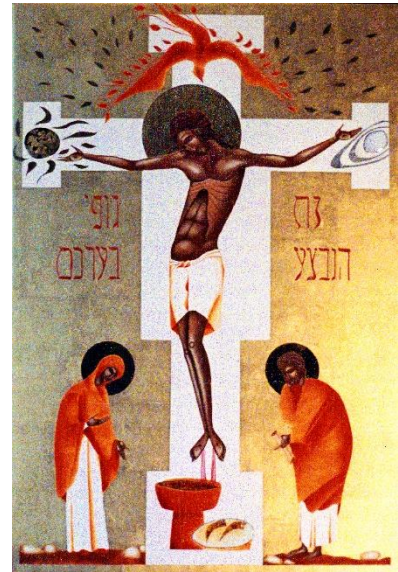


THE PASSION OF THE IMAGE

Imaging the Depths

I was standing on the ship's bridge, reading the image of the sea floor below us on the screen before me. We were pushing against the warm Agulhas current, swift and strong as we sailed south eastwards up the coast of Southern Africa. On my right the massive sea horizon stretched away, the next land mass being the Antarctic. On my left, whales tried to keep up with the ship, and beyond them were the bays of the Garden Route where they sheltered in the mating season, their songs audible onshore at night. Sonar technology gave us the information we needed about what was below us as it created 'sound scapes' of the ocean floor. There are active systems to determine the shape of the seabed by emitting acoustic pulses, but there is also a passive sonar/sound system to 'listen' to the sea. This is how ships image the depths and I became familiar with this technology on the voyage. I want to image the depths of John's Gospel both actively by identifying the Passion in its images, and passively by listening intensely to it.



THE PRAYING EYE

“Open, then, brethren, the Scriptures and receive from the Lord this treasure, the common property of all men. As a treasurer, each one holds the key. Who then will not become a rich man? Blessed be He who has removed the cause of our abjection. Great indeed is this gift which is revealed to our blindness. Each one of us is endowed with a pair of eyes, yet how few are those who have perceived what this gift is and whence it comes. Have pity, Lord, on the blind who have such precious gold before their eyes.”¹

The title of this section could easily be something like ‘When the Eye is Sound’, which is a play on words: that at the sound of the text the soul's eye contemplates the Image in the images. But equally it might mean that the eye is healthy and seeing well.

¹Ephrem the Syrian, Sermon V1 on Fasting, as used in *Lectionnaire Monastique* for Lent.

The Passion of the Image is a natural development of *The Passion of the Word*. The Word, as Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, is the Image of the Invisible God.² "... *An image is a likeness of the original with a certain difference*, for it is not an exact reproduction of the original. Thus, the Son is the living, substantial, unchangeable Image of the invisible God, bearing in Himself the whole Father, being in all things equal to Him, differing only in being begotten by the Father, who is the Begetter; the Son is begotten..."³ *The Passion of the Image* is not only that of Jesus as shepherd or lamb or some such, but the theme of the Passion with which John's Gospel is infused and which is not only obvious at certain points but also subliminal, submerged in the text and waiting to be identified. This process needs contemplative receptivity and what some might call a monastic theology to complement the analytic theology we are accustomed to. My approach to *The Passion of the Image* is as one trained and practised in spiritual receptivity to the Divine Other in word, image, all things, and of course, as a Benedictine, in the simple prayer of Presence.

Therefore, to enter into this sequence to *The Passion of the Word*, it would be enriching for you, the reader, to experience what it means to contemplate, and to read the chapters of Volume 4 in that ambience. So please allow me to say a little about contemplation, in order to help you to do this. In *The Passion of the Word* I analysed the importance of the role of the viewer, that is, *the capacity* of the one contemplating.⁴ I also developed through the exegesis of Isaiah's Servant Songs, Zecharia and others, the prophetic imperative that the One who was Crucified must be contemplated.⁵

Contemplative resting with the text requires that we allow certain aspects of ourselves to sleep, *while the heart remains intensely awake*. I use the term 'heart' here as a Semite would: that inner centre of intelligence. Our thinking faculty is multi layered, and we know instinctively how to think things through while we are getting on with various tasks. You cannot stop the chattering mind, but freeing the heart is essential for contemplation. Let the mind go to sleep, look away from it, and descend into the wide-awake heart, the intelligent centre. There is no substitute for this. The heart also must look away from itself toward the Beloved. Any self-conscious attention even to the act of contemplation itself is a hindrance. In a homily attributed to St John Chrysostom the author uses phrases such as these to describe the importance of the heart in prayer: "...The prayer I speak of is not a mechanical formula, but a movement of the heart; ... [it] continues night and day... It is the medium of communication between God and man. Through prayer our hearts are raised to heaven, and we embrace God in a way no words can convey. Like an infant crying for its mother so do our souls crave the divine nourishment ... Prayer is the desire for God, a wordless love, not proceeding from man, but actuated by divine grace ..." ⁶

² Col 2.9

³ St John Damascene on Holy Images (πρὸς τοὺς διαβάλλοντας τῆς ἁγίας εἰκόνας). Followed by Three Sermons on the Assumption (κοίμησις) Author: John of Damascus. Release Date: September 09, 2015 [EBook #49917]

⁴ For the discussion of this see *The Passion of the Word*, Chapter 1, especially the subsection *Abyss*.

⁵ For this discussion see *The Passion of the Word*, Chapter 11, the subsection *They will Look on Him whom they have Pierced*.

⁶ Homily on prayer, attributed to St John Chrysostom as used in *Lectonnaire Monastique*.

Another way to conceptualise this is that we are human, and our hearts are made to love. When we sit in front of someone we love deeply, we listen to them with our ears, our eyes, with our bodies and we lean forward with attention. We would not dream of attending to our breathing, or posture etc. We may have some residual thought about how the dinner is cooking or the state of the floors, but it is not intrusive. We ignore it, let it go to sleep. If we are rubbing some sore spot on the arm of this beloved person, we do not look at our hand, and think about what we are doing. We simply do it, with loving attention to the other. Why do I go into this kind of detail here? Because prayer is about love, and exegesis of John's Gospel needs this loving contemplative gaze, like John's himself, to seek the Image of the Beloved.

Prayer is relationship. As Martin Buber says, it is the *I - Thou* relationship. When we understand this, prayer is natural, and is not something we self-consciously do, not even in the formal liturgy. It is possible anywhere and at any time. You may say to me that you do not yet have this relationship of love, do not feel or know experientially this love which is the essence of prayer, so how can you contemplate? It might seem that you are standing in front of a closed door to which you have no key. But knock, and the door will be opened to you, seek and you will find, ask and it will be given to you, for he who seeks, finds. However, if the door is locked from *your* side, if you hold the key, there comes a moment when you must choose to unlock it. It may be that it is He, the Beloved, who is knocking, not you. It may be that He is knocking on your being. At some point you will have to take the risk of entering into this relationship and crossing the threshold. For the exploration of this adventure see *The Passion of the Word* in the footnote below.⁷

It is different, I think, for those who live in a contemplative community which has the kind of enclosure which creates and protects this contemplative way of life. Then besides running a monastery and its various projects, the eye of the contemplative is always open at various degrees of interiority, to the One sought. Contemplation is then a way of life. It is not in any sense something parcelled out in time, although it is provided for by certain specified times also when it can be completely uninterrupted.

Mystics assert *the mutuality of contemplation*, and I would like to touch on that here. As we contemplate the images in the Fourth Gospel, we are being contemplated by them, that is by the Image Himself who creates a pathway into the contemplating soul. The Beguine who describes the Lamb at the heart of the abyss goes further, saying that a *mutual liberty* arises for both God and the soul in this contemplative exchange and that the soul's abyss is essential in order for this to happen.⁸ I would add that in the act of contemplation the contemplative must be drawn into their own abyss for this encounter to happen *at depth*. This requires integrity and trust in relationship, a true '*I - Thou*' capacity at the heart of the prayer.

⁷ Chapter 14 of *The Passion of the Word* regarding the question of the door. See also chapters 3, and 7 of the same, but most specially chapter 2 where this theme is comprehensively explored in the subsection *The Voice, the Music*.

⁸ Hadewijch of Brabant (13th century), Letter 18, paragraph 63; in *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, The Classics of Western Spirituality, Paulist Press, 1980, page 86.