

St Thomas on The Bourne

Feb 24th. 2nd Sunday before Lent.

At once I was in the Spirit, and lo, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne

Revelation 4 2.

As you know, on the Acropolis in Athens stands the Parthenon, a stunningly beautiful Greek Temple. The deity of that Temple was Athena. And her statue, which some claim was constructed by Phidias in the 5th century BC, was at the very heart of the building. It was constructed of wood, covered in bronze plates and those plates in turn were covered with gold, weighing in total about 2,400 lbs. Her face and arms were made from ivory. In her outstretched right hand she held the goddess Nike, and her left hand rested on a shield. The statue was about 38 feet tall. Of course, she is no longer there but, believe it or not, apparently there is a huge replica of her in Nashville, Tennessee, even bigger than the original. But this one is made of gypsum and glass fibre...and was unveiled to a suitably overawed public in 1990.

Now, by contrast, let's go in our imaginations to the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem Temple at the time of Jesus. There, the holiest room of that Temple complex was a space 20 cubits square, roughly 33 feet x 33 feet, with absolutely nothing in it. In the First Temple, the Holy of Holies contained the Ark of the Covenant, a chest which held the Tablets of Stone on which were carved the 10 Commandments but all of that was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BC and the Second Temple, the one that Jesus knew, was rebuilt in 516 BC. Because the Ark and the Ten Commandments had been destroyed it was decided to leave the Holy of Holies empty. It was only entered once each year by the High Priest on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

So, in Athens, a statue of enormous proportions; in Jerusalem, an empty, cube-shaped room; the contrast is intriguing.

Why the difference? Why didn't Judaism have statues of God? The simple answer, from the Jewish perspective, is that the 10 Commandments forbade any imagery of God. But I think that it might be even more fascinating than that. If you have a statue at the centre of your worship, imaginative human thinking about the Divine is apt to be restricted, but an empty room allows the imagination to take wing. It promotes and allows for, possibility.

Well. This morning we heard a reading from the Book of Revelation in which the author attempts the impossible. He is trying to describe the very Being of God. Because he was Jewish he couldn't describe statues of God, because there were none, so instead he used word-based visual imagery to do so.

"And there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne! And the one seated there looks like jasper and carnelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald..."

Where did his daring verbal imagery come from? He drew on some hints from the Old Testament to enable his vision to come alive. So, from Ezekiel, for example, he gets the idea of the four living creatures. He also gets from Ezekiel the idea that God sat on a throne from which came flashes of lightning and peals of thunder. Ezekiel had described his vision of heaven in these terms: ' *In my*

vision I saw a storm wind coming from the north, a vast cloud with flashes of fire and brilliant light about it...'

And from Isaiah 6 he gets the idea of a heavenly company praising God.

'In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the skirt of his robe filled the temple...the seraphim were calling to one another Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory... '

In other words, in spite of the prohibition of image-making in Judaism, there were times when verbal visual imagery broke out and flooded human consciousness...

Now translate all of that into our own age. If you were asked to describe God, what would you say? Would you use mystical, visionary language? Might you refer your interlocutors to some Biblical verses such as the ones we have looked at this morning?

I once asked some Primary School Children in Shropshire to describe God...and one of them, I recall, said that God was like a load of television sets looking at each other. Well...he was not a million miles from those fantastical beings in Ezekiel who were covered with eyes.

But I return to the empty cuboid room in the Jerusalem Temple, for I suggest that what it shows is that in the end no language can be adequate to describe God...in the presence of the ineffable, in the presence of the Divine, all language falters and breaks down...even the language of Ezekiel and Isaiah and John of the Revelation, even their luscious and awesome and visionary language fails.

Perhaps I can put it like this. If we want to try to describe God we might feel bound to use words, but when words fail we turn to music, and when even music fails, finally beyond and within music we get to a place of silence: words first, then music and then silence. But paradoxically, as we think about God, as we try to comprehend him, the pattern is then reversed and we are moved from silence to music to words and we are brought back to where we are...but renewed.

God, of course, is beyond all description...except, except, that in Jesus Christ he has revealed who he truly is...and that is the joy and the perplexity and the depth of our faith. Language collapses in the face of God's indescribable being but yet we see and experience in Jesus Christ who God really is... and that is a gift from heaven, a gift beyond words.