes sense; a mannerism which conceals a fault; a silence which masks a sadness; a habit which indicates a virtue. In any case we need the immaculate charity* of the truth, about ourselves and about others. Only with the truth is there freedom. We need to see; we must have knowledge. We dare not live with shadows. "Know thyself" is the challenge of the Delphic oracle. But this not possible apart from the knowledge God Himself imparts. The truth, like the clearest, purest air, takes some getting used to, if we are to live with it and within it.

(To be continued next week).

*thus the MS

The Rev'd William H. Ralston, Jr.

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