IMPASSIBILITY, ASCETICISM AND THE VISION OF GOD

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'Many decades were to elapse before the key-phrases in doctrine, in philosophy, in liturgy, and in ethics made good their footing against vast numbers of competing formulae. But the thought of the *vision of God* as the goal of human life, and the determinant, therefore, of Christian conduct, came rapidly to its own. Before the first of our extant creeds had assumed its present shape - before any dominant liturgical form had emerged from the primitive fluidity of worship - before so much as the bare terminology of the great Christological controversies had entered the new vocabulary - before it was certain whether "the Word" or "the Son of God" should be the crowning title of the Risen Lord - before even the propriety of speaking of the Godhead as a Trinity had become apparent - before the Church had passed a single one of these milestones in her history, the first of a great line of post-apostolic theologians had declared: "The glory of God is a living man; and the life of man is the vision of God".' So wrote Kenneth E. Kirk,[1] and his reference is to Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.* 4.xx.7).The theme of the vision of God is one of the most practical and fruitful concepts of Scripture.

For many in contemporary Christianity, either the 'vision of God' is held to be unattainable in this life or the phrase is regarded as a poetic convention. Not so with Calvin. In the *Institutes* I:1:2-3 we read, '. . . it is evident that man never attains to a true self-knowledge until he have previously contemplated the face of God, and come down after such contemplation to look into himself.' 'Hence that dread and amazement with which, as Scripture universally relates, holy men were struck and overwhelmed whenever they beheld the presence of God.' In this opening chapter, beholding God is spoken of in terms of contemplation. 'But should we once begin to raise our thoughts to God, and reflect what kind of Being he is, and how absolute the perfection of that righteousness, and wisdom, and virtue, to which, as a standard, we are bound to be conformed, what formerly delighted us by its false show of righteousness, will become polluted with the greatest iniquity. . .' Calvin, however, goes beyond this. In Book III:2:1, writing of contemporary experience, he says, 'Paul further declares, that in the person of Christ the glory of God is visibly manifested to us, or, which is the same

1. *The Vision of God*, 1931, p.1.

thing, we have "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ".' And in section 19 of the same chapter, 'As soon as the minutest particle of faith is instilled into our minds, we begin to behold the face of God, placid, serene, and propitious; afar off, indeed, but still so distinctly as to assure us that there is no delusion in it'. The knowledge of God in this section is not simply propositional. The Canons of Dort (1618-9) speak of the gracious countenance of God, 'to behold which is to the godly dearer than life, and the withdrawal of which is more bitter than death'. (V art. 13).

Among the Puritans, listen to for example, Christopher Lowe: 'Consider . . . that Jesus Christ himself, was under spiritual desertion as well as thou: Christ himself cried, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Matt. 27:46. Here was *subtractio visionis*, though not *unionis*.'[2] Matthew Sylvester's sermon-lecture asks, 'How many a gracious person from whom God hides his face, trust in the Lord as his God?'[3] He says 'No counsel nor encouragement will, or can, avail that soul for trust or conduct which neglects its stated work and watch, which God enjoins it to, and expects from it . . . . "Repent and do your first works" was the grave and sober counsel (Rev. 2:5). Begin then, with thyself, and end with God, and work thyself up to his will, and thou shalt see his face with joy'. William Spurstowe, who also was concerned to encourage the Christian who was feeling depressed or deserted, declared that belief in the word was not the end, but the means to the end. 'Eye God in the promises', he counselled. 'Promises are not the primary object of faith, but the secondary: or they are rather the means by which we believe, than the things on which we are to rest ... The promises are instrumental in the coming of Christ and the soul together; they are the *warrant* by which faith is emboldened to come to him, and take hold of him; but the union which faith makes, is not between a believer and the promise, but between a believer and Christ'.[4] Goodwin would take us further. (Sermon XV on Eph.1:13, 14, p 236). 'I yield, my brethren, that the sealing of the Spirit is but faith, if you compare it to heaven. ... But let me tell you that it is faith elevated and raised up above its ordinary rate; as Stephen's eye with which he saw Christ was his natural sight, but it was his natural sight elevated, raised up above the ordinary proportion of an eye; so is this, a light beyond the ordinary light of faith.' Again, in Sermon XVI (Eph. 1:13,14, p. 242), with reference to the 'seal of the Spirit', he said, 'I gave you these three things:- the first was, that it was a distinct light from the ordinary light of faith, a light beyond that light. It is indeed faith ele-

2. Quoted in *The Genius of Puritanism*, Peter Lewis, 1975, p. 105.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 121.
4. *The Wells of Salvation Opened*; see Lewis, *op.cit.* pp 114f.

vated, though not to vision, where faith shall cease, as it is in heaven; yet Stephen's bodily eye was raised to see Christ beyond what the power of the ordinary sight could have done, so here is a light beyond what the ordinary light can reach unto.' In quoting Goodwin, let me hasten to add that I do not endorse everything he says here, nor do I accept his understanding of the 'seal of the Spirit'. The value of his words lies in their testimony to an experiential dimension witnessed to in Scripture which goes beyond a sense of assurance.

The concept of the 'vision of God' is regarded by many with suspicion. It has little obvious relevance for the pragmatic mind. Protestant evangelical theologians, too, alarmed by the subjective vagaries of the wilder Anabaptists and their spiritual descendants, have rightly sought to safeguard the unique position of the Scriptures. Yet in doing this, they have unwittingly detracted from the Scriptures by failing to recognise the place given in the Word to the 'vision of God'. When the theme could not be avoided it was emasculated. They have frequently been confirmed in this by the tendency in the history of the Church to see the vision of God as inextricably bound up with a damaging unbiblical asceticism.

It is essential, at this point, to emphasize that the pursuit of the vision of God down through the ages does not present a simple monolithic pattern, and disentangling even the most dominant strands is highly complicated. Yet certain generalisations can profitably be made, I believe, if only to indicate cul-de-sacs and dangerous diversions. I intend to highlight significant points which should help us on our contemporary journey, but do not intend to give a complete historical analysis. I trust that this attempt at depiction will not be vitiated by the broad brush strokes and necessary selectivity.

One of the disturbing things is that many have seen the pursuit of the vision of God as requiring a self-destructive rigorous ascetic lifestyle. This is particularly true in the monastic movement from the 4th century onwards and in the Byzantine Hesychast tradition of the 14th century. This in turn was fuelled by the concept of the impassibility of God. Many today cannot do justice to the biblical theme of the vision of God because they rightly reject a non-biblical asceticism so often associated with it, and yet, fascinatingly, they retain a belief in the impassibility of God which has encouraged world-despising life-styles. Impassibility, asceticism and the vision of God are frequently closely intertwined. This area is our primary concern and will enable us to be selective. The positive result of this study should be a sharpening of our focus on the biblical data and the blessing that will ensue from that.

Impassibility

Conservative New Testament scholars have argued vigorously, and, I believe, convincingly for 'propitiation' as the correct translation of *hilasterion*.

Yet, generally, when evangelicals have been embarrassed by references to the anger of God in Scripture they have run to the bolthole of anthropomorphism. The astonishing thing about this is that we are told that it helps us to discover the real meaning of the text while in fact, the 'explanation' contradicts what the text actually says! The text says that God gets angry in certain situations, but we know that that cannot possibly be the case in any way that is really analogous to the anger we experience. In fact the truth is that God does not get angry. So much for the perspicuity of Scripture! And to add insult to injury we are told that not only does the text, if taken as it stands, give us an erroneous picture, but it does so to help us to understand it better. One cannot help wondering what has been gained by the scholarly study of *hilasterion* if, at the end of the day, the anger of God is a concept as illusory as the so-called reality of those mystics who have cut loose from Scripture.

The concept of God repenting also causes embarrassment, yet there are a number of statements in Scripture to this effect: Gen. 6: 6,7. Ex.32:12,14. Deut.32:36. Jud. 2:18. I Sam.15:11,35. II Sam.24:16. I Chron.21:15. Ps.90:13, 106:45, 135:14. Jer.18:8,10, 20:16, 26:3,13,19. 42:10. Joel 2:13,14. Amos 7:3,6. Jonah 3:9,10, 4:2 - twenty-seven occurrences in all; twenty-nine if we add Is.1:24 and 57:6. In apparent contrast we read, 'God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should repent. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfil it?' (Num.23:19). '. . . the Glory of Israel will not lie or repent; for he is not a man, that he should repent' (I Sam.15:29). These two verses are understood in a time-less, philosophical way, and all the other verses are interpreted in harmony with this misunderstanding. This is done by labelling them anthropomorphic. The determining factor is not Scripture, but a complex which includes a reluctance to ascribe to God anything which appears unworthy, and the concept of his impassibility - a concept imported from pagan Greek philosophy. The concept was not without its problems. It was the answer of Plotinus (AD 204-270) to the Sceptic, Carneades (213-129 BC). 'All living beings, he (Carneades) argued, God included, must be subject to substantial change . . . and to emotional disturbance; but susceptibility to change entails susceptibility to destruction . . . . Hence the object of Plotinus' doctrine of the impassibility of incorporeal beings was to de-

fend their immortality by exempting them from change . . . .[5] This, however, raised the question of the relations of the gods to the world in which we live. Plotinus reasoned that the gods must have two souls. This is illustrated very clearly in his treatment of prayer. 'Prayer to the celestial gods cannot touch their higher souls, which are absorbed in contemplation and unaware of anything in the sensible cosmos; it does, however, provoke an automatic response from their lower soul, which grants the petitioner's wish . . .'[6] I very much doubt if even the most Neoplatonically inclined among us would posit two souls in the Godhead, yet that would have to be done if we are to adhere to the concept of impassibility and at the same time do justice to the text of Scripture.

The I Sam.15:29 reference ('. . . the Glory of Israel will not lie or repent; for he is not a man that he should repent') is particularly interesting because it is both preceded (11) and followed (35) by the assertion that God does, in fact, repent or change his mind. If v.29 gave the general controlling principle we would expect to find it at verse 11. Taking the passage as it stands, we can only conclude that it does *not* teach that God does not really repent, but that he really *does*, with the specific exception of the decision about Saul, thus making Saul's rejection all the more awesome. Numbers 23:19 is, again, about a very specific decision - God's decision to bless Israel. Balaam realises that God cannot be manipulated. The same is true of the Messianic promise in Psalm 110:4.

It is not surprising that the concept of impassibility has had an influence on the interpretation of Exodus 3:14, 'God said to Moses, "*I am who I am*" . And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, *I am* has sent me to you".' The purpose of this revelation was not to proclaim God as a timeless, eternal, unchangeable being, but as one who is active in relationship on behalf of his people. He is the one who has just been revealing himself to Moses as 'the angel of the Lord' 'in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush' (2). This is highly suggestive. The fire probably symbolizes the holiness of God, but if so, it is strange that the bush was unaffected. It was surely a visual parable of the grace of God in his dealings with his people. It speaks, too, of his presence on this earthly scene. Notice how he does not deliver his people by remote control. He not only sends Moses as his representative, but prior to giving the commission he declares his personal involvement with his people in their sufferings. 'I have seen the affliction of my people . . . and have heard their cry . . . I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them . . . and to bring them up out of that land . . . And now, behold the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have seen

5. R. T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, 1972, p. 26.
6. *Ibid.*, p 70.

the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt.' (7-10). And when Moses protested, God said, 'But I will be with you . . .' (12). Moses again tries to decline and the Lord speaks of himself as '*I am*' and adds, 'Go and gather the elders of Israel together, and say to them that the Lord says . . . I have observed you and what has been done to you in Egypt; and I promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt.' (16,17). This is eloquent testimony to a God who feels for his people, who not only sends Moses as his visible representative, but who also himself comes among his people to deliver them.

We can hold to the concept of impassibility only by treating thousands of passages as anthropomorphic, but even that cannot save the concept which is shattered by the fact of the Incarnation. Individual texts of Scripture are only anthropomorphic in the sense that every word from Genesis to Revelation is anthropomorphic. All Scripture is revelation from God to men in terms that are intelligible to us.

As an apologetic tool, Neoplatonic thought commended itself far better than gnosticism, but in the absence of a developed biblical theology it came to control the interpretation of Scripture. It seemed to offer the highest concept of God. To reject it and especially to reject the concept of impassibility, as Moltmann has noted,[7] seemed to leave us with a victim, trapped by his own creatures. The Scripture witness to God, however, is of one who really interacts with his creatures, making himself vulnerable, but does so as one who at all times is in complete control of every changing situation. 'In him, according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his will, we who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of his glory.' (Eph. 1:11,12).

When God was thought of as Trinity, the concept of impassibility was readily applied to the Son and the Holy Spirit as well as the Father, One might have expected that the New Testament data would have made it impossible to apply the concept to the Incarnate Son. Selectivity operated.

Passages such as Matthew 27:14 ('But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge; so that the governor wondered greatly') and I Pet.2:23 ('When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but trusted to him who judges justly') could easily be marshalled to portray Jesus as impassible. This leaves us, however, with a very inconsistent Jesus when other evidence is considered, for example, Matt.26:37,38 ('. . . he began to be sorrowful and

7. *The Trinity and the kingdom of God*, London,1981, pp 21ff.

troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death" . . .') or Hebrews 5:7 ('In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear').

The pastoral consequences of holding to the concept of the impassibility of God are disastrous, not only in as much as it fuels a tendency towards a destructive unbiblical asceticism, as we shall see, but also, because an impassible God cannot really feel for us. Our theology may speak differently, but in times of crisis we become consistent and our instinct is to doubt the real compassion and love of God. If we may be permitted to play with words when such a serious matter is at stake, we could say that an apathetic God has apathetic and fatalistic offspring. One of the biggest pastoral challenges we face today is how to help the not insignificant number of those who started out well but have now virtually dropped out of the spiritual race.

Asceticism

Our concept of God determines our lifestyle. If we seek to be like God and to live in union with him we will become increasingly dissatisfied with ourselves and will take steps to deal with the rogue elements in our life.

If our God is impassible and our Lord Jesus Christ untouched by what afflicts us, then our sympathies should be drawn to Anoub the Monk (late 4th and early 5th century). 'They stayed in an old temple several days. Then Abba Anoub said to Abba Poemen, "For love's sake do this: let each of us live in quietness, each one by himself, without meeting one another the whole week." Abba Poemen replied, "We will do as you wish." So they did this. Now there was in the temple a statue of stone. When he woke up in the morning, Abba Anoub threw stones at the face of the statue and in the evening he said to it, "Forgive me." During the whole week he did this. On Saturday they came together and Abba Poemen said to Abba Anoub, "Abba, I have seen you during the whole week throwing stones at the face of the statue and kneeling to ask it to forgive you. Does a believer act thus?" The old man answered him, "I did it for your sake. When you saw me throwing stones at the face of the statue, did it speak, or did it become angry?" Abba Poemen said, "No." "Or again, when I bent down in penitence, was it moved, and did it say, 'I will not forgive you?'" Again Abba Poemen answered "No." Then the old man resumed, "Now we are seven brethren; if you wish us to live together, let us be like this statue, which is not moved whether one beats it or whether one flatters it. If you do not wish to become like this, there are four doors here in the temple, let each one go where he will."' One was made housekeeper 'and all that he brought them, they ate and none of them had the authority to say, "Bring us

something else another time," or perhaps, "We do not want to eat this." Thus they passed all their time in quietness and peace.'[8]

We may smile at this cultivation of the Stoic spirit, but we have a modern parallel in what is termed 'alienation', and unfortunately, many Christians are prone to the despair this breeds. The almost subconscious permeation of the concept of the 'impassibility of God' can make even the most resistant vulnerable. We walk a tight-rope when we pursue the via negativa and the non-emotional or rather, the desensitized, 'dark night of the soul' of the mystics. Both of these can be fruitful and liberating but it is only too easy to lose balance. Calvin is, perhaps, our best guide. Considering II Cor.4:8f ('We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed'), he says, 'You see that to bear the cross patiently is not to have your feelings altogether blunted, and to be absolutely insensible to pain, according to the absurd description which the Stoics of old gave of their hero as one who, divested of humanity, was affected in the same way by adversity and prosperity, grief and joy; or rather, like a stone, was not affected by anything. . . . Now also we have among Christians a new kind of Stoics, who hold it vicious not only to groan and weep, but even to be sad and anxious. These paradoxes are usually started by indolent men . . . But we have nothing to do with that iron philosophy which our Lord and Master condemned - not only in word, but also by his own example. . . . If every kind of fear is a mark of unbelief, what place shall we assign to the dread which, it is said, in no slight degree amazed him; if all sadness is condemned, how shall we justify him when he confesses, "My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death"?' (*Institutes* III:8:9)

We may recoil with horror from the extremes of asceticism and wonder what relevance this all has to our time. Yet few are untouched by the disease. Many Christians are unable to enjoy the good gifts with which God so richly endows them (I Tim.6:17) without a feeling of guilt, while others over-react by throwing off restraint and attempting to cultivate a lifestyle of worldliness with the blessing of God, vainly imagining that they are well-balanced Christians avoiding fanatical excess, whereas all the time they are at the other extreme from asceticism at its worst.

Calvin got the balance right. He knew how to renounce and how to affirm the blessings of God. We might call his path the way of true Christian asceticism, were it not for the fact that 'asceticism' no longer carries its original meaning of 'training'. We are all called to a life of moderation and the cultivation of a peaceable gentle spirit (Psalm 131, 1

8. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. B. Ward, revised edit., 1981.

Thess. 4:11, Jas.3:17f, Heb.12:11, Phil.4:5 (*epieikes*), Gal.5:23 (*enkrateia*), 2 Thess.3:12 (*hesuchia*).

The Vision of God

In view of its historical association with a defective doctrine of God which encouraged abnormal lifestyles, we might be tempted to reject the concept of the vision of God, project it into the future life or make it in effect irrelevant by regarding it as merely a literary convention.

Undoubtedly, there is Scriptural warrant for an eschatological understanding. 'For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face' (I Cor.13:12; ' . . . when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is,' I John 3:2). Yet there are many references that speak about the possibility of 'seeing God' in this life. The tendency to project the vision of God completely into the life beyond is prominent in Roman Catholic thought (although there are exceptions), because the phrase 'we shall see him as he is' is taken to mean 'we shall see him as he is in himself', i.e. in his essence. This was the position of Aquinas and the Western Church and was stated officially by Pope Benedict XII: 'The soul of the just see the divine essence by an intuitive, face-to-face vision, with no creature as a medium of vision, but with the divine essence immediately manifesting itself to them, clearly and openly' [9] and in a Council of Florence decree (1438-45): 'Souls immediately upon entrance into heaven see clearly the one and triune God as he is.'[10] Aquinas argued that 'To say that God is seen through some likeness is to say that God is not seen at all.'[11] Scripture, however, gives us no encouragement to believe that we will ever see God in his essence. Palamas (1296-1359) and the East denied that God could be seen in his essence and distinguished between God's essence and his energies. Berkouwer,[12] noting that I John 3:2 does not speak of God's essence, feels we do not need to choose between Aquinas and Palamas, yet he inclines to favour Aquinas, asserting that Palamas divides the indivisible. There is, however, much to be said for the view of Palamas.

We might regard passages such as Psalm 24:6 ('Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob') or Psalm 63, ('So I have gazed upon thee in the sanctuary to behold thy might and glory') or 2 Cor.3:18 ('And we all, with unveiled face, beholding and reflecting the glory of the Lord . . .') etc. as examples of poetic license. Yet we must surely admit, that with all the reserve there present, Exodus 24:9-11 is sober narrative. 'Then Moses and

9. *Benedictus Deus*,(1336), trans. in *Spiritual Theology*, J. Aumann, 1979, p. 42.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, p 43.
12. *The Return of Christ*, ET, Grand Rapids,1972, p 383.

Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel; and there was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank.' The same conclusion is irresistible in other passages, such as Judges 13:22 ('And Manoah said to his wife, "We shall surely die, for we have seen God."') or Isaiah 6:5 ('And I said, "Woe is me! for I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts!"').

In the light of such passages as Exod.33:20; John 1:18, 6:46; I Tim.1:17 and I John 4:12 which assert that no one can see God, it is understandable that the concept of 'seeing God' has been adulterated. Yet there are a number of passages that clearly teach that in this life it is possible to 'see God', albeit imperfectly, and these greatly outnumber the others, e.g. Gen.16:13, 32:30; Exod.24:9-11, 33:11; Num.12:6-8; Deut.34:10; 1 Kings 22:19; Job 42:5f; Ps.27:4, 42:2, 84:7; Is,6:1,5; Ezek.10:18f, 11:22f, 43:4,7; Dan.7:9f; Amos 7:7, 9:1; 1 Cor.13:12; 2 Cor.3:7,18, 12:1; Heb.11:27; 1 John 3:1f. We allow that some of these texts may be using a convention with minimal content, but it is surely difficult to believe that all these references can be dismissed. And these are only a small selection.

It is only on *a priori* grounds, for which there is no biblical justification, that the texts which speak of the impossibility of seeing God are taken as normative and as determining the content we put into those in the other group. Both groups must be held together and given equal weight. In short, although 'seeing God' is not crassly physical, it is still a very real 'seeing' - one that could produce dread.

We have already mentioned the growing encroachment of Greek philosophy. This has become a controlling factor in much theology which, on the doctrine of God, speaks first in categories of Greek origin before treating of the Trinity. Moltmann[13] is so refreshingly liberating in his reversal, a reversal which corrects theological aberration. If we start with a definable God, definable in terms of self-existence, immutability, infinity, etc., we reduce theology to a science and, even worse, we reduce the Lord of glory to an idol. The true ground of religious experience is cut away from under our feet, with encounter with God becoming subjective, and despite our theology of grace we are continually being drawn into the legalistic web.

If we begin with the full revelation in Scripture of God as Trinity, theology becomes an act of worship, God is sensed to be truly ineffable.

13. *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God.*

True religious experience is objective, and the vision of God overwhelms the believer as and when God chooses to reveal himself. It is not a reward for works done. It is all of grace.

In the pagan religions of the time the concept of 'seeing the god' was prominent and this may well explain why the concept figures more prominently in post-apostolic Christian literature than in the New Testament. This serves to highlight the importance of keeping the doctrine of the Trinity central.

In rabbinic theology, to avoid the use of the divine name 'Yahweh', the three pre-eminent periphrases used were 'Word', 'Glory' and 'Shekinah' (or 'Presence'). In the Targums, 'Word' was used for the invisible presence of God and 'Glory' for his visible presence. The most popular term was 'Shekinah' which stood for both the visible and invisible presence of God.

John begins his prologue, 'In the beginning was the Word'. He goes on, not only to make a distinction between the Word and God by saying 'with God' twice, but in the same breath to identify the Word and God, 'The Word was God' (John 1:1f). This Word 'became flesh' - the invisible One makes himself visible - 'and dwelt among us' ('pitched his tent' - an allusion which surely includes a hint, at least, of the Shekinah). 'We have beheld his glory (the word for the visible presence of God), 'glory as of the only Son from the Father.' (1:14). And notice that this was no impoverished revelation. He was 'full of grace and truth'. Doubtless there is a reference here to the Transfiguration, but it may include more besides, as Jn.14:9f seems to suggest, since Philip was not present at the Transfiguration but yet was privileged to have 'seen' Jesus in a way that revealed God the Father. 'Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied". Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father; how can you say 'Show us the Father'?"' Passages which point to a post-ascension 'seeing of Jesus' include Acts 7:55; 1 Cor.9:1, 15:8; 2 Cor.3:18, 4:6 and Col.l:15. Notice again that it is never of human origin. It is a divine gift.

In the Son we 'see' the Father, Jn1:18, 14:7ff,12:45; Col.1:15; Heb.1:3. This vision transcends an intellectual awareness of his presence.The Holy Spirit not only reveals the Lord Jesus in us (**cf.** Gal:1:16) but he also makes himself visible in his gifts which are 'the manifestation of the Spirit' (I Cor.12:7). Indeed, when he chooses, he can manifest the Triune God. (I Cor.14:25) 'the secrets of his (i.e. the unbeliever's) heart are disclosed; and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you.' The Holy Spirit who, at the baptism of Jesus, 'descended upon him in bodily form, as a dove' (Luke 3:22), descended on the day of Pentecost on the believers with visible 'tongues as of fire' (Acts 2:1-3).

Historically, the objectivity of the manifestation of God has been threatened by the tendency to think of the vision of God in terms of the experience of the recipient with two categories being distinguished - the ecstatic moment and the continuous experience of love for the Lord. Valid as this is, if given too much preponderance, it can lessen the objective control of the inscripturated word and lead to a morass of subjectivism.

Granted that the vision of God is in some real, though very imperfect sense, attainable in this life, and granted that it is much more than a sense of assurance, how then should we live?

We might be tempted to think that the ideal place to experience the vision of God is the hermit's cell, away from all distraction. Although the vision is usually experienced by individuals, it is generally in Scripture, given in a corporate setting. In John 1:14 it is the community, 'we', which 'beheld his glory'. Even the Transfiguration took place in the presence of a community. Note that the 'manifestation of the Spirit' is for the common good (1 Cor.12:7) and the context of chapters 11 to 14 of 1 Corinthians is the church.(*cf.* especially 14:24f). Paul was not alone on the Damascus road although the revelation was to him alone. Note the first person plural in 1 Cor.13:12a, 'For now *we* see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face' - all the more striking since v.11 and v.12b are in the first person singular. Exod.24:9ff witnesses to a corporate experience. The Lord dealt with Moses face to face, and although he was marked out by this fact as unique - a type of Christ, we might say - yet, even so, he was the representative of the whole people of God. It is possible that Isaiah was alone in the temple when he 'saw the Lord', but it is not likely. Even at night, as Psalm 134 informs us, some of the servants of the Lord were to be found in his house.

Psalm 63 is instructive. Verse 1 tells of the flesh that faints for God in a dry and weary land. The RSV tries to improve on the verse by inserting the word 'as' but if the writer is saying that his flesh faints for God **as** in a dry and weary land, then for many of us the verse will have very limited relevance, because our experience is different. What the psalmist is saying is that when we are cut off from civilization with its comforts and distractions, we become aware of our longing and only the Lord is left to satisfy it. Yet it was not in the physical wilderness that he saw God. That was the experience of the sanctuary (v.2) where the Lord meets with his people. If our lives are to be healthy spiritually we need times of withdrawal but these are not an end in themselves, nor should we expect the fulness of God's blessing there. It is in the fellowship of the saints that we should normally expect to 'see God'. Times of withdrawal should prepare us, whetting our appetites for the corporate worship.

The beatitude, 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God' (Matt.5:8), so often understood in an individualistic way, alludes to Psalm 24:3ff: 'Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false, and does not swear deceitfully. He will receive blessings from the Lord, and vindication from the God of his salvation. Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob.' It is the individual as part of the worshipping community who is addressed. Dealing with sin is an individual matter but the issue is corporate. Gregory the Great, Bernard of Clairvaux, John of the Cross, John Calvin and many other outstanding Christians who have taken the vision of God seriously have known the importance of interaction with others.

Not simply the individual, but humankind in sexual differentiation was created by God 'in his image', 'after his likeness' (Gen. 2:6ff, 5:1f), 'entrusted with dominion, made little less than God, crowned with glory and honour' (Ps. 8:5). Yet, although the image of God was not obliterated by sin (Gen. 9:6; Jas. 3:9), 'we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. But we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honour, because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.' Note the corporate dimension. 'For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering', etc. (Heb.2:8ff). The Lord Jesus is, *par excellence*, 'the image of God' and so 'he reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature' (Heb1:3). And note, it is the one who 'is the image of the invisible God' (Col. 1:15) who is 'the head of the body, the church' (Col.1:18). The church is the new humanity which bodies forth Christ Jesus the Lord.

Psalm 24 also alerts us to the relationship between the vision of God and Torah. Compare Psalm 11:7, 'For the Lord is righteous, he loves righteous deeds; the upright shall behold his face,' or Psalm 17:15, 'As for me, I shall behold thy face in right doing (or, when vindicated); when I awake, I shall be satisfied with beholding thy form,' and also 1 John 3:2f '. . . we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.'

We are not called to a narrow legalistic obedience to the Law. One of the striking things about the list in Psalm 24 is its brevity. It is Law as revelation - a gift of grace to be received and lived out by faith. The Spirit and the Word must never be divorced, as I Cor. 2:7-16 and Eph. 5:18-20 taken with Col. 3:16f make clear. On this subject we paddle at

the shore virtually unaware of the vastness of the ocean that lies beyond us.