

BEYOND WORDS

By Gerry Pierse

Two ways of talking about God

1. The *katapatic* way when we say what God is like.
2. The *apophatic* way when we say that we can really say nothing about God.
3. The first way is found mostly in the West which likes exact definitions and formulas.
4. The other is found mostly in the East which is more accepting of mystery.
5. An example from the East: There they would say, "When the wise man points to the moon, the fool sees the finger". The fool can think that the finger is the moon when it is only a few inches pointing to the moon that is almost 400,000 km away from us. What we say about God tells us as much about the Divinity, as a finger does about the moon. Some of our theological arguments are as foolish as arguing about the length of a finger in relation to the moon.

Beyond words . . .

1. Our *images* of God are images, and therefore not God.
2. Our *feelings* about God are feelings about God, and therefore not God himself.
3. Our *words* about God are words, and therefore not God.
4. Again they say in the East, "A wave becomes enlightened when it knows it is born of water."
5. Some of our positions and arguments are like a big wave looking down sneeringly on a small one. Ultimately both are water.
6. Our words and images are like fistfuls of a mountain. We sometimes think we have the mountain in our pockets, but we only have an insignificant fistful of it there.
7. If we are *attached* to anything, even our words or theories about God, they can keep us from God.
8. Western logical minds want to choose *either/or*, but the more intuitive eastern minds *embrace the truth of both approaches*.
9. Great saints have favoured both approaches. Teresa of Avila and Ignatius of Loyola would have us find God in all things. For them God dances creation. Look at the dance, and you will have to see the dancer.
10. But, according to St Augustine, "If you can say it, it is not God".
11. The true God is like a glimpse of something in a rear view mirror. When you look around, you no longer see it. It is a Tabor happening that cannot be put in a tabernacle. A recognition like that at Emmaus that disappears at once. It is just a glimpse.
12. John of the Cross would say that any image or thought about God is an obstacle to knowing or being present to God. He says,

*To reach satisfaction in all,
Desire its possession in nothing.
To come to knowledge of all,
Desire the knowledge of nothing.
To come to possess all,
Desire the possession of nothing
To arrive at being all,
Desire to be nothing.*

13. For John of the Cross we must hold on to "nothing, nothing, nothing" in order to get "all, all, all".
14. The only thing big enough to hold God, then, is SILENCE.
15. John Main, following the approach of John of the Cross, is ruthless in his demand that in meditation we let go of all *thoughts, words, and images* that block us from openness to the vastness of God. His ever repeated advice is, "Say your mantra". Only silence, then, is big enough for God. To pray is to be open to this vastness.
16. To pray is to know that ultimately only God can pray. When asked by Moses, God defined himself as, "I AM". To pray is to be in our own I AM-ness which is to be in the I AM-ness of God.
17. I think we get a hint of this when Jesus is in agony in the Garden. He asks the disciples, "You watch while I pray". He does not ask them to pray, but only to watch while he prays. To pray is to watch while the Trinity prays. To be still in silence is to be where the Trinity is in prayer.
18. Strangely, this way of prayer, that gives the merest glimpse of God, also gives us a glimpse of ourselves and this is most transformative.
19. According to the wisdom of the East, you cannot be in silence and continue to be dishonest. We can be busy saying prayers and doing things, and yet ignore the inconsistencies in our behaviour.
20. But we cannot be silent and still hold grudges or hatred in our hearts, or be involved in unhealthy relationships.
21. Silence will challenge the lies in our lives. It challenges us to know ourselves in all honesty, and it will make us give up what is inconsistent, or to give up the silence.
22. Lao Tse, the Chinese Philosopher who lived 500 years before the time of Christ, said:

*To know others is to be wise
To know self is to be enlightened
To conquer others is to have physical strength,
To conquer self is to be strong*

23. The twice daily practice of meditation is the best road I know to this enlightenment and strength.

Notes in outline produced by Alex Peck (apeck77@yahoo.com.au); April 1, 2009.

Source: Fr. Gerry Pierse, "The Prayer That Jesus Taught", *Meditatio Talks 2006, Series A*
(<http://www.wccm.org/item.asp?recordid=meditatiolisten&pagestyle=default>)