

# The Twenty-Second Sunday of Ordinary Time – YrA – 3 September 2023

**Message:** *Value the Mystical*

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Creator, Redemer, and Giver of Life, known to us, through creation, community, and mystical communion, may we know the Eternal Word and Way. **Amen.**

It is tempting to seek an explanation for Moses' burning bush experience. Perhaps it was one of a particular kind of bush that has been identified as producing oils that easily burn in the heat of the sun that caught Moses' attention. We don't know. We cannot delve into the facts in this way. We cannot know whether God's voice was a physical phenomenon or a mystical experience, revealing God's way to Moses. Whatever it was, Moses didn't feel he was the one God should have chosen. Yet, Moses was also utterly convinced of the rightness of this calling. Something significant happened that transformed Moses' view of the world and his place in it.

The language used, "I AM WHO I AM" is profoundly mystical. It is both challenging and instantly recognisable as a deep truth. How can God who is infinitely and immeasurably beyond our comprehension have a name that has meaning to us. "I AM" is the limit of our understanding. It is all we need to understand; the psalmist understood, "Be still and know that I AM God" (Ps 46.10) Is there anything more we need if we can truly receive this revelation with all our being.

Most of us are somewhat reluctant to talk about our mystical experiences. They tend to be experiences that touch us deeply and so are profoundly precious. It is hard to trust

others with such treasures. They may not understand. They may dismiss them or not comprehend their significance to us. Yet, surveys suggest that many, many, people have spiritual or mystical experiences that they cannot explain.

As a minister, it is sometimes my privilege to hear about those experiences. Sometimes to be the only person who has ever heard about those experiences, which makes me a little sad. Every community of Christians should be able to share such experiences. They are often somewhat beyond words but our reading from Paul's letter to the Romans forcefully conveys, we should be a community where we can trust one another and who treasure one another's experiences. It would be amazing if we truly 'out did one another in showing honour', this would become a transformative community for those who encountered it.

Mystical experiences are incredibly varied and can be life transforming. They may be specific to a time or they may set an agenda for a season or even life. The early American psychologist William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* argued that mystical experiences are: Ineffable, that is indescribable, and must be experienced to be understood; Noetic, giving knowledge of divine truths; Transient; and Beyond our control, you cannot make them happen.

While widely being regarded as the founder of psychology in the US, William James was among those teaching theology students. What a refreshing lack of division between the search for scientific and spiritual understanding. One wonders how and why we created division in what is clearly a whole. Our physical and spiritual lives are not distinct and separate, we are an integrated whole, our divisions are artificial.

In the past the spiritual guides were people's psychologists and therapists. Because their understanding of the universe was not scientific, it is easy for psychologists, and all who wish to appear scientific to dismiss the insights of countless generations of these spiritual guides. It is easy to find areas of their thinking that we would no longer find helpful. Yet, this is to risk losing wisdom that has been collected over millennia. People remain people, we have not changed all that much! When we read the stories of the scriptures, we can still understand the emotions and insights of those stories.

Last week, we had St Peter's realisation of Jesus that 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' We wonder, had Peter been building up to this or did it suddenly come to him when Jesus specifically asked the question. At what point did Peter realise he was in the presence of "I AM", the eternal word, through whom the world was created.

Mystical experiences take many forms, sometimes they are as simple as a realisation that things are quite other than we thought; we may have no idea where the new understanding came from, the old is gone and we are convinced of the new.

This week we heard Peter's great fall after his great triumph. God has ways of not letting us gain too high an opinion of ourselves. That is perhaps one of the signs of an authentic experience. Nonetheless, about a week later Peter, James, and John experienced the transfiguration, now there is a deeply mystical experience, one they did not share with the other disciples until after Jesus's resurrection.

Today we live in a world that is simultaneously profoundly rational and irrational. The meta narratives of religions and

science are both challenged and often rejected. Yet, most of us also rely on science for much of our life. Those amazing computers we carry in our pockets, our phones, are a wonder, and a curse, of science. Many of those who don't trust science are happy to communicate their distrust through the very technologies that science has enabled.

How do we challenge this distrust? William James had an interesting take on the nature of truth. He recognised its subjective nature and defined his philosophical stance as pragmatism. He believed that truths have value and that we consider something a truth if it is useful to us. One might reasonably reflect that, using his criteria, it is possible to see why some people might have developed a distrust of both religion and science. Both have been less than life enhancing in a wide variety of ways.

The evidence of the truthfulness of our faith should be seen in the fruit that it bears in our lives. Are we what we claim to be. The coherence and integrity of a truth was another of James's criteria. It has to fit together as part of the whole.

In his study of religion William James also turned the academic view upside down. Where traditionally we have studied first, doctrine, theology, and philosophy, then studied the social institutions of religion, and lastly, if you ever get that far, the individual experiences of faith, William James argues for the priority of individual religious experiences and that the institutions, philosophy, theology, and doctrine arise as an expression of those individual experiences. This inversion is perhaps not the whole story as one can see that each feeds the other. Nonetheless, it was the mystical experiences of the apostles that shaped the early church.

Paul's experience on the Damascus Road changed his life and the life of the church. Peter's vision of being told to eat of traditionally unclean animals brought about the inclusion of us gentiles. Individual mystical experiences are undoubtedly important, and as William James recognised, they are not as uncommon as we suppose and they are undoubtedly a part of our way of knowing the world.

When we read the writings of mystics, we can see that they had deep insights into the nature of reality and our relationship with God. Following James's criteria, we are only getting a small glimpse of what the mystics themselves understood. Yet, even that glimpse is precious. Mystics are present in Christianity throughout the ages, yet corporately the church seems uncomfortable with the truths they reveal.

Our own traditions of meditation have been so well buried that it has taken mindfulness, rooted in Buddhism to call us back to a deeper awareness of our world, our neighbour, and ourselves. Yet, we have a history rich with mystic insights that I am sure continue in the midst of this congregation here today. Our task is to 'outdo one another in showing honour' and encouraging that mystical spark that is the image of God in one another.

This is odd and unfamiliar. Yet it is the path many of those we recognise as saints followed, a mystical communion with God, a wisdom and knowledge that comes from deep within, that requires nurture and attentiveness, and that might just be the antidote that the world needs to so many of its woes.

“Be still and know that I AM God.”