

# The Fourteenth Sunday – 23 June 2024

## Message – being open to mysticism

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Creator, Redeemer, and Giver of Life, revealed to us through brokenness, and the seemingly insignificant, open our hearts and minds, to your love and grace. **Amen.**

Today's reading from St Paul's epistle might be described as torturous and involved. It is even worse in the Greek original. Our translators have tried to make it a little more readable, while preserving the sense of the original.

We don't often think of Paul as a mystic. It seems his mystical experiences were not frequent. He had to go back fourteen years for a significant experience. This is almost certainly not his Damascus Road experience, which the Corinthians were all well aware of. Paul did not see that experience as mystical: it was a real meeting with Christ.

The term mysticism dates only from the seventeenth century and it is diversly defined. A suggested working definition is *'The mystical element in Christianity that is part of its belief and practice that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God.'* (DNTB, *Mysticism*)

For most of us, like Paul, this is not our daily experience. We do not experience the immediate presence of God on a daily basis. We do, hopefully see echoes of the creator God on a regular basis in creation. We are also called to see the image of God in one another, that is both the people who are easy to love and those we struggle to love.

However, the immediate or direct presence of God is a far rarer experience. Though Paul talks of union with Christ, this is not an immediate experience but a matter of faith.

Whatever definition of mystical experiences we use, they were not uncommon in Hellenistic society. Today they are probably more common than we think but most who experience them don't want others to think they need psychiatric help. Like prophets, mystics have often had a mixed reception.

For those wondering, though both draw us closer to God, there is a distinction made between meditation and mysticism. Up to the sixteenth century there was a strong focus on growing closer to God through meditative prayer. This reached its pinnacle in John of the Cross and Teresa Avila, who are perceived to have respectively promoted the via negative and the via positive, either an emptying or a filling of the self. In reality they both supported both as necessary to what was at the time called mystical theology, based on the belief that some things cannot be known through the intellect alone and must be experienced. Christianity has a long history of meditative prayer. It is a great loss that we have forgotten so much of it.

The experience that Paul describes is more immediate than simple meditation. We do not know how many heavens Paul believed there were but three was a common view of the time though there are also references to five, seven, and ten. It is likely that Paul is seeing three as some form of perfection. Both the second book of Enoch (8) and the Apocalypse of Moses (37.5) call the third heaven Paradise, which is what Paul goes on to call it.

Paul's '*whether in the body or out of the body*' addresses the Gnostic debate in Corinth. The Gnostics believed that in spiritual experiences the soul was necessarily out of the body because the soul was good and the body was evil. Paul does not accept this dichotomy. It is not his understanding of our created nature. Though he uses the language of body and spirit, this is about our natures, both are contained within the one whole, embodied, person.

The idea of learning truths in mystical experiences that could not be shared was common at the time. It is highly likely that those who presented themselves to the Corinthians as having more authority than Paul claimed such experiences.

Paul, until this point, has not felt that it is helpful to share his experience with other believers. This contrasts with the mystics with whom we are familiar, such as Julian of Norwich or the author of the cloud of unknowing, who tried to describe their experiences for the benefit of the church. Their experiences have often revealed truths that we can sense to be true and yet are counterintuitive; truths that are consistent with our understanding of the way of Christ and which deepen our faith and understanding.

Paul evaluates the sharing of his spiritual experiences on the basis of whether they will benefit the church. He does not speak in tongues in corporate worship, he had not shared this mystical experience, until now, both of which built him up, because they would not benefit the church. It is a question we should always ask when hearing of mystical experiences. Does this build the church and draw people to faith? Unless the answer is yes, it should largely remain a

private experience other than, perhaps, reflecting on it with someone we trust as we fully explore its meaning.

Those who have mystical experiences often experience suffering as a part of those experiences. Perhaps, this side of death, knowing more than is humanly possible, carries with it a burden, often mental, sometimes physical, and in contrast to the often received spiritual peace.

It is interesting that Paul too carries a burden. In our translation, his is not necessarily related directly to his mystical experiences though one thought follows the other. However, the Greek is unclear. And, it is possible to read it that Paul sees his thorn in the flesh as God's way of keeping him humble in light of his great revelations. Undeniably, both experiences deeply affected his faith.

As a hospital chaplain, I met many patients for whom there was a spiritual dimension to the experience of illness, for some this was mystical. Illness, enforced reliance on others, being forced to face our human frailty, can sew the seed for spiritual, or even mystical, experience, if we are open to it.

Paul outlines the true measure of our faithfulness to Christ. It is not found in mystical experiences. Such experiences are a gift for some but not every follower of the way of Christ.

The true measure of our faithfulness to Christ is found in our acceptance of our weakness, not generally a popular idea. We don't like to think of ourselves as weak or powerless. Illness is one of the times that can force us to acknowledge a reality that we would rather not face.

Paul's '*thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me*' is long debated. Some see it as purely spiritual, others as

physical. There is no way of deciding from the text. We know from scripture and life experience that both the good and the bad suffer physical illness. However, Paul's frequent use of flesh to refer to our human nature gives us no way of being certain whether he is referring to spiritual or physical suffering. Both may be a part of our faith journey.

Given the purpose of the thorn, it is clear that in some sense it is from God, yet it is the evil one's messenger who torments him. Here we are reminded of the story of Job. The evil one is allowed to harass Job but only within limits.

Whatever it is that leads us to recognise our weakness, it can be a blessing. In our weakness, God can work through us, and God will give us peace. Our weakness opens us up to seeing where God is at work. In that open state remarkable things can happen. We are no longer tied to our own agenda but can see God's vision, or at least not get in the way of God's agenda.

In Paul's prayer for the thorn to be taken away might be seen an echo of Christ's prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, however, it is more likely that, as with the third heaven, the three times is to be understood in the sense of perfection and completeness. Paul asked and has received God's complete answer, '*my grace is sufficient for you*'. Not the way of the world but the way of Christ.

I end with words from the cloud of unknowing:

*It is good to think of your kindness, O God,  
and to love and praise you for that.  
Yet it is far better to think upon your simple being,  
and to love you and praise you for yourself.*