

We want exactitude but what we get is ambiguity. John revels in it and perhaps Paul, too – if he's allowed to. For in both writers there is often a play on words or on images, which could go in more than one direction. In Paul's remarkable hymn, in his letter to the Philippians, there is an issue as to whether Paul envisages Christ as fully divine or merely made in the image of God, as was Adam; but whichever it is, the dynamic of descent, of humility, and of ascent, of glorification, is the same.

Similarly, with the ambiguity regarding the up and down language of John's gospel and the puzzling connection with the lifting up of the serpent by Moses in the desert where it becomes a symbol of healing rather than of death. The serpent hasn't changed its spots, as it were, any more than the Cross has become less of an instrument of torture, but the dynamic of descent and ascent is what matters. In both instances, it's important not to reify one or the other images of ascent and descent, but to always allow them to qualify or condition one another.

This what I think I mean: when the Free Church theologian, the Reverend Professor Donald Macleod, defended the Isle of Harris in the Hebrides from the threat of a super-quarry, some years ago now, he focussed on the sacredness of the earth: on its ability, that is, to reveal God, and on our role as guardians of its revelatory nature. To 'till the earth' means to be at its service rather than to do with it as we will. This, and other arguments, were all impeccably Calvinist but the company he kept was not, including a North American indigenous chief in full regalia, and his Calvinist brethren were not impressed. And, as Alistair Maclean goes on to say:

Such uptight religious rectitude reminded me of the young rabbi who said to an elder, 'How come that in days gone by people saw God, but they don't any more?'

And the elder replied, 'Because these days nobody's prepared to stoop that low'.
(quoted p.235 *Soil and Sun*)

Now, in case we think that this is a problem confined to certain Calvinists, it's a problem Catholics have too. Again, some years ago, in a very lively and lovely Catholic parish a woman was left at the altar rails unattended to. The priest hadn't see her at the tail end of the communicants and he returned to the tabernacle with the remaining hosts. She was in tears but no one, including me, dared to interrupt the placing of the hosts in the tabernacle. We were all caught up in the rectitude of holiness and the priest returned to his place oblivious to what had just gone on. The point is that it's entirely in the human, in the earthly, that God is most present, whether that be in the form of a serpent or of a cross or of a human being left at the altar rail. This is incarnation for those with eyes to see: the meaning of the word 'and' in 'Christ as fully God *and* fully human'.

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