

# THE GOD BEHIND THE SIGNS

By ADRIAN LYONS

*A Zen exchange (third century): 'I saw a holy monk. He floated across a river.' 'I saw a holier monk. He built a bridge on which all could walk.'*

MIRACULOUS AND WONDERFUL EVENTS evoke strong emotions, especially fear, awe and hope. The perception that a marvel is taking place often evokes emotion, with the imagination projecting sights and sounds that give flesh to hopes or fears in symbolic forms. And who is to say that God is not a collaborator in this process, at least sometimes? But how shall we know? And how shall we recognize the God behind the signs?

The overwhelming evidence of the New Testament concerns a God whose purpose is to befriend humankind, and indeed the whole of creation, and to raise to new life all that now bears the mark of mortality. Jesus' parables, such as that of the talents, suggest that love (shown in action on behalf of those who need it) is to be lavished by each of us on the others—in imitation and appreciation of the God who lavishes blessings on us all. At the same time, evil is to be taken seriously, both as tragedy and as pain we inflict on one another by way of malice or mismanagement. But the Spirit of God is as creative in restoring life as in fashioning new life from chaos. Evil will have its day, but the upthrust of resurrection will defeat it in the end.

## *Signs of God?*

If some such scheme is accepted—implying that the true God always makes for life, not death—we can begin to look with focussed eye for signs of God's activity (often shared with human agents) in the world around. Where interventions of God are alleged, especially breaks in expected patterns of human behaviour, our first question should be whether (from the vantage point of Christian wisdom) the likely effect is a move toward life or toward death. Applying this criterion, simple in concept, can be difficult

in practice—though not always. St Ignatius of Loyola's rules for discernment belonging to the Second Week of *The Spiritual Exercises* will often be found illuminating. But so too will the 'spiritual good sense' one finds in reflective Christian communities.

Of course the Spirit's initiating and renewing activity is to be looked for in every century. But the Catholic tradition shows a solid sanity in refusing to look for major new elements of revelation beyond the Apostolic Age. This tradition is unsympathetic to every claim that something essential to the Judaeo-Christian images of God was missed earlier, and that God (or Mary or a saint) has had to reopen the process of public revelation. Another way of putting the case is to say that despite the reluctance of prophets, the waywardness of the hearers, the fickleness of believers, God's power and artistry have succeeded in providing us with an accurate sense of who the divine One is and what is pleasing by way of response to our God. Signs and wonders may function to emphasize some aspect that has been underplayed in recent times, or specify some aspect of God's love and mercy that is specially needed in our nuclear age, but no, we are not to look for another; the God whom Jesus called *Abbā* is sufficiently well known to the body of Christians through the centuries for us to be able to distinguish the vitality associated with *that* God from any other.

More than this, we know much about the modes in which God has been experienced across the sweep of recorded history. Believers (even those who did not know they were such until some strong experience overtook them) record instances of being called, promised, invited, enraged against injustice, lured and enticed into love, overcome with tears of compassion. True, there are instances when cataclysmic threats and millennarian calls to abandon the world and its evils have both been experienced and were attributed to God. But accounts of this kind are not central to the Judaeo-Christian writings, nor have they become central to Christians' cumulative communal discovery of God. These phenomena are much more characteristic of those sects and movements that flare for a moment of history and burn out. History, even when read as Salvation History, cannot tell us the whole truth, especially in a particular case. Christians have learnt both to value and to be wary of enthusiasm.

#### *Discerning through the emotions*

That said, one promising approach to discerning between signs—those that make for life and those that do not—is to begin with

the *emotions* they elicit. My approach will be to consider in turn the primary emotions: fear, anger, grief, love, and serenity and joy.

Where there is question of *fear* or religious awe, both scripture and the inner experiences of our contemporaries confirm that, though God is not finally to be known as the fear-inspiring One, first contact may indeed be disconcerting. Theophanies recorded in the Jewish scriptures make this plain, as does Luke's recreation of Gabriel's announcement to Mary. But none of these recorded encounters leave the persons concerned in permanent terror or in a condition of immobility. The effect is very different from voodoo, Central African sorcery or the tribal animism still practised in different parts of the world, where people are kept in thrall by fear of deities and indeed fear of their earthly representatives. If one has lingering doubts about apparitions, such as that reported at Fatima, it is largely because the focus of the revelations is on disasters, albeit ones to be avoided through prayer and penance. And when devotees of such signs and wonders seem attracted to prayer without a programme of corresponding action, the suspicion of pietism arises too. The Father of Jesus was not one to keep the three disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration for long, but had them quickly return to the familiar world below.

*Anger*, particularly against injustices, is one of the typical emotions of a prophet, and on the face of an authentic prophet one of the expressions on the face of God. Here one's use of language is metaphorical or analogous, as indeed language about God remains always. But the connection between anger as we experience it in ourselves, in our 'touchstone people' (those we find most credible), and in God, is inescapable for believers. In our time, when denunciations of oppression, torture and economic inequality are frequently heard from religious leaders—though a pattern of practical follow-through is not always attached—the image of a God angry on behalf of the poor is more familiar and accessible than two decades ago.

However, signs and wonders are not often attached to denunciations of injustice. Perhaps this is because the outflow of emotion into action (in the outer world) absorbs imaginative energy that might otherwise project marvels or find a need to perceive them. Alternatively, one might point to the sustained anger of a Nelson Mandela across twenty-seven years, or the articulate rage of a Desmond Tutu, or the persistent courage of a Desmond Hurley,

as signs both moving and conscience-raising. Jesus' own celebrated demarcations of misused authority point us in the direction of recognizing within such African leaders the impetus of God.

When I think of the God to be found in manifestations of *grief*, I remember a young man whose sister died in circumstances suggesting that some family members may have been involved. Further distressed by what he felt to be the hypocrisy of an elaborate family funeral, the young man seemed close to collapse. When invited to take part in preparing a liturgy that friends hoped might give him comfort, and also acknowledge the likely truth, he seemed altogether limp and distant. But come the time for the service to begin, he was transformed. Suddenly it was he who was resolute, thankful for his sister's life and articulate in strengthening and confirming those who had come bringing compassion for him. That night, 'Blessed are those who mourn' acquired a new depth of meaning.

This incident seems a world away from statues seen to weep and similar marvels. While popular piety of another age may have been stimulated by such phenomena, one suspects that evidence of comfort received and appropriated, followed by service to one's sisters and brothers, is more credible in our time—and closer to the accounts of Jesus' own actions. Closer, too, to what we would hope for from God.

Much could be said here about *love*, and indeed about signs that point toward God as Love. First, a historical note. Into an age when Jansenism tinged Catholic spirituality in Europe came the revelations to Margaret Mary Alacocque concerning the Sacred Heart. As often with signs among pious folk, these words and picturings could not have been more timely. From a psychological perspective and with hindsight, the need to enrich mainstream Catholicism again with affectivity is clear. Whether one points to this deeply felt lack as readying St Margaret Mary for preternatural or supernatural revelations, the result of her experiences was to give warmth and fervour back to Catholic devotional life at a time when austerity and a hint of manichean intellectualism seemed likely to bind the faithful rather than set them free. In the event, the fruits of devotion to the Sacred Heart were good, and they continue to be so. One's sense of God's providence is enhanced by knowing of them.

Ours is a time and a culture in which God is sensed more often through intimacy than through distance, more within circles and

networks than in height or hierarchy. In short, this is a time of paradigm shift, when expectations of love have never been higher and signs of love (especially 'redemptive love') have never been more needed. One thinks of the love that offers re-parenting to some whose first experiences were deeply damaging, reintegration into the wider community to those with disabilities, or reconciliation to those alienated from others they once loved. Such happenings, like other experiences of grace, are not to be presumed. Encountering them, one is reminded of Christ's love that not only healed individuals but sought to reintegrate them into their families and communities.

*Serenity and joy* are emotions one easily associates with Julian of Norwich and her 'shewings'—though this is said without any implication that her serenity was simple or easily won. Her buoyancy of spirit is in fact most evident precisely when her compassion for the suffering Christ—suffering both then and now—is most engaged. In Julian's life and writings, as in the lives of special contemporaries of ours, the signs of the Kingdom that begin 'Happy are you . . .' take new flesh and show new life.

### *Signs no longer credible*

For many of our contemporaries, deeply affected by advances in physics and the increasing understanding scientists have won for us, the notion of a God who intervenes to suspend the predictable order of the universe—or what we perceive as such—is repugnant. True, quantum physics and other evidences of indeterminacy heavily qualify our earlier claims to predict order in the macro- and micro-spheres, but in the everyday world of technology, order rather than unpredictability is the main thrust of our experience. A God of interventions now seems to many of us a diminished God rather than an admirable one. God's working the unexpected, even in response to prayer, smacks of keeping us off our guard, or asserting sovereignty in an arbitrary way, or even being manipulative. This is not, our instincts tell us, the same God who encourages us to seek out the truth of the world understood as our natural environment, and to seek the wisdom to manage it well. Not an incarnate God collaborating with us, so much as one who seizes back the flying controls—or occasionally puts us in a spin to show us what novices we are. What is more, the existence of an interfering God, one who interrupts the normal physical or biological laws, would appear to place in question the importance

of our being committed to work for peace and justice. Divine intervention of an interrupting kind seems to qualify or even trivialize our freedom of choice and the importance of our actions.

My own impression of Jesus is deeply coloured by his refusals of Satan's temptations to turn stones into loaves or glide safely to earth from the temple parapet. More moving still is God's determination to accompany Jesus on his way to crucifixion while refusing to interfere even there. Our God, understanding the sign-language of the situations far better than we do, apparently judged that they would dim the image of Love—and lessen our sense of what is involved in being moved to faithfulness, even in face of death, by Love.

*Criteria of interpretation*

One way of considering which of the more recent signs and wonders we should accept as God's (in the light of scripture and Christian tradition) is to look at both the emotion each produces and at the 'fruit' that follows. If the effect is to immobilize rather than liberate and empower the recipient, we should be suspicious. If the persons involved combine prayerfulness with action among the oppressed, or on behalf of the sick or the starving, our initial reaction may well be favourable. This is so precisely because in our time we have come to recognize God more clearly than ever as primarily concerned with 'lost sheep', of whatever kind.

Moreover, whatever else is to be said about Jesus' miracles, with few exceptions each seems clearly designed to re-empower someone who has become immobilized, and to reincorporate that person into the community where he or she belongs. None prompts a retreat into pietism, a withdrawal into millennarian communities or claims to some esoteric knowledge or preternatural power. Jesus' miracles are typically not those of new creation but are signs of restoration, healing and forgiveness. Nothing new is produced, but a radical lack or a damaged condition is recognized and corrected. The implication is that God's inclination, driven by compassion, is to bring people to wholeness—and that in Jesus this desire takes on an urgency that speeds up the ordinary processes.

What is clear from the Gospels, especially Mark's, is that Jesus' disciples had some difficulty not in recognizing that marvellous events were occurring, but in discovering the way to interpret them. Jesus' 'signs' (as St John chooses to call them) were not just marvels but enactments indicating God's power to restore and

liberate. The disciples, in their short-sighted fashion, had trouble looking beyond the events—at least until the Spirit's coming brought them wisdom.

*The art of reading God's signs*

In a splendidly provocative article, José Faur has argued that one of the distinctive attributes of the God of the Hebrews is being one who *writes* and asks his people to read his writing, not simply a God who speaks.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, the Greek gods were gods of action—and were illiterate. They offer no tablets of the Law, nor do they proclaim the created world as God's writing, full of God's meanings. Thus, argues Faur, for the Greeks 'things simply *are*: they don't signify'. For the Jews, by contrast, things and events 'signify and require "reading", that is, decoding and interpretation'. In other words, a Jewish observer of the world approaches creation with the supposition that God is 'a communicative Author', and that history is no jumble of events but contains words like those of a book, constituting a message.

In an illuminating analogy, Faur suggests that God's relationship to the world is akin to that of an author (say Shakespeare), everywhere sensed in his works but nowhere to be seen. He quotes T. S. Eliot to the effect that 'the world of the great poetic dramatist is a world in which the creator is everywhere present, and everywhere hidden'. It is the task of a scholar, or at least a sensitive amateur interpreter, to recognize something of the dramatist's character through the medium of the play. One must indeed learn to read God's signs, Faur suggests. Their language is clear, but must be mastered.

*Current signs*

Particularly at charismatic prayer meetings, where expectation of healings is high, evidence of cures seems well attested. This movement of Christian renewal looks to Jesus, and to the power of the Spirit, to repair body and mind together. And while the processes of faith-healing, especially their way of restoring psychosomatic connections, are not well understood, educated people will not often look now to a God of special interventions to explain them. In any case, healings are interpreted more as signs of the Christian community's being in continuity with Jesus' own ministry, and as indicators of the Spirit's presence, than as marvels to be publicized. One may add that in practice such signs of God's

healing power generally operate, as did Jesus' miracles, to confirm the stance of those open to God's power rather than as marvels to overwhelm the faithless.

Pope John XXIII, best remembered for inviting the Spirit to blow through the newly opened windows of the Roman Catholic Church, opened also the possibility of renewed relationships with other Churches and other religions. An impartial observer would have to agree that these relationships have developed enormously in recent years, though there is evidence of a pause whenever the likelihood of actual union suggests loss as well as gain. But at a local level, participation in other Churches' wedding ceremonies, exchanging of pulpits and encouraging joint participation in Lenten programmes would have been unthinkable in many places thirty years ago. Now such happenings are to be expected—marvels no longer. The growth of understanding and charity among the Christian communions is surely one of the signs that asks for a reading, and evokes a spirit of gratitude. Still, one of the signs the wider world still lacks is the witness of Churches embracing one another as sisters or brothers, and sharing in Communion and ministry together on a regular basis.

Elsewhere, one does see signs that the Spirit has been moving people to break down old walls, in Berlin and other Cold War areas. The prayerful activities of Christians in Leipzig, especially at St Nicholas' church, are widely recognized as vital in sustaining through many years a critique of the previous repressive regime and the hope of a peaceful transition to shared power. The removal of dictators in other parts of the world, and the establishment in our time of democracy where it had never existed, give heart and sustain faith in many who hope in God.

#### *A final thought*

In his Good Friday homily in Adelaide, Vincentian Fr Bob Symons made the point that Jesus' agonized cry on the Cross may be heard as a call to action on behalf of the abandoned and the needy. Left unrescued and unaccompanied by those with the power to assist him, or even to defend his life, Jesus cried out, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'. Since God's people had abandoned Jesus, God's hands were indeed tied, argued Symons. In this context above all, God's call to women and men to serve God in serving one another—and not to seek God in special signs and wonders—is clear and compelling. True, God is



eternally free to communicate with us in a multiplicity of ways. But in our time God seems to wish to be known primarily as One who inspires to action in service of the poor. In time that portrait may be perceived by the Church as needing supplementing. But for now, any image of God too far removed from that one—especially into subjectivity and piety rather than solidarity and action—deserves some scepticism. The signs of our times rather than signs and wonders seem the more promising bearers of God's love to our age.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> José Faur, 'God as writer: omnipresence and the art of dissimulation', in *Religion & intellectual life*, vol vi, no 3/4 (Spring/Summer 1989), pp 31-43.