

# Wrestling with the Word—4

## Cornelius Ernst, O.P.

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### *The Sermon*

'No one has ever seen God'; this is the text which was read to us from the first Epistle of St John, and which also occurs at the end of the Prologue to St John's Gospel. 'No one has ever seen God': an appropriate text, perhaps, for the Sunday after the Ascension and before Pentecost, in that pause which the liturgy has contrived for our meditation between the departure of the Son as risen Lord and the coming of the Spirit, an experience of absence through which we may more profoundly recover an experience of presence—absence, presence, of what, of whom? Of God, whom no one has ever seen.

Let us recall what must be a familiar experience to all of us at some time in our lives: the sleeping city, the lights shining in the empty streets, oneself, the solitary watcher withdrawn from the human community of sleep, to which one is all the more deeply drawn. This is the before and after of all the active business of the day, the multifarious contradiction of human project, plan and purpose, the coming and going: all rises from and returns to sleep, movement back to stillness, the rising and falling of a single biological rhythm of breathing, unconscious, at rest. Are these sleepers dreaming their personal dreams, or are they united in the single impersonal dream of the world? Even those who do not sleep in this sleeping stillness, the sufferers awake in their white nights alone, the lovers involved in their private intimacy, aren't they too enacting in this universal dream a typical human destiny of pain and sex, death and procreation, sounding a ground bass of human existence? The sleeping city: a human community realized in a unity before and after, below if not above, the community of active function and conscious purpose: this underlying community finding itself in a deeper unity of typical man. And who or what sustains this deeper unity—is the dream of the world really impersonal, or does the dream unfold in some deeper dreamer? And is the sleeping city in the dark the deficient image of a waking community more deeply awake than any depth of sleep, caught up into the unity of a single radiance of light where the mystery of waking life finds its consummation and its sense, the heavenly city, Jerusalem? A peace, a tranquillity, a blessing, repose, *shalom*, more profound than the deep unconsciousness of sleep.

A modern translation of the opening of St John's epistle brings out strikingly the force of the neuter pronouns there: 'It was there from the beginning; we have heard it; we have seen it with our own eyes; we have looked upon it, and felt it with our own hands; and it is of this we tell. Our theme is the word of life.' What is this 'it', or who is it? It is the expression, the declaration, annunciation, com-

munication of the God no one has ever seen. 'No one has ever seen God, according to the Gospel prologue, but he alone God as Son at the heart of the Father, he has made him known'; it is Jesus who discloses the Father, for whoever has seen Jesus has seen the Father. But how do we see Jesus? According to the Gospel (12, 20 f.) some Greeks came to Philip 'and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus". Philip went and told Andrew, Andrew went with Philip and they told Jesus. And Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies it bears much fruit."' So seeing Jesus means sharing the life of a seed, a neuter *it* (as much an *it* as flesh and wine, bread and blood), which dies and by dying bears fruit, initiates a communion, is no longer alone. We see God without seeing him, by entering into a communion of life with the Word of God which communicates life. The communion is so personal that it can only be talked about in neuters and abstracts: 'neuter' means *neither*, neither masculine nor feminine, neither male nor female, personal as ultimately, typically that in man which is image of God.

So no one has seen God except the Son who has departed in his Ascension; yet it is for our advantage that he goes away, so as to send us the sustainer, counsellor, advocate, Paraclete. 'No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love finds its completeness in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his own Spirit.' So the Epistle. The presence manifested by the visible Jesus is withdrawn: the substance of that presence—the communication of risen life—is to be manifested by the Spirit of life in the mutual love of those who have received the Word of life. The God whom no one has ever seen is to become tangible, felt, as a presence of love; for God is love. 'So we know and believe'—that is, it is our experience in faith—'this love with which God brings himself forth in us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.' We feel our way into the God whom no one has ever seen, who is the ultimate sense of our personal lives, who is so deeply personal himself that we must refer to him by the abstract, Love.

'Love', of course, is a word of multiple application. Love as *eros*, 'erotic' love, was a god before Christianity and is a god, a universal force even now. 'Love makes the world go round'—so the pallid reminder of a view which saw *eros* reflected in the rotation of the spheres, the drift of the stars, the rise and fall of the tides, the cycle of the seasons, cosmic sympathy and human tenderness and warmth: *eros* articulate as lyrical excitement and tragic conflict. And love is the inarticulate bearing by a mother of her son, the connexion in the womb which persists and endures through long years of erratic growth. This love has many faces and many masks, some of them grotesquely distorted; this love may be a god or gods: but is God this

Love? And if not, why can we use the same word 'love' for the gods and for God? How strange that *agapé* should be the word for love in the Greek translation of the Song of Songs in the Bible, and that Jewish and Christian mystics should find their vocabulary in this canticle of erotic love!

John offers us some criteria. 'By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?' The link between the eros-gods and the God who is *agapé* comes out more clearly if we remember that what is here translated 'heart' is more literally and semantically 'bowels', bowels of compassion, the organ of human connexion, sympathy, fellow-feeling. *Agapé*-love is something to do with the flow and the bond of human connexion, connexion at the fine point of ultimate humanity, neither male nor female, where all men are or have to become *one*; *agapé*-love is the living sense of what is ultimately common to all men, the feeling sense of human community, human contact in the fragile and delicate flesh, contact become tangible at the point where each of us may be most intimately and searchingly touched; *agapé*-love is human communion as compassion. John is renewing in the sense of Jesus, the Son of Man, what Isaiah had said about the fast:

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
When you see the naked, to cover him,  
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? (58, 7).

'To hide yourself from your own flesh.' *Agapé*-love is shown up by its negation: withdrawal from communion in the bare flesh of mankind, a withdrawal in which the heart hides itself in deliberate insensibility, hides itself from itself, and turns to stone: 'is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?' This is the unkindness which denies human kinship, the oneness of man.

In Jesus' prayer before his Passion, he prays to his Father for the men whom the Father has given him 'that they may be *one* even as we, Jesus and the Father, are *one*'. Jesus, as the One who by dying and rising again becomes Many, is the manifestation of the God who is love, who is One in Father and Son and who seeks to include all men in the communication of this oneness; and we by being one in the love of God abiding in us, manifest Jesus by laying down our lives for the brethren, manifest the God who is love by being many in one, in a unity which is community.

What we are talking about is the ultimate point of human existence; and that is God whom no man has ever seen. We discover the invisible God in the context of human meaning inaugurated by the Word of God—we have seen it and felt it with the eyes and hands

of apostolic witnesses and, in the medium of a sensibility made delicate by the Spirit, with our own eyes and hands; and we discover the invisible God in the presence of the Spirit initiating a human communion of divine consanguinity and consubstantiality, the blood of God's love. The invisible God has three witnesses: the Spirit breathing within us, the symbolic-sacramental water, the irreducibly historical blood of Jesus. These three witnesses run together into one, God's Son, the Son of Man, who has become our light and life and truth, and who by stretching out his arms on the Cross has drawn us into the all-embracing unity of the God whom no man has ever seen: the one God whose compassionate love is manifested in the compassionate communion of mankind in the fine point of humanity, the extreme Passion of the Son of Man. For this one God of love whom no man has ever seen has made his own the one flesh of mankind and manifested his glory there, in a naked *Consummatum est*.

### *The Preparation*

The texts appointed for this Sunday, the Sunday after Ascension Day, were Acts 1, 15–17, 20–26; 1 John 4, 11–16; John 17, 11b–19. I followed my usual practice and simply glanced at these texts some days before. I must confess that I regard this first moment in the genesis of the sermon as quite fundamental. This glance at the text is in no way a piece of conscious study, even when the texts are unfamiliar. In this case of course the texts were extremely, even painfully, familiar; glancing at them meant at the conscious level verifying that they were what they were and recognizing that they were about what is deepest in Christianity. At this conscious level, then, there was an ironic admission to myself that I should have either to evade them, to sidle up to them, as it were (this is something I had felt forced to do when confronted with the prologue to St John's Gospel some months before); or, somehow, meet them head on with a kind of shock of collision, which would have to be registered later as a sort of broadside discharged at the congregation.

But what I regard as fundamentally important is allowing the texts to subside into the back of the mind for at least twenty-four hours, so that settled there, in that foyer of awareness just prior to consciousness where one's interests—one's life-concerns—are in active process of taking shape (the meristem or growing point of the mind; I don't, therefore, mean some deep unconscious), they can offer a point of condensation and crystallization for these active concerns. My experience has been after a twenty-four-hour period of incubation like this, the texts begin to press for some kind of utterance, generate a restlessness which drives me to a variety of books in the attempt to formulate questions at the level of articulate consciousness and eventually find a focus, a perspective, for final communication, where an indistinct but quite firm sense of an

audience, of a congregation as horizon, is now awake. The texts have 'fertilized' the life-interests, and assumed whatever vital density they have at the moment. I must also add that explicitly or implicitly and habitually there would be some invocation of the Holy Spirit at this stage, some exposure of texts and life-concerns together to a consecrating and equilibrating influence acknowledged to be beyond the reach of deliberate control. Basically, I believe, the sermon must be allowed to *happen*, to be an event in one's own process of growth in the Spirit; and this in turn involves the presence of some matured confidence in the receptive interests of the audience, some unspoken estimate of what it is prepared to take. In the present case a tradition of some three years of preaching by Dominicans to a congregation which has freely opted to take part in the evening Mass at Blackfriars allows of some measure of assurance that life-concerns are shared, over and above a general conviction that preaching must be a communication in the Spirit.

I am afraid that much of this must seem pretty pretentious, in view of what actually emerges and has actually emerged in this case; but it does represent the theological expectations at work in my preaching practice. In the case of the present sermon, the deliberate 'letting-be' of the texts in the back of my mind produced unexpected results, since I eventually felt compelled to begin putting down on paper what was emerging consciously; this is only the second occasion in some fifteen years of preaching that I have written out a sermon. I shan't, however, venture here to discuss the implications of preaching with or without a complete 'score', except perhaps to admit to a private distrust (for myself) for any attempt at formal coherence and tightness of organization in a sermon. Somehow, it seems to me, one oughtn't to *dare*: the sermon is inescapably *provisional*, as open-ended, at both ends, as any stretch of a human life . . . which makes the present sermon all the more puzzling to me. And let me say quite frankly that I *am* puzzled by my own sermon; I don't quite trust it.

Quite clearly the set Scriptural texts had on this occasion long-term interests to engage. I saw, without defining them, that the two Johannine texts had their manifest and hidden connexions, while the text from Acts had a different kind of life, so that I tentatively decided to rest the sermon on the Johannine texts. The immediate front of interests encountered by the texts happened in fact to be Jewish mysticism, in particular for the light it seems to throw on the kind of imagination active in St John's Gospel. Apart from Scholem's remarkable book, *Aspects of Jewish Mysticism*, I should mention the fine novel by Patrick White, *Riders in the Chariot*, the title of which is in fact a translation of the *Yorde merkabah* of early Jewish mysticism; I had read the novel some months ago when I was pursuing similar investigations on a somewhat broader front, but it was still in my mind. I was also in the middle of a course of lectures on Sin and Grace.

Once the process of active questioning and search had begun, I noticed what, shamefully, no doubt, I had never noticed before: the sentence 'No one has ever seen God' occurred in the Gospel as well as in the Epistle, with a minor and insignificant difference in the Greek. I suddenly saw that this could be linked with the queerness of the Sunday, liturgically speaking, falling between Ascension and Pentecost, a non-Sunday, as it were, celebrating nothing but an interim, a pause. So absence, God's not being in the world. I hoped, without wishing to make too much of it explicitly, that the Johannine assertion, 'No one has ever seen God', could assume and allude to what is often thought to be a modern sense of God's absence from the world; then to show how John's sense of the transcendence of God was sustained by the sense of his immanence (in Jesus, in the Spirit, in the community) would be to respond, by allusion at least, to this modern sense of absence as non-existence.

This seemed to give me my main theme, or the perspective within which the texts could show themselves. What I had now to do was to face somehow the challenge of 'God is love'. My preoccupation became now to acquire a sharper awareness of 'the early Christian community', in particular John's community, so as to understand how an experience of community could support an experience of the presence of God in such a community, an experience of God as love which showed in its immanence the transcendence of the God whom no one has ever seen. I spent some fairly fruitless hours turning over the pages of various books, most of which I had used before: commentaries on Acts, Schnackenburg's commentary on the Johannine epistles, Ratzinger's small book on Christian brotherhood, Warnach on *agapé*. . . . None of these seemed really to connect.

While I was doing this I became more and more conscious of the relevance to what I was looking for of what had seemed a moment of insight some nights before, when unable to sleep I had looked out from my window at the top of the tower at Blackfriars over Oxford spread out before me. To speak of a moment of insight is perhaps rather pretentious; but there had seemed to be a valid glimpse of something—human community as exhibited in the community of a city—which on reflection and analysis brought up reminiscences of Wordsworth's Westminster Bridge sonnet, the night thoughts of Henry V in Shakespeare, passages in the early T. S. Eliot, as well as thoughts about the place of the city in early near Eastern civilization and the writings of Lewis Mumford, linked with the Jerusalem-Zion theme in Old and New Testaments. The second paragraph of the sermon represents what became of these reflections, written down under some compulsion, without any very clear sense of just how this meditated experience was going to contribute to the sermon.

In fact, this registration of experience was a turning point, not only for what it seemed to be disclosing, but also because it initiated a certain style and rhythm of communication. If the 'congregation

could swallow that kind of communication early in the sermon, we—they and I—could go on to explore ‘God is love’, ‘No one has ever seen God’ in a style of communication which for want of a better word I could call ‘poetic’, meaning indirect and allusive rather than direct and declaratory. The rest of the sermon became an exercise in this style of indirect communication, the only way, it now seemed, in which reflections and half-intuitions of years past could be put into words.

It would be tedious and again pretentious to list the allusions which were drawn into the text of the sermon as it wrote itself. Of course they were not deliberately introduced, but as the words were put down on the page the allusions became more or less conscious—Dante, Aristotle (the *de Anima* on touch!), D. H. Lawrence, Shakespeare, Rahner on the Sacred Heart, apart from Scripture. The question remains in my mind as to whether this sort of sermon is a legitimate exercise, and beyond that what sort of communication is appropriate in theology generally. For instance, there is the play on the word ‘naked’, first in the Isaiah quotation and finally in the last words of the sermon; is this sort of ambiguity, whether or not creative in the sense of Empson’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, appropriate to theological communication? I can’t resist quoting here a text I came across while pursuing this question after preaching the sermon; it is a description of Mallarmé’s conversation by a young poet-contemporary, which I found in Anthony Hartley’s introduction to his Penguin *Mallarmé*:

A pleasant voice. Ritual gestures. And inexhaustibly subtle speech, ennobling every subject with rare ornamentations: literature, music, art, life, and even news items, discovering secret analogies between things, communicating doors, hidden contours. The universe is simplified since he sums it up in dreams, as the sea is summed up by a murmur in a shell.

Should a sermon, a piece of theological communication, reach towards the summation of the universe in the dream-murmur of a shell?

## Human and Divine Love \*

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The subject of love is of universal interest, has engaged the attention of many since time immemorial and will continue to do so. It is of particular interest to Christians who make the claim that God is love.

\*Based on a lecture first given to the Society of St Gregory in August 1969.