

How to describe the ineffable? In our Wednesday masses in the monastery grounds, we work out the meaning of the readings between us, which led yesterday to the question, ‘Just how does Revelation work? How do we hear God’s word or discern his word for us?’ And it occurred to me afterwards – it’s usually afterwards – that what we were doing was finding God’s will for us, or discovering God’s word, that is, opening ourselves up to God’s revelation in the very act of arguing about it. This thought was prompted by one person’s comment that in yesterday’s short sayings ‘Foxes have holes..’ etc what was missing was any debate as to their meaning and I thought of the noisy world of the Jewish Yeshiva, where debate is everything, and of the comment from a Jewish friend that, when two Rabbis meet, you can be sure they will have three opinions. So these sayings of Jesus may appear harsh to us: ‘Leave the dead to bury the dead’ etc. but within a Jewish context they may be no more than an invitation to explore their meaning further, perhaps to re-cast them in that greater imperative, to love. What, in this context, would be the most loving thing to do? And so on. Now, I would like to suggest that when we hear of angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man we are in the realm of just such a debate where words are deliberately used ambiguously or cryptically to spark other associations: Jacob’s dream and later his wrestling with, perhaps, an angel; Jesus’ statement at his trial before the Sanhedrin that the High Priest ‘will see the Son of Man, seated at the right hand of the Power and among the clouds of heaven’: and most obviously, then, of the vision in the Book of Daniel also read today. This use of symbolic language is a way of allowing the ineffable to have a voice, to speak about the *‘unseen spiritual realities that permeate the physical world’* in the words of the New Collegeville Biblical Commentary. And more:

*This history is shot through with divine purpose and activity, but the divine forces work in and through their earthly counterparts, not over and above them. In other words, the struggle of the Jewish people to remain faithful to their God and their law is God’s own work represented by the activity of such heavenly beings as ‘One like a Son of Man’.*

What Jesus recognises in Nathanael is this very same activity at work proven, not by his obedient passivity, but by his willingness to engage in debate. ‘Can anything good come from Nazareth?’ And can one press this further with the idea that Nathanael can speak this precisely because he is secure in his faith and also protected by angels ascending and descending on him – a man without guile, a man who knows he is loved.

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