

Someone remarked to me the other day how for the first ten minutes of a Shakespearean drama it's as if one were listening to a foreign language for the first time – it's all Greek to me, one might say – and then suddenly a switch seems to take place in the brain and one begins to understand. It's not dissimilar perhaps to distinguishing birdsong. At first it's all one babble, too many different voices at once- a cacophony as opposed to a chorus- but with perseverance and concentration the individual voices gradually become distinct, and with further practice one suddenly realises that the song of the Garden Warbler is indeed different from that of the Blackcap. It helps to hear both together but it feels a real triumph when at last a pale rounded head appears without a black cap to prove ones instinct right, often after many years of trying. Of course next year may be different and one has to re- remember the songs all over again, and even now a little tiredness or lack of concentration and the sounds begin to merge again: was that a snatch of Nightingale or a Song Thrush, was that a Blackbird or a Song Thrush again or a Mistle Thrush and so on?

And tuning in spiritually is perhaps much the same and an oft-repeated process. In the gospel Thomas and Philip are still struggling to understand who Jesus really is and who they really are in relation to him. The writer of the gospel uses this natural confusion to initiate us too into a learning process. The disciples are still waiting for something else to click in order to understand, as are we. Later they will describe this switch in understanding, this sudden enlightenment, in terms of a spiritual conversion, the coming of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit that is of Christ so that they will see and hear and understand as Christ does. The language of John's gospel is difficult until we too are enlightened by this Spirit for, as said on the feast of St Philip and St James , it's an introduction into understanding God as mystery , it's a mystical take which ultimately dissolves all distinctions, a realm in which paradox reigns in which either/or is replaced by both/and, a world in which in its most radical expression we become God. When Jesus tells Thomas and Philip that they will perform not only the same works as himself, but even greater works, he is merging the human and the divine in such a way that they become indistinguishable. Even mystics of other faiths tend towards this experience and can be helpful to us to understand our own. These are the words of the Sufi mystic Ibn Arabi contemplating the meaning of Adam as made in God's image to the point where

*'When we witness him (that is, God) we witness ourselves
When we witness ourselves, we witness him'*

We can call this ' transparency': the revealing of Christ in one another when that initial period of confusion is replaced by a completely unselfconscious enjoyment of being oneself – not a self that ever needs to name God but is God to oneself and to others. So you see here the puzzle of being both entirely merged with God and yet absolutely distinct as a person – not an automaton, not just the same as everyone else in Christ or in God, but different. Already words begin to fail and become stumbling blocks but the proof of the pudding will be in the direction of travel, to mix metaphors once again. This is where language becomes a barrier but actions do not. This is when the Hebrew speaking Jewish Christians become aware of an injustice towards their Jewish Greek- speaking companions and do something about it. They too in a sense suffered an initial period of confusion , they just didn't see that there was a problem before their Greek-speaking companions were used by the Spirit to enlighten them further. It's a process otherwise known as love and not completed until Christ, until God , is all in all. This is the way as Jesus says, follow it and where I am you will be too.

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