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2nd February God is hiding

Welcome and Presentation

Prayer:

1) A presence and an experience

Rabbi Baruch.

This is a Jewish story: Rabbi Baruch tries to explain that God feels abandoned, like a stranger who is unknown to mankind. One day his grand-child is playing "hide and seek" with another boy. He is hiding, but the other boy does not bother to search for him and goes away in order to have other games by himself. The grand-child bursts into tears and complains to his grand-father. Rabbi Baruch, with his eyes also full of tears, explains to him: "God says exactly the same thing: I am hiding, but nobody is searching for me!"

The burning Bush: Ex 3:1-6.

1 Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian; and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.

2 And the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush; and he looked, and lo, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed.

3 And Moses said, "I will turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt."

4 When the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here am I."

5 Then he said, "Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."

6 And he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Theophany: Ex 19:16-25.

16 On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled.

17 Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God; and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain.

18 And Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the LORD descended upon it in fire; and the smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain quaked greatly.

19 And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder.

20 And the LORD came down upon Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain; and the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.

21 And the LORD said to Moses, "Go down and warn the people, lest they break through to the LORD to gaze and many of them perish.

22 And also let the priests who come near to the LORD consecrate themselves, lest the LORD break out upon them."

23 And Moses said to the LORD, "The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai; for thou thyself didst charge us, saying, 'Set bounds about the mountain, and consecrate it.'"

24 And the LORD said to him, "Go down, and come up bringing Aaron with you; but do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the LORD, lest he break out against them."

25 So Moses went down to the people and told them.

Glory: Ex 33:18-23.

18 Moses said, "I pray thee, show me thy glory."

19 And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.

20 But," he said, "you cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live."

21 And the LORD said, "Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand upon the rock;

22 and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by;

23 then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."

The Radiance (the Horns): Ex 34:29-35.

29 When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tables of the testimony in his hand as he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God.

30 And when Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him.

31 But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses talked with them.

32 And afterward all the people of Israel came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the LORD had spoken with him in Mount Sinai.

33 And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face;

34 but whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he took the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the people of Israel what he was commanded,

35 the people of Israel saw the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face shone; and Moses would put the veil upon his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

Elijah: 1R 19:8-14.

8 And (Elijah) arose, and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

9 And there he came to a cave, and lodged there; and behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and he said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

10 He said, "I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the people of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thy altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away."

11 And he said, "Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD." And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake;

12 and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice.

13 And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him, and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

14 He said, "I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the people of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thy altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away."

According to the story of Rabbi Baruch, God is hiding and we have to search him. Nobody never saw God; nevertheless we know that he exists. God is real; nevertheless he has no special form which could make him visible to our eyes. God is far beyond any representation we could have of him; nevertheless he is very near to us. There is like a deep contradiction in his nature: the accessibility of his inaccessible nature. Jesus has made us aware of his immediate presence; nevertheless God remains a mystery for us. We cannot grasp who he is.

God is in fact all the time present, although we are not aware of it. He is all the time with us, so near to us as our skin, or even deeper inside us in our heart. There is something very strange in this proximity and in the impossibility to grasp how this presence can be known to us. Sometimes we experience this presence so strongly, and, despise of this clear sign, we sometimes latter doubt of the reality of the experience. God is like a big shadow in our back: we can feel it but we never can see it with our eyes.

The Bible tells us how Moses and Elijah had experiences of meeting God. These stories are fascinating and we sometimes wish it would happen to us. Moses is transformed by these experiences; he must even wear a veil in order to reduce the shininess of his face. For the anecdote, Moses is often represented in paintings or sculptures with horns because the first translations of this description of his face had made a confusion between two meanings of the same Hebrew word which means at the same time *beam of light* and *horn*. He was said to have horns; in fact he had more exactly beams of light radiating from his face. For Elijah, it is also worth looking at the meaning of the Hebrew word which describes his encounter with God: in fact it is not a breeze which announces God's presence but the literal translation of the Hebrew expression means *the voice of a silence which is grind into dust*. It means the presence of God is hardly perceptible. It is less consistent than silence, because this silence is described as not even being consistent. Other stories still describe God's glory: the shepherds, Stephen, etc. But none of these stories ever shows God. God never can be seen fully.

The orthodox tradition speaks about the energies of God, as being parts of him, as expressions of the nature of the Trinity. His nature remains inaccessible to us but his energies make him known to us. I like this distinction which shows God at the same time in his proximity and in his mystery.

The holy Trinity is the force for union. It attracts us to take part in the divinity of God. Nevertheless we cannot participate in God's nature because it remains inaccessible, but God's proximity through love is the powerful force of attraction which calls us to reconnect with our source. God is hiding but our destiny is to search him. Because he is hiding, we can search him.

Time of personal recollection:

Sharing

2) To see and re-cognise

You know me: Ps 139

- 1 *O LORD, thou hast searched me and known me!*
- 2 *Thou knowest when I sit down and when I rise up; thou discernest my thoughts from afar.*
- 3 *Thou searchest out my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways.*
- 4 *Even before a word is on my tongue, lo, O LORD, thou knowest it altogether.*
- 5 *Thou dost beset me behind and before, and layest thy hand upon me.*
- 6 *Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain it.*
- 7 *Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?*
- 8 *If I ascend to heaven, thou art there! If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there!*
- 9 *If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,*
- 10 *even there thy hand shall lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.*
- 11 *If I say, "Let only darkness cover me, and the light about me be night,"*
- 12 *even the darkness is not dark to thee, the night is bright as the day; for darkness is as light with thee.*
- 13 *For thou didst form my inward parts, thou didst knit me together in my mother's womb.*
- 14 *I praise thee, for thou art fearful and wonderful. Wonderful are thy works! Thou knowest me right well;*
- 15 *my frame was not hidden from thee, when I was being made in secret, intricately wrought in the depths of the earth.*
- 16 *Thy eyes beheld my unformed substance; in thy book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.*
- 17 *How precious to me are thy thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!*
- 18 *If I would count them, they are more than the sand. When I awake, I am still with thee.*
- 19 *O that thou wouldst slay the wicked, O God, and that men of blood would depart from me,*
- 20 *men who maliciously defy thee, who lift themselves up against thee for evil!*
- 21 *Do I not hate them that hate thee, O LORD? And do I not loathe them that rise up against thee?*
- 22 *I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies.*
- 23 *Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts!*
- 24 *And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!*

Hear but do not understand... Is 6:9-10

- 9 *And he said, "Go, and say to this people: 'Hear and hear, but do not understand; see and see, but do not perceive.'*
- 10 *Make the heart of this people fat, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed."*

God is hiding; it is part of his nature.

In fact we have to learn how to see what is not visible, how to recognise what we do not know. We have to see beyond the appearances, but nevertheless these appearances help us to see this other reality, as the movement of the leaves in the wind help us to notice the wind which is not visible. All these signs are just very temporary manifestations of God. They never last. They are not God, they are not even his energies. They are only very episodic signs. And we have to learn to understand with our heart which is the nature of the one who provokes these signs, but we must not get stuck with signs. They have no special significance. It is dangerous to turn them into images of God, into idols. Therefore we have to learn to see, but it is a special way to see: we have to stay free of the signs and register only the content of the message. Even the memory is falsified, only the present can be the real experience.

We have also to learn how to recognise. But it is not about recognition of what we see all the time, as when we recognise our friends or our house. We have to recognise what is the most intimate part of our being. It is a dimension we know well because we lived with it since we were born, but it is at the same time completely unknown to us because it is this deepest mystery of our origin. Recognition is in fact a second new cognition. It is a new endeavour of something completely breathtaking, which has to change deeply our life and our way to look at the world, as it did for Moses.

As long we do not change deeply, it means we are not in touch with this deeper reality in us. This knowledge is not an intellectual knowledge; it is not a memory; it is a knowledge of the heart; it is a deep link, a personal relationship with God. It is why it is an experience: this knowledge is a change in us in relationship with our creator. Nothing can describe it. It happens. And it happens in the present. It is true only in the present.

This new knowledge is not memory but it is faith. Because it is in the present, it cannot be stored, and it remains therefore always a part of doubt whether it was real. Faith is this change in ourselves.

Why is God hiding? Why could he not reveal himself to us as he is? and make us believe for ever? Maybe for one of the following reasons:

- 1) First God has no shape. He can appear to anybody under any shape, as he does in our neighbour or in silence. But the shape is more hiding the content than expressing it fully; it is only a sign. If we identify the sign with God, it becomes a reductionist idol. And this false representation leads us on a wrong track. Instead of being a help, it would be a trap.
- 2) Secondly, God is pure love. He has therefore to hide, because real love cannot impose itself. Love is fragile and must leave the one to whom it is proposed free of accepting or refusing it. In the discretion of God's love we recognise its truth and its authenticity. With humour, we could say: the more God is discrete, the more he seems to be himself.
- 3) Thirdly, God's way of hiding provokes our desire to search God. If God were sitting beside us as my friend does, we would get accustomed to him and we would forget him. While he is hiding, we also forget him but our distraction makes him more desirable. His mystery is without end; we can search him for ever; it is the program of our whole life. By searching him with our whole being, we commit ourselves on a path which is the only possible one which gives life. And it is endless, because we will only discover a very tiny part of him.

Time of personal recollection:

Sharing

3) Nobody has ever seen the Father

Nobody has ever seen God: Jn 1:17-18.

17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

18 No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.

Show us the Father: 14:5-11.

5 Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?"

6 Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me.

7 If you had known me, you would have known my Father also; henceforth you know him and have seen him."

8 Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied."

9 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'?"

10 Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority; but the Father who dwells in me does his works.

11 Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me; or else believe me for the sake of the works themselves.

In fact we sit between two realities:

- one is just hot air but it is the one we know, the materiality of our everyday life: this is the one where we use our energy to control our destiny, to accumulate goods, to impress in order to be loved. Where we fight for our own comfort.
- the other one is the only true reality but it is hidden: it is the contrary of the world we know: love, generosity, powerlessness, humility, detachment are the rules which allow to grow. It is the one we have access to, if we accept to forget ourselves, to detach from our comfort, to loose our life.

We can only access the true reality if we become really free of the first, which is visible, (the one of appearances), in order to access the second one, which is in fact the only reality although it is invisible.

Christ has come to make the invisible visible. Nobody ever saw God, but who knows Christ knows the Father. Christ the Word, Jesus God the Son is the expression of God in our world. Jesus shows us the Father, in order we can search him.

Our difficulty is certainly to recognise Christ in our daily life. John the Baptist could recognise him, although he did not know him before. How could John recognise Christ in this simple fellow who walked with simple people and who had nothing of an earthly king, as he was awaited? This is grace, through a very discrete action of God in us. Our challenge is to recognise God in his humility, in his simplicity, in his silence, although we dream of a powerful God who could intervene powerfully in our lives and solve our problems, and solve the problems of the world. God is often said to be absent or non existing because the world is full of suffering. But it is wrong to say this, because it is ignoring that God is love and respect of our free will to search him. It is a way of manipulating God into a big problem solver. No, his presence expresses itself very often in an

unexpected way. Very often we feel before all his silence and his absence until we notice in fact the great tenderness and discretion of his way to interact with us.

We experience a permanent mixture of proximity and of silent hiding of God. The story of the Transfiguration is certainly one of the most striking combinations of this proximity and of this hidden divine dimension of God. It is a sign of encouragement on our path.

The Eucharist is certainly the most central experience in our relationship with God. It is really the most tangible aspect of his presence among us and in ourselves. Here again it is nothing striking in its appearances; it is very simple and discrete: bread and wine, like our food of everyday, become the signs and even the experience of his love and constant presence. The Eucharist is a transformation of our gifts; we bring the bread and the wine, and God makes them supports of his presence. In the same way we are offering our life to God, it means each moment of it, each gesture, each action, each time of silence and contemplation, and God transforms these gifts to make them signs of his presence: we offer the container and he fills it with his grace.

In this way, we have just to concentrate on our offering and on our awareness of his way of transforming us. This seems to be the core of our life. Our offering is our consecration, it means it is what makes us sacred. Sacredness is the central theme, because it is based on love, on giving. Acting and effectiveness are no more important, only the spirit which animates our offering becomes the central force of our life.

This offering is the core of our being: I am. This will be the theme of our next afternoon of prayer and sharing, about contemplation.

Time of personal recollection:

Sharing