

## Third Sunday of Lent - C

St. Mark's at UBC

2 March 2013

Dear Archbishop Prendergast, brother priests, sisters, those attending the symposium and friends in Christ:

### *Introduction*

We have just completed the symposium on “Vatican II and the Faith of the Church” sponsored by St. Mark's College. I cannot tell you how delighted I am that you have taken part in this extraordinarily timely event during this time of transition in the Church's life and how pleased I am that the College has organized it. As a high school student I remember that we prayed that the upcoming Ecumenical Council would bring a “new Pentecost” upon the Church. Now, more than fifty years later, we are still in the Upper Room, already emboldened by the Spirit, and ready to open wide its doors with the fullness of its teaching. We still need more prayer and a deeper conversion of heart before the harvest of the Council can be fully realized. But, if we listen to the Spirit, that will be accomplished in the Lord's own good time.

As Pope Benedict reminded us in his last *lectio divina* addressed to the clergy of Rome two weeks ago, “some have made the criticism that the Council spoke of many things, but not of God.” However, he vehemently rejected that view. “It did speak of God!” he insisted, by opening up the whole of God's holy people, to the adoration of God, in

the celebration of the Liturgy<sup>1</sup> – a point made so clearly by Archbishop Terry in this morning’s keynote address.

**“*I AM’ sent me to you.*”**

This initial theme of the Council – the adoration of God and his primacy over all else that is – forms a bridge to today’s first reading from the Book of Exodus.

Moses is tending the flocks. He sees a burning bush which is not consumed, and he hears his name called out from the blaze. When Moses responds, “Here I am” (Ex 3:4), he is warned to “come no closer” (Ex 3:5), because the spot on which he stands is holy ground. That ground is sacred because he is encountering the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God who has come to rescue his people. Yet Moses is still hesitant for the mission he fears is his, and so he says: “If they ask me ‘what is his name?’ what am I to tell them?” God says, “I AM WHO I AM. Thus you shall say to the children of Israel: I AM sent me to you. . . . This is my name forever and this is my title for all generations” (Ex 3:13-15, 16).

St. Thomas Aquinas saw in the burning bush a revelation of the deepest mystery of a God who could never adequately be named or conceptualized. For him and for the great tradition of Catholic theology,

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, *Lectio Divina* with the Clergy of Rome (14 February 2013).

there is no other way to talk about who and what God is other than to say that God is existence itself: “am-ness.” God is the holy ground of all being. At the heart of the universe is not some mindless grinding machinery or evolutionary process. What moves everything, from stars to human hearts, is personal being.

All other beings have their own existence by gift of God. We cannot give existence to ourselves; we have been willed, loved into existence. Aquinas valued personal reality as the “most perfect grade of existence” because it images the “I am-ness” of God: life that can know itself and give itself to the other. This is not some glib speciesism, which degrades other kinds of life. It is simply an acknowledgment that freedom, intelligence, and love introduce a new splendor of intrinsic goodness and value into the world which, without persons, would be bereft of such beauty.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. John Kavanaugh, Center for Liturgy, Homily (3 March 2013).

God reveals himself by using “the terminology of being,” thereby expressing “a special coming together between the language of revelation and the language of that human knowledge of reality which from antiquity was called ‘first philosophy.’ The language of this philosophy enables one to approach, in some way, the name of God as ‘Being’ . . . [However,] human language does not suffice to express adequately and exhaustively the ‘Who is’ of God! Our concepts and our words in regard to God serve only to say what he is not, rather than what he is.”<sup>3</sup>

When we refer to God, it would be fitting to write that “I AM” and that “HE IS” in upper case, reserving the lower case for creatures.

It is clear, then, that the God of our faith, he who is, the Blessed Trinity, is the central affirmation, the truth of truths, of our faith. Moses reveals to us a God of infinite majesty. This majesty is the glory of the divine Being, the glory of the name of God, many times celebrated in Sacred Scripture: “O Lord, our God, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” (Ps 8:2).

God shows himself in mysterious ways – as the fire that does not consume – according to a logic which defies all that we know and expect:

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<sup>3</sup> Blessed John Paul II, General Audience (7 August 1985).

He is the God who is at once close at hand and far-away; he is in the world but not of it. He is the God who comes to meet us, but who will not be possessed. He is “I AM WHO I AM” – the name which is no name! I AM WHO I AM: the divine abyss in which essence and existence are one! The God who is Being itself! Before such a mystery, how can we fail to “take off our shoes” as he commands, and adore him on this holy ground?<sup>4</sup>

### ***Divine Name in Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer***<sup>5</sup>

When we come to God’s revelation of his name in the New Testament, we turn to the high priestly prayer of Jesus during the Last Supper. Twice in the course of that prayer Jesus speaks of revealing God’s name. “I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world” (Jn 17:6). “I have made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (Jn 17:26).

The Lord is alluding here to the scene of the burning bush, when God, at Moses’ request, had revealed his name. Jesus is bringing to fulfilment what began with the burning bush; that in him God, who had

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<sup>4</sup> Blessed John Paul II, Homily, Celebration of the Word at Mount Sinai (26 February 2000), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Benedict XVI, Homily at Chrism Mass (1 April 2010).

made himself known to Moses, is now revealing himself fully.

The essence of what took place on Mount Horeb was not the mysterious word, the “name” which God had revealed to Moses, as a kind of identity marker. Rather, to give one’s name meant to enter into relationship with another. The revelation of the divine name, then, meant that God, infinite being, enters into the network of human relationships; that he comes out of himself, so to speak, and becomes one of us, present among us and for us.

Consequently, Israel saw in the name of God not merely a word steeped in mystery, but an affirmation that God is with us. This desire of God to be with his people comes to completion in the Incarnation of the Son. Here what began at the burning bush is truly brought to completion: God, as the Man Jesus, can be called upon by us and he is close to us. He is one of us, yet he remains the eternal and infinite God. His love comes forth, so to speak, from himself and enters into our midst.

“Truly you are a God who is hidden, O God of Israel”, the prophet Isaiah had prayed (45:15). This never ceases to be true. But we can also say: Truly you are a God who is close, you are a God-with-us. You have revealed your mystery to us, you have shown your face to us. You have revealed yourself and given yourself into our hands. God has shown himself, because he, infinite and beyond the grasp of our reason, is the

God who is close to us, who loves us, and whom we can know and love.

### ***Conclusion***

This Year of Faith pushes back to what is absolutely the most important: the conviction that we live in God's world and are invited to love and serve him. Pope Benedict XVI was insistent on the need to concentrate on the foundational beliefs of Christianity. While he viewed relativism's denial of objective truth, and the denial of moral truths in particular, as the central problem of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, he focussed less on single issues and more on the need to preserve the basic relationship between the human being and the Creator: belief in God. Indeed, it was forgetfulness of God that he most warned us against.

Let us pray this afternoon that the fruits of the Second Vatican Council will be increasingly realized in our day – and that we will never lose sight of what is most fundamental: the revelation to Moses and in Jesus of God's closeness to us through his redemptive love. And to close with Benedict's words on the Council's providential beginning with its document on the sacred liturgy – and its equally providential ending, we might add, as Archbishop Terry noted, with its document on the Church in the Modern World:

In fact, by starting with the theme of the "liturgy", the Council shed very clear light on the primacy of God and his indisputable priority. God in the very first place: this itself

explains to us the Council's decision to start with the liturgy. Wherever the gaze on God is not conclusive, everything else loses its orientation. The fundamental criterion for the liturgy is its orientation to God, enabling us to take part in his action itself.<sup>6</sup>

And that is what we now continue to do. We are beneficiaries and participants in this mystery for the salvation of the world.

\_ J. Michael Miller, CSB  
Archbishop of Vancouver

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<sup>6</sup> Benedict XVI, General Audience (26 September 2012).