

Most of us will never be confused with God, will we? But Jesus certainly had that problem. And, for good reason: he was God! Of course, that is so unexpected. Good religious people in Jesus' day already had a relationship with God. They knew of God. They knew about God. They worshipped God. At the same time, they were strangely attracted to Jesus. And some said that he was God. But that could not be. Everybody had an opinion about Jesus. Still, it was all so confusing. So the religious leaders (with malice aforethought I am sure) came to him to ask him straight out: "Are you the Messiah?" Are you the representative of God? Are you God come among us?

And Jesus gave them directly indirect answers. It is a bit like this: if you know me, you know me; if you do not, you do not. Is that fair? Is that clear? What exactly had Jesus meant? I think it has to do with something that George Herbert 17th Century Welsh poet and priest wrote in one of his perceptive poems. Herbert penned a brilliant picture of the aching in each of our souls. It was called *The Pulley*, and in it Herbert portrayed God at the moment of creation, sprinkling his new human creature with treasures kept in a jar beside him:

When God at first made man,
Having a glass of blessings standing by,
"Let us," said he, "pour on him all we can.
Let the world's riches, which dispersèd lie,
Contract into a span."

So strength first made a way;
Then beauty flowed, then wisdom, honour, pleasure.
When almost all was out, God made a stay,
Perceiving that, alone of all his treasure,
Rest in the bottom lay.

"For if I should," said he,
"Bestow this jewel also on my creature,
He would adore my gifts instead of me,
And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature;
So both should losers be.

"Yet let him keep the rest,
But keep them with repining restlessness;
Let him be rich and weary, that at least,
If goodness lead him not, yet weariness
May toss him to my breast."

These were God's finest resources, given now as gifts to the crown of his universe: strength, beauty, wisdom, honour, pleasure... All were scattered liberally in the genetic recipe of our kind. When the jar of God's treasures was nearly empty, wrote Herbert, God put the lid on it. People, said God, would be rich with gifts and talents beyond measure. But people would also remain restless, searching for something more, wishing for things transcendent, reaching for the stars or heaven or whatever might be out there.

Only if the mighty human race, with all its immense capabilities and capacities, remained restless would it eventually seek its way back to its Creator. Herbert saw well that the strong talents and marvellous abilities of humanity would make us like impatient children, eager to strike out on our own and find our self-made destinies. Only if God would hold back a sense of full satisfaction from our souls would we search our way back home.

This remains a perennial theological paradox: it is the creative act of God that gives us freedom. Yet when we use our abilities for our own ends, we tend to lose what is best in ourselves and often demean it in others, pushing like adolescents away from our spiritual parent. Only if we become restless to find the face of God in some longing for home will we regain a glimpse of our own best faces reflected back toward us in the kindness and smile of God. This is what Jesus meant when he told the crowds, “My sheep listen to my voice...” If the restlessness of divine urgency causes our hearts to seek God, we know who Jesus is.

Remember that great advertising slogan of His Master's Voice (HMV) which was the name of a major British and international record label created in 1901 by The Gramophone Co. Ltd. The phrase was coined in the late 1890s as the title of a painting depicting a terrier-mix dog named Nipper listening to a wind-up disc gramophone and tilting his head. Whimsical, to be sure. But also touching. To have that sense, even if we cannot see our Master, that his voice is audible, his presence is near, his care is always certain.

That is why Jesus came. And those who know it, hear his voice. He does not need to explain himself to them. Meanwhile, those who know God but do not truly need God, have a difficult time understanding who Jesus is and was.

Thomas Merton priest and monk, most known for his books *Seeds of Contemplation* (1949) and *New Seeds of Contemplation* (1962) which I commend to you, when writing about the religious community with which he spent many years, noted that every prospective participant was initially brought in and made to stand in the centre of a circle formed by current members. There he was asked by the abbot, “What do you come seeking?”

The answers varied, of course, in line with the individual’s recent experiences. Some said, “I come seeking a deeper relationship with God.” Others were more pragmatic: “I desire to become more disciplined in my practices of life.” And there were always a few who were simply running away: “I hope to find solace from the world and refuge from the problems that have plagued me.”

But Merton said that there was really only one answer which all needed to voice before they could take up residence. “I need mercy!” was the true cry of the heart. “I need mercy!”

Merton said that any other answer betrayed our prideful assertion of self-determination. We wanted, we planned, we were running away from, we desired... But the person who knew his need of mercy had stepped out of the myopic circle of self-interest long enough to begin to see the fragile interdependence of all who were taken into the larger fellowship of faith. “My sheep listen to my voice...” said Jesus. Can you hear him?

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