

MEETING POINT

It is interesting how a simple event can trigger the mind. One such incident happened when Enid and I traveled back to the United Kingdom and landed at Heathrow Airport. I am always surprised when we arrive at Heathrow to see how many other people are traveling. Once you are off the plane and get to the immigration Hall the number of people who suddenly appear seemingly from nowhere is overwhelming. You shuffle through the lines and after claiming your baggage you are out through customs and into the main hallway. There the crowds are overwhelming, and seemingly chaotic. It always happens that the baggage cart you have been able to capture has wobbly wheels, and the attempt to navigate through the pressing crowd is almost impossible. How could anyone meet anyone within this turbulent seething throng?

There above the natural noise of so many people you also have those wall-to-wall announcements. Don't leave your baggage unattended!! No smoking allowed in the Terminal, and on and on they drone. But interspersed with these set announcements was one which was a clue to my puzzlement about how anyone could meet up with anyone in this mob-like confusion. The announcer's voice was bored, but clear: "Paging George Williamson, a passenger arriving from New York on American 101, please meet your daughter at the meeting point." At the *meeting point*. That cleared that up – except how would you know where the meeting point could be in this confused mess?

There are some films that make a deal about missed meetings at notable places in New York – Cary Grant and Deborah Kerr in "An Affair to Remember" – failing to meet on top of the Empire State Building. But at least they knew where they were supposed to meet!! But how impersonal is the "Meeting Point" at cavernous Terminal 4 at Heathrow.

Enid and I had an hour to wait for our bus that would take us to South Wales, and so we went to look for a place where we could have a cup of coffee to while away the time. This turned out to be an experience in itself because the coffee shop was stuck at the extreme end of the Arrivals Hall, and we had to navigate our wobbly baggage cart through the crowded Hall. As we approached the Starbuck's my puzzlement about arranged meetings was answered. There hanging from the ceiling was a simple sign – and what it said was "Meeting Point". Not quite under the clock at Grand Central or the top of the Empire State building – but adequate if you knew where to find it.

But it was this idea of a *meeting point* that began to fascinate me, and I began to think of the point of meeting in Biblical terms. Our Bible is about the human encounter with God. Where are the 'meeting points' between men and women and God described in the scriptures? What happened at those encounters surely has meaning for us today – and also, I thought, are those encounters our 'meeting points' with God today.

What of the story in Genesis of that first meeting between Adam, Eve and God in the Garden of Eden? It was in that fateful meeting that we are told that Adam and Eve understood who they were. You know the story well. God has created a world, which he has called 'good'. In midst of this world in a place of beauty and harmony he has placed this human pair who is the pinnacle of his work. This world is theirs, but they have been given two commands. They must look after this world, and they must not eat of the Tree of Knowledge.

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They enjoy their world of lush beauty, but are beguiled by the command not to eat of the tree of Knowledge. If the world is theirs why should they not eat of this tree? Why has God forbidden this one thing? The command seems to put a limit on their power, and surely they as the gods of this new world should have no limit on their ownership. In the midst of the paradise there is the glimmer of that awful beast – envy.

Envy of God and his power, this is the disease that taints the purity of the garden. They could not accept this one limitation upon their lives – they could not be God. That is the heart of the story – they were limited beings, created beings, with the limitations of their creature hood. Though created, they wanted to be the creator.

The moment they ate the fruit, they knew what it was they had done, though at first they recognized the nature of what they had done only dimly. Their first attempt to cover themselves with some kind of covering intimated that they had something to hide from this new world. They were not whole beings any longer.

Then, they heard God walking in the Garden, and this was the meeting point at which they encountered themselves for the first time. In his presence they understood that they had tried to insinuate themselves into a realm of being that was beyond them, and they understood the gulf that must exist between the creator and the creature. At that point of meeting they understood their limits: “The Lord God called to the man, and said to him, ‘Where are you?’ He said, ‘I heard the sound of you in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked and I hid myself.’”

This is such a simple tale of meeting – a meeting between God and man – but how deeply profound it is, and how it sets out from the very beginning of the human story what was to be the story of our human history, and indeed the story of our own personal lives. We are so desirous of being god that we forget that we are not God. And what happens when we lift our pretensions to the heavens is that we take on intimations of power and control over others that we spread destruction around us. We long to be the center of the whole of creation setting ourselves up to be the very heart of our own world. We want to make others bend to our will and wishes. So much of the human story is captured in this simple tale of the first man and woman.

Human history is the story of conflict, greed and the exploitation of others embracing the human need to take over control. It is the history of human pretension. There is at the end of this story of the banishment of Adam and Eve from the garden this poignant verse: “I heard the sound of you in the garden and I was afraid.” Our meeting with God comes when we see and understand who we are – creatures with limitations, that we are not God, and that we are not the makers of this world, nor do we control it. Our encounter with god – our meeting point with God – comes when we understand this about ourselves. Adam says, “I am afraid!” The word ‘fear’ has two meanings: it is the fear we have of the unknown and the disastrous, but also it is the awe we experience before that which is beyond us. This awe is what we often experience before the wonders of nature, the awe that we experience when we look at the expanse of the universe now being opened up to us by the Hubble telescope. Awe expresses our emotion of encounter of that which is beyond us, which gives us the awareness of our own limited being and puts paid to our pretensions of being God. In awe we stand under the “meeting point” at which we encounter God.

There are in the stories of Jesus so many meeting points at which we can enter into our meeting with God, but I would like to look at one point of meeting that comes with such utter

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simplicity, yet which sums up so much of the possibility of meeting. This is the story of the young centurion who had been placed on duty at the foot of the Cross on that fateful day of Crucifixion. Christ had been jeered at, he had been condemned as a common criminal, and the soldiers had mocked him as he was being placed upon the cross. He had been betrayed into captivity by one of his own, and even the closest of them all – Peter – had betrayed him. In this loneliness, in this agony of despair, and with the cry from the Psalms: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me.” Matthew records in one simple verse a meeting point of utter wonder: “Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, ‘Truly this man was God’s son.’”

There is that word again – they were terrified. We are reminded of Adam’s terror at meeting God in the garden. We are reminded of the terror, the fear of the unknown, of that which is beyond our comprehension, the awe before the force of creation, and the power that lies beyond our own limits.

The Cross is our ultimate ‘meeting point’ with God. For, as the centurion saw and seemed to understand, the power of the Cross rests in the power of disclosure, the disclosure of God’s love and concern for human life, and the willingness of God to show in very human terms the nature of that love. So much of Jesus teaching was about the nature of our human condition and our need to understand who we are. We grow under his tutelage because he enables us to understand ourselves as we understand who he is. The awe and terror felt by the centurion was as much an awareness of his own being as it was of Jesus’ being the Son of God. One comes to realize the nature of who we are only before the power that lies beyond us. So often this understanding comes upon us quite unaware. The last thing that the centurion on duty watch that day expected was to come face to face with a deeper reality than he had ever fully understood. It was, for him, one more day, one more duty, and one more moment in the daily grind before he would go back to his companions and drink or play the hours away until the next tour of duty. But in that moment beneath the cross he began to understand himself and the nature of his own life much more clearly than ever before. It was for him an epiphany, a moment of earth shattering importance symbolized by the earthquake and the darkness. Life would never be the same again. In the man physically hounded and in pain, dying upon the cross, the centurion encountered something far beyond himself, yet in that encounter he met himself for the first time. In the ‘dazzling’ darkness around him the centurion saw the depth of human misery, and also the depth of divine love. He encountered God’s antidote to the human pretension to be god in God’s own sacrifice.

The poor centurion could not, I am sure, have made any philosophical observations upon his experience, but in those words “Surely, this is the Son of God” he brought into words a sense that he had met the One who was beyond all human experience.

O world invisible, we view thee,
O world intangible, we touch thee,
O world unknowable, we know thee,
Inapprehensible, we clutch thee. (Francis Thompson)

The meeting point lies in the inner moment of understanding the distance and yet the nearness of God in the experience of a Love that is beyond all human understanding. A moment when the fear of Adam in his fall turns into the awe of what God has done in the sacrificial gift of the Cross:

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Oh loving wisdom of our God!
When all was sin and shame,
A second Adam to the fight
And to the rescue came

Oh generous love! That he who smote
In man for man the foe,
The double agony in man
For man should undergo;

(Henry Newman)

The “meeting points” in the Garden of Eden and on the Mount of Olives represent our meeting points with God. Like the couple in the Garden of Eden we encounter Him in our own selfishness, our own desire to be gods, our own grasping at the center of the world. But on the Mount of Olives we encounter God himself giving himself in love for you and for me. The words of Augustine have power today as throughout the ages: “You made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it finds rest in Thee.” Our meeting point is in that restless heart – the awareness that there is a need that goes beyond us. The couple in the Garden of Eden thought that they could fulfill themselves by their own efforts – grasping for that which was beyond them. As we stand in that point of meeting are we prepared to accept God’s outstretched hand and recognize in that sacrifice our dependence upon Him? At our point of meeting are we Adam and Eve, or are we the Centurion? Do we turn away in fear, or do we accept that what God has done is to enter into our lives with that dramatic evidence of love?

Genesis 3:1-10

Matthew 27:45-54

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