

The God Above God

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I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god.

Isaiah 44:6

I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.

Revelation 22:13

We live in a very anxious time. On whichever side of the political spectrum we fall, many of us feel threatened. It may even seem that the world as we know it is coming to an end. Authoritarianism and oppression are on the rise, and significant parts of the world seem in an endless state of war. In the United States division and mutual hatred appear to reach levels not known since the Civil War. And this in addition to the personal struggles we all face, concerning our own individual fate or that of our loved ones. As Paul Tillich put it, it seems like the foundations of the earth are shaking.

It is natural in such circumstances to turn to God in prayer. The prayers we offer most commonly are petitionary; we ask God for things. This kind of prayer, unfortunately, often doesn't work. Do we really believe we can persuade God to give us things we would not receive otherwise? Do we really think we're giving information God doesn't already have? Perhaps the most universal prayer, the prayer for world peace, has apparently never been answered.

If we reflect deeply on it, what petitionary prayer says about God may make us uncomfortable. It encourages a view of God as a supreme authority who might possibly give us what we need only if we approach God in the proper way and say the right words, and of course it doesn't hurt to include lots of praise. Even then, God's responses can seem undependable and arbitrary. And if intercessory prayers really can influence God, then what about people who don't have anyone to pray for them? Does God pay them less attention, or love them any less?

I am not saying intercessory prayer has no value. There is always value in lifting up in love to the congregation those who are in special need. But taken literally, these prayers make a statement about God that might make us feel uneasy.

Jesus was not a fan of petitionary prayer. Here is what he said about it:

When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. (Matthew 6:7-8)

After that follows the “Lord’s Prayer”: a prayer that goes no further than to acknowledge our dependence on God for our daily sustenance, and to hope for bringing God’s kingdom here to earth. Prayer should not present God with a to-do list, but rather be an endeavor to unite ourselves to the quest to bring heaven and earth together (“Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven”). It is important to understand what that means. The answer is found in scripture, but it is very subtle.

How do we see God?

To find this answer we may need to revise our image of God. It is almost impossible for human beings not to make God human. But there is no way to reconcile a good supreme “being” with all the evil and destruction rampant in this world. Theologians have offered many rationalizations, but none of them work. And a God who would like to help but is powerless over God’s own creation is really no better than a powerful God who lets unrestrained cruelty happen.

But is atheism the only alternative? Or is there still a possible faith in God that can help us deal with our anxieties?

When conditions are difficult, we suffer not only from the present but also from feeling that the suffering of this moment is how it will always be. No one escapes severe pain in this life, and for many such pain defines most of their time on earth. But every journey is over before we know it. Have you ever felt, when taking a vacation, that no matter how long it lasted it seemed almost over practically the day it began? Our entire life can feel like that as we approach its end and time seems to accelerate. Jesus was aware of this.

Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ But God

said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God." (Luke 12:16-21)

What was this rich man's mistake? He probably was not a bad person. He may have been rather average. He just thought that this life is all there is, and even possibly that it would last forever. Yes, intellectually we all know we are going to die, but we don't really believe it until life circumstances force us to confront it. And when the end does come, we may find ourselves unprepared.

This man, a man of privilege, thought his life would be unending good fortune. A person less fortunate, perhaps born into extreme poverty, or slavery, or a war zone, might think the opposite, that life is only misery and pain, now and forever. Both make the mistake of believing that *this life is the beginning, and this life is the end.*

Jesus tells us something different: this life is but one brief blip in eternity. It is contained within a much larger reality. We may call it Ultimate Reality, in contrast to the passing reality of our temporal existence.

How do we see reality?

The Bible has a lot to say about Ultimate Reality. In the synoptic Gospels it is called the Kingdom of God. The Gospel of John has its own unique perspective:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1)

Unfortunately, in translation this sentence is nearly unintelligible. What Word? In which language? We are used to identifying the Word with Jesus, but why call him a Word, and if the Word was God, are we saying that Jesus and God are identical?

To understand this verse we need to dig deeper into its language. "Word" is a literal translation of the Greek *logos*, which does mean "word" but is also much more than that. This "word" has a history, which no doubt influenced the author of this Gospel.

By the time the Gospel was written, the Logos had become an important concept in Greek philosophy, and particularly in Stoicism. Heraclitus (about 500 BCE) was the first we know of to have used the term. By “Logos” he meant a rational intelligence that gives order to the world; one may think of it as divine. The idea makes sense. Science alone cannot explain the orderliness of the universe. Natural selection may indeed play a part in evolution, but it does not explain the ability of physical particles to impart life, the fine-tuning of the laws of nature and the precise values of the physical constants that make natural law and life possible. Nor does it explain the existence of individual human consciousness and the human being’s capacity for free will. Some ordering principle must be behind it all. The Greeks called it *Logos* and considered it an aspect of God.

The Stoics in particular developed this idea in some detail. In his *Meditations* the Roman Emperor and Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius puts it this way:

The substance of the universe is obedient and compliant; and the reason [Greek: *Logos*] which governs it has in itself no cause for doing evil, for it has no malice, nor does it do evil to anything, nor is anything harmed by it. But all things are made and perfected according to this reason. (*Meditations* Book 6, trans. James Harris)

Readers of the New Testament should resonate with this language: the Logos is purely good, and through it all things were made.

Marcus Aurelius lived after the Gospels were written, but he encapsulates well the Stoic philosophy of the Logos that had been around for some time. Another source, Philo of Alexandria, was a contemporary of Jesus and has interesting things to say about the Logos. Philo was a Hellenized Jew and put together ideas from Greek philosophy and Jewish thought. Here is what he says about the Logos:

And the invisible divine reason [Logos], perceptible only by intellect, he [the Creator] calls the image of God. (*Creation* 31)

For the word [Logos] of the living God being the bond of every thing, as has been said before, holds all things together. (*Flight* 112)

But the most universal of all things is God; and in the second place the word [Logos] of God. (*Allegory* 2:86)

For Philo, the Logos is an intermediary between God and human beings, and stands behind God as the agent of creation. Most likely Philo also had in mind this from Hebrew scripture:

Does not wisdom call,
and does not understanding raise her voice?...
The LORD created me [wisdom] at the beginning of his work,
the first of his acts of long ago.
Ages ago I was set up,
at the first, before the beginning of the earth. (Proverbs 8:1,22-23)

Like the Logos, wisdom (Greek: *sofia*) is preexistent and the agent of creation. These ideas from two different traditions fit together very nicely.

Similarities to the use of Logos in the Gospel of John are readily apparent, though there is one key difference we will get to. For now suffice it to say that all of the above lay in the background of the term *Logos* that John chose to use. We do not know whether John was specifically acquainted with Philo, but Stoicism was, in fact, the dominant philosophy at the time of the Gospel, so detecting traces of its influence should not be surprising. Having both a Jewish and Greek background the author of John surely would have been aware of these associations. They are all present behind the text, and cannot be captured by a one-word English translation. “Word” simply does not mean what Logos means.

So what is the Gospel really telling us? Let’s take a deeper look.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. (John 1:1-3)

This fits perfectly what was said above about the Logos (or wisdom, or “divine reason” as it is often translated) being the preexistent agent of creation.

There is some controversy about how to translate verse 1c, “and the Word was God.” This hinges on a technical grammatical point. If the verse meant to say that the Word and God are the same, then in the Greek both words should have a definite article (in Greek definite articles don’t work the way they do in English). But in the Greek, the word “God” (*theos*) lacks the article, which some scholars take to mean that it functions more like an

adjective than a noun. And so some translations render, “And the Word was divine.” I think this rendering is more accurate. (It also avoids the unfortunate possibility of equating Jesus with God the Father, which not even traditional church theology does.)

Ultimate Reality revealed in Christ

So far everything is consistent with Philo and the Stoics, where such a passage would not be out of place. But then we get this:

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

And the Word became flesh. What this actually says is that the Logos, or Ultimate Reality, or eternal life, *became visible in Jesus as the Christ.* Jesus said: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Some take this literally, but Jesus is not saying that he *is* the Father. Rather, this verse is telling us that if we want to know the nature of God, we can look at those qualities manifest in Jesus. As the Messiah and culmination of Hebrew prophecy Jesus revealed the nature of God and thus of Ultimate Reality. It is characterized by goodness, and epitomized by love. In our earthly existence this becomes *non-self-interested love*, beginning with *compassion* (literally, being “with the suffering” of others).

Scripture tells us that the human being was created “in the image of God,” though often we cannot see that in ordinary human beings, in whom this image is obscured by self-interest and egotism. But in Jesus this “image of God” is visible. Paul Tillich has a singularly helpful way of putting it: “Jesus as the Christ represents the essential unity between God and man appearing under the conditions of existential estrangement” (*Systematic Theology II*, 122). In other words, *even under the conditions of suffering that we inevitably experience as human beings, we can have hope in the vision of Jesus revealing to us the nature of our underlying reality.*

Debates about God usually center on whether God exists, but the truly important question is not whether there really is a God or higher power, but whether God is good. Seeing all the unmerited suffering and extreme pain and unrestrained cruelty in this world, it is easy to doubt God’s goodness. And religions sometimes have doubted it. Zoroastrianism posited a cosmic struggle between good and evil divine forces. And Gnosticism, an early

Christian view the church condemned as a heresy, held that this world could not have been created by the real God but by an inferior sub-deity, given various names, who didn't know what he was doing and made a royal mess of things. One can easily understand this view's attractiveness given what we suffer, but Jewish and Christian tradition maintain that, in spite of everything, God is good.

And yet that can be hard to believe. So Jesus manifested the qualities of God amidst the limitations that create human suffering, and in spite of those conditions we can witness the flourishing of goodness. A world in which Christlike compassion and love exist cannot have been created by an evil force. Evil has no creative power; it only destroys. But Jewish prophetic tradition continuing in the Christian message tells us that in spite of all the evil in the world, Ultimate Reality is good. If we doubt this, we can look to the revelation provided in Jesus as the Christ. He shows us that only goodness, epitomized by love, has the creative power sufficient to make existence possible.

But what then of all the flaws within creation? Why does it so often seem that there is no God? This is a mystery to which we cannot yet have a complete answer. But we do have a clue. We can observe that only in a world in which God's presence is not always tangible can compassion and love be learned. Tillich calls this "conditions of estrangement." In this world we are estranged from each other and estranged from God, giving rise to conflict, destruction, and despair. But this estrangement carries within it the seeds of faith. It is in feeling for the suffering of others that we begin to learn what real love is, in the true spiritual sense, and not only loving those who love us back. *Non-self-interested love* brings us into an awareness of the divine, and non-self-interested love is learnable only in a world of suffering.

The divine life unfolds through separation, estrangement, return, and reconciliation. Scripture reflects this, with its recurrent theme of exile and return. It tells us not only of historical existence but of divine reality: we are in exile from eternal life and are awaiting our return. But God always brings us back from the darkness if we are seeking God's presence. It may not be right away, or even for quite a while, but eventually it happens. No pain lasts forever. "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" (Matthew 5:4).

But what of those who are not comforted in this life? That does seem to include many. Our reconciliation may or may not be felt in this life, but it always comes from eternal life. Eternal life is the full dimension of reality that encompasses this life and goes beyond it. If you want to know more about it, Jesus called it the “Kingdom of God” and you can see what he says about it in the Gospels. Even though we may not be aware of it, eternity is always present, even in this world.

There is still a danger, a threat to our spirituality that we need to guard against. This is the impression that eternal life only happens “after death,” and the temptation to discount this life as meaningless as we wait for something better after we die. Taking this path leads to nihilism. How can we avoid it?

It is here that we can experience the saving power of Jesus’s revelation of the Logos in his being. “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” (Colossians 1:15). “The image of the invisible God”: are we not told (Genesis 1:27) that in this image all of us were created? That image may yet be hidden from us, but Jesus makes it explicit. He shows us what we are called to become. And in becoming this image now revealed to us, we redeem this present life and make it worth living even under conditions of suffering.

The author of Ephesians, most likely a disciple of Paul, puts it like this:

For surely you have heard about him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus. You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. (Eph 4:21-24)

Our understanding of the Logos should give new meaning to these words. When we conform ourselves, as best we can, to the image Jesus revealed, which is the “Logos made flesh,” we place ourselves in harmony with that Logos, the underlying structure of reality. This opens us to the influence of eternal life, and we will find that influence manifest in our own lives in some way at some point. Then the individual events in our lives become meaningful; they acquire a sense of direction. But if we choose self over love and act in opposition to the Logos, then we are on our own and may

live and feel as if eternity did not exist. But eternity is not just after we die. It surrounds this world and affects our lives here as well.

This is why Jesus said it was so hard for rich people to enter the kingdom of heaven. The rich are highly tempted to think of this life as permanent, and wealth something to which they are entitled. And so they keep grasping for it – the more they have, the more they want. This placement of self over love puts them out of harmony with the Logos and takes them away from the eternal. Only by confronting the finiteness of this world can we gain a sense of the eternal. Then we become aware of what a tiny part we are in relation to the greater world that surrounds us, Ultimate Reality, eternal life.

In his presence Jesus revealed to us both the image of God in which we were created, and the Logos, or Ultimate Reality, the creation God called “very good.” Therefore we can look to this revelation when we are afraid, when events in this life threaten to tear us apart. We can come to see our trials as temporary aspects of our journey ending not in this world but in eternal life. “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18). Revealed to us, not after we die, but in eternal life. Making the decision to conform ourselves to this divine image prepares us for its manifestation even in our present existence. The reminder that our present trials are not all there is and will not endure, because we are part of a greater reality informed by goodness, can be deeply comforting. The messianic revelation in Jesus as the Christ shows us that this reality exists and that it is good, and its nature is compassion. This limitless compassion is not just a wish but has been demonstrated here on earth. Its revelation becomes an anchor for the spirit when we are surrounded by darkness.

The imitation of Christ

What then is our task here on earth? It is to conform to the best of our ability to our true essence, revealed to us in Jesus as the Christ. If we cannot do this with great gestures, we can do it in small ways. In every act of kindness we are touching the eternal, bringing heaven and earth closer together. When I worked in hospice as a pastoral music therapist, I had a conversation with the priest that has stayed with me. This priest always used to say, “This earth is not our home.” Curious, I asked him one day, then why are we here? His answer: “To build God’s creation.” Every loving

act brings us closer to our essence and to eternal life, and helps build God's creation. We don't have to wait until we die to know eternal life.

Paul describes the transformation available to us:

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. (2 Corinthians 5:17-18)

Being "in Christ" means being inspired by Christ's example to experience our true essence as channels for God's love. This will not protect us from all suffering, but it will give us meaning and a sense of direction.

We need to be mindful about what being "in Christ" actually means. It emphatically does not mean that all we have to do is believe and we are saved. This popular understanding is a distortion of the biblical text. Professing certain beliefs or doctrines does not bring us closer to our essence. We need to be infused with the ardent appreciation of non-self-interested love.

Faith within darkness

We may now consider a most important question: How can we respond to adversity with faith, especially if we are living in a dark time?

If the naturalists are right and this physical world is all there is, then faith is groundless. The unaddressed suffering of masses of innocent people cannot be reconciled with a God who is good – if we think of God as a being, even a "supreme" one. There is a "protest atheism" that originates in a deep moral sense, calling theists to account for a God who does not conform to standards of morality. Such atheists should not be condemned or dismissed. They perform an important function, keeping us honest, calling us to account for our flawed theologies and to reexamine exactly what we believe.

We have the right, however, to conclude that the natural world is not all there is, and that God is more than a being among other, lesser beings. This comes from the revelation of a higher reality in Jesus as the Christ. An

amoral, natural world created by an amoral deity could not produce the non-self-interested love that he demonstrated.

These considerations bring us to a foundation for faith. Our faith can rest on the realization that:

1. There is a Logos, an underlying structure to reality that makes creation possible;
2. The Logos is revealed in Jesus as the Christ.

Here reason and revelation come together: reason, in that the world could not exist without some reality beyond it giving rise to it, and revelation, the nature of this Ultimate Reality becoming visible in the Christ event.

This faith gives us guidance for how to respond in a troubled time. It is of no avail to plead with God to change things for us. What we can do is bring ourselves into alignment with the Logos, the reality that Jesus revealed. We do this, through our own small ways, by being channels of God's love on earth. It doesn't have to be through grandiose projects or dramatic gestures. Even small acts of kindness reverberate, helping to bring heaven closer to earth, as the Lord's Prayer expresses it. Our task is to bring love into the world, and by pursuing it we put ourselves into alignment with the Logos, the underlying structure of reality, the foundation of our reality as it exists in heaven. This is bound to have effects on our own lives here, things large or small we cannot foresee but not available to those who choose badly and cut themselves off from the Logos. If we find the concept abstract, we can look to the concrete example set by Jesus.

We are now ready to understand another mysterious verse from the Gospel of John: "The Father and I are one" (John 10:30). Like John 14:9 quoted above, Jesus is not saying that he actually *is* the Father, and taking this verse literally as many unfortunately do leads straight into the Sabellian heresy. This verse is better understood as a statement that Jesus was so united with God that he overcame the separation, or estrangement, of the human from the divine. He so reflected God's own qualities in his being that the nature of Ultimate Reality, the Logos, could be seen through him. In philosophical terms, his existence (as he was in his human life on earth) was completely congruent with his essence (the image of God in which he was created). Thus he serves as a guide for us to follow, however imperfect our efforts may be, back to reunion with God.

We mentioned earlier the danger of falling into nihilism, if only eternity matters and this life is just pointless suffering and therefore without value. The revelation of the Logos in Jesus as the Christ saves us from nihilism. It shows us the pattern of reality, to which conforming can change our lives. I think this is what Jesus meant by “But strive first for the kingdom of God and its righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33). Not that we will get everything we want, or even everything we believe we need, but that conforming to the kingdom of God, another term for Ultimate Reality, has unforeseen positive effects on our lives here on earth. Eternal life is not separate from this life, either in space or in time – it is not another kind of life that “follows” this life; rather, it encompasses temporal life and is so much more. From the perspective of eternity, temporal life is nothing more than a fleeting instant.

Then what about judgment?

The end of our estrangement from eternal life does not mean there is no judgment. On the contrary, self-centered lovelessness cannot stand in the presence of pure goodness. “If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit” (Galatians 6:8): we all make a basic choice between self and love, and that choice has consequences. Eventually temporal existence and eternal life will meet, and whatever in our existence does not conform to goodness will be consumed and ultimately vanish. What is left will determine our eternal destiny. Therefore the choices we make in this life are critical.

Every soul at each moment makes the basic choice: for self or for love. Most of us are ambiguous mixtures of both, and no one chooses love consistently or perfectly. But those in whom the choice for self is so strong that it completely overshadows our capacity for love, or violates the humanity of others, are indeed in an unfortunate position. Their existence in eternal life, such as it is, will be impoverished. And love just for one’s family or group of identification is not enough: it must also be love of the stranger, the one who is not like you. “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them” (Luke 6:32); “You shall love [the stranger] as yourself” (Leviticus 19:34). If we think of eternal life not as something that happens “after” death but that is here, now and always, and encompasses and permeates this life, we can see more clearly

the fate of those who live contrary to its principles. Eternity is invisible to them, and they are invisible to eternity.

Jesus explained how this works in the following parable:

He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'" (Matthew 13:24-30)

The "good seed" is the image of God in which we were each created. The weeds are the imperfections introduced by selfishness and egotism. To one degree or another, we are all ambiguous mixtures of both, and it can be hard to tell which is what and where the dividing line is located. We don't have the wisdom to judge (Matthew 7:1), but it is all sorted out in eternity. When the "harvest" comes, when temporal life ends and eternal life is everything, then the weeds are separated out and burned. In other words, that which does not conform to the image of God, to the divine Logos, is consumed and discarded. The "fires of hell" described in the Bible are a symbolic, not a literal indication of this. As the prophet Habakkuk, talking to God, said: "Your eyes are too pure to behold evil" (Habakkuk 1:13). Evil is basically selfishness of a degree high enough to cause serious harm. It is excluded from eternity, so we must be purified of it, and what survives is a measure of the love we have shared.

As the psalmist says:

Do not fret because of the wicked;
do not be envious of wrongdoers,
for they will soon fade like the grass,
and wither like the green herb. (Psalm 37:1-2)

If our vision is limited to the horizons of temporal life, we will see only a part of this judgment. We can see already in this life the self-destructive nature

of sinfulness and evil. But it is in eternal life that these words become completely true: evildoers “will fade like the grass”; the evil within them will be exposed, consumed, and discarded. This follows logically from the Logos, Ultimate Reality, as revealed in the person of Jesus as the Christ. By that revelation of our pure essence we know that goodness is essential to reality, and evil cannot stand in its presence. And whenever our own kindness dispels the darkness of another, we too participate in the power of the Christ. Darkness and evil are excluded from eternal life, like an unruly guest denied admission to the wedding feast. And so we need not fret at the presence of evildoers; they already carry the seeds of their own destruction and do not survive into eternity.

Eternal life is loving, so most people’s experiences are positive. In hospice, as I spent time with people who were dying, I sensed the vast majority of them surrounded by a deep, almost other-worldly peacefulness. I believe the love in them – and most of us do know love – was met by the love in eternal life. On a few notable occasions, this peacefulness was especially strong and deep in individuals who I knew had lived unusually loving lives. I am convinced that the deeper and more extensive the love we share here on earth, the more profoundly eternal love comes to meet us at the time of our transition.

We can see the Christ event as a revelation of this ultimate reality. It is summed up in the passage from Revelation: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” The Alpha, the first, the beginning: we come from goodness and are created in the image of goodness. The Omega, the last, the end: we return from this exile to a reality defined by goodness. In between is the hardship, in which we learn to the greatest depth possible what love really means. “I am the first and I am the last”: God at the beginning and God at the end, so nothing ultimately to fear. A world in which non-self-interested love can exist, epitomized by Christ but accessible to us all, cannot have been created by the devil. God must be good after all.

The ways we think of God

I wonder if we would benefit from revising the ways we think about God. This is a sensitive topic, and no one way will be best for everyone. So here I will be speaking mostly for myself. I cannot relate to a God who must be placated for everything we need, who needs our prayers phrased in certain

ways, and even then is no more likely to give it to us. I think of Jesus's admonition not to pile up too many words when we pray, and I wonder if our words may even create a barrier between ourselves and God. I suspect that, not unlike human conversation, the more we talk while praying, the less we listen. For me, God's presence comes in the quiet stillness of silence – as it were, in the space between moments in time.

What this amounts to is questioning the notion of a "personal" God, a God who is very person-like, not unlike ourselves but without a body and with infinite power. It is this God that many have come to question, finding it irreconcilable with the extreme evil that exists in the world. It is this God to whom Nietzsche's phrase "God is dead" refers. Not that God has literally died, but that the traditional understanding of God fails to speak to increasing numbers of people. In our modern era, in its extreme conditions, doubts and anxieties come to the surface that were more easily suppressed in earlier times. This poses a problem for faith, threatening to undermine it completely.

Yet having the courage to face and follow our doubts does not mean we end up in darkness. On the last page of *The Courage to Be* Tillich makes a very often misunderstood but remarkable statement: *The courage to be is rooted in the God who appears when God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt.* He is talking about what happens when old ideas of God no longer work. Even then, our doubts are still prayers, and we are still in conversation with God. And that is faith. Even if the idea of God as a person no longer works for us, when that image of God dissolves there is still a God who appears in its place. We may think of that as the Logos, the underlying structure of reality that is rooted in goodness because only goodness has creative power; evil can only destroy. For this reason I like to refer to God as Absolute Goodness. The nature of the Logos is reflected in the revelation of Jesus as the Christ, whose presence points toward that reality.

Finally, on prayer

This revelation also gives us a different direction for prayer. Instead of entreating a cosmic person who may or may not give us what we want, we can think of prayer as *the endeavor to bring ourselves into the awareness of eternal life.* In prayer we seek to align ourselves with Ultimate Reality, with Jesus's compassionate presence as a guide. We may then expect a

transforming effect in our own lives, even though we cannot determine just what it will be or when we will know it. Just placing ourselves inside this compassionate presence is enough. It is the Alpha and the Omega.

How we do this, how we pray so as to bring ourselves closer to the awareness of eternity, can vary for different individuals. For some, sacred music can become a carrier of the eternal. Or perhaps a meditative walk, or contemplative reading (*lectio divina*). Even small acts of kindness when needed most can bring an awareness of the eternal. It all depends upon where we place our attention. Asking God for things, presenting God with a list of wishes, can actually create distance between ourselves and God, suggesting God as a being “out there” who may or may not exercise the power to help. But Jesus taught that God is not “out there” and away from us, but that the kingdom of God, or eternal life, is actually and always in our midst (Luke 17:21).

We need to keep in mind that Jesus is the culmination of a long tradition of Hebrew prophecy. The prophets came to a people mired in this-worldly concerns, greed, corruption, war, and destruction. They spoke to the people about another order of creation, a divine order, beyond the frailties of human existence and with redeeming power. In the Hebrew Bible we can see how these teachings gradually evolved, and without this background in Hebrew prophecy we cannot fully appreciate what Jesus brought to us. The significance of Jesus is as Jewish as it is Christian.

Because of his messianic vocation, in Jesus the presence of the divine became visible. In this way, not taking the incarnation so literally that it challenges monotheism, we really can think of Jesus as God’s presence here among us. This presence is potential within each of us, but it is clouded by fear. In Jesus it became actual. The Alpha and the Omega – creation begins well and ends well; it is “very good” (Genesis 1:31). Even when our darker moments seem to be all there is, this revelation should give us hope, reminding us of who we are, and where we really live.

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