JACOB'S WELL

THE UNKNOWN

One day the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) was walking along a street in Dresden, deeply pondering the question of identity. Passing by a garden, he decided to sit and look at the flowers. The owner was suspicious and called the police. A policeman arrived and asked him, "Who are you?" Schopenhauer paused and said, "If you can help me find the answer to that question, I will be eternally grateful to you."

Your name is not you: when you were born you had no name. Your address is not you, because when you move away you are still you. Neither is your phone number you, or your email address, or your Facebook address. When we ask ourselves, "Who am I?" we usually recite our past; but that is the answer to a different question, "Who *was* I?" But who am I now? The ancient 'Know thyself' is an impossible instruction. But that is exactly why it is given: it is to bring you to the unknown.

"I saw most surely that it is quicker and easier for us to know God than it is to know our own soul." So wrote the 14th-century anchoress Julian of Norwich, the greatest of the English mystics. Meister Eckhart, in the same century, said, "There is nothing so unknown to the soul as herself."

It is not surprising that the mystics should surprise us. They are the people who have penetrated furthest into mystery, and it would be very disappointing if they came back with just a few hackneyed phrases that we know already. They all have this in common: that they have an overpowering sense of the mysterious presence of God. But this sense of mystery then flows back over everything – because they sense God's presence in everything, and especially in human beings. "I am lost in wonder when I consider [the human mind]," St Augustine wrote. "People go out and gaze in astonishment at high mountains, the huge waves of the sea, the broad reaches of rivers, the ocean that encircles the world, or the stars in their courses. But they pay no attention to themselves."

But how could Julian of Norwich say that it is easier to know God than to know oneself? This is what she added: "Our soul is so deeply grounded in God and so endlessly treasured that we cannot come to knowledge of it until we first have knowledge of God, who is the Creator to whom it is united." She was not suggesting that it was easy to understand God; she was saying that it is impossible to understand oneself by oneself. To get some inkling of who we are we have to live a life that (as St Paul put it) "looks towards God."

"Computers are no good," said Picasso, "they only give you answers." Questions are more interesting and challenging: they are like open doors; answers are often more like closed doors. We live, to a surprising degree, in a world of closed doors; we live in a world of information technology where "I don't know" is an admission of failure. We get the impression that with a bit of effort we could close all the doors - because more information is available to us than ever before. But behind all the closed doors is a great wide open door. It is the unknown, the mysterious; we say 'God', but we shouldn't think that God is a closed door. "God dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see" (1 Tim 6:16). It is very counter-cultural to say "I don't know." It is like being a child surrounded by tall people who know everything. But we have to be willing to become like children, Jesus said. In face of the great questions, "I don't know" can be a very enlightened statement.

Gott mit uns – ‘God with us’ – is effectively the motto of many armies and empires, not only Hitler’s Third Reich. We are inclined to make God like ourselves. This is where the real value of “I don’t know” appears: it shows respect for God; it is a refusal to project our own brutality onto God, pulling God down to our own level.

If we can let God be God, the chances are that we will also have the grace to let other people be as God wants them to be, refusing to remake them in our own image. Welcome, then, open doors! “O gates, life high your heads! Grow higher, ancient doors!” (Psalm 23).

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