

AT THE GATES OF TOMORROW

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Each of us stands at the gate of tomorrow,
facing the future.
At times we have walked in wonder and awe;
at other times we have moved along in the flood of fear.
Looking back we may recognize
that amid the joys and struggles of the journey
we have been companioned by a grace-filled Presence
that has held us together and led us on.
This is not simply a journey
through a string of days and years,
rather this is a sacred journey
that is held and surrounded by a Mystery.
Although we might long of someone
to translate the risks of this journey
into logical explanations,
we more often find ourselves
in the land of pure faith.
We stand at the threshold of our hopes and dreams
and ask in trust to be led and supported
by a Love and an Energy
much larger than we can imagine.
At times we see the flecks of light,
recognize the comfort of a pattern,
feel a Presence.
At other times,
it seems only the shadow of a silhouette.
But always, in both our knowing and our unknowing,
we are escorted into tomorrow,
by One who will give us all that we need.
We ask to walk there in courage,
striving for integrity,
as we attempt to discern the voice of Life
amid our distractions and busyness.¹

Dear Sisters and Brothers, two questions come to mind: Do we expect anything significant to happen during these days together? Do I want something to happen, or am I satisfied with the way things are. May I invite you to ask our God that, as a result of our time together, we may experience a side of God that we have never known before. I made this prayer for myself about twenty years ago, not knowing what I was asking for. My life took a turn then and brought me to places I would rather have avoided. But looking back now, I am deeply grateful for what has happened. God takes us seriously, even if we do not take God seriously. Perhaps, we should pause before making such a prayer and realise what might happen.

¹Doris Klein, *Risk the Sacred Journey*

The theme chosen is so very apt: *Energized by the Spirit, we risk together for mission*. We are inviting the Spirit that hovered over the Deep of Chaos to bring a flaring forth once more. We are asking for another Big Bang to take place in our Congregation, another Divine Orgasm to spew forth seeds of life in our midst. So let us gather ourselves at this time and pray for courage and clarity. Lord, that we might see!

*May our minds come alive today
To the invisible geography that invites us
To new frontiers,
To break the dead shells of yesterdays,
To risk being disturbed and changed.
May we have the courage
To live the life that we would love,
To postpone our dream no longer
But to do at last
What we came here for
And waste our hearts on fear no more.²*

What am I seeing as I look at our world today? I am seeing the result of what happens when we move from God to Mammon: the unrestricted lust for more. I see it in my own country as foreign investors enter the Indian economy in the name of free markets and the good life for all. Our Prime Minister speaks of development and makes it his platform for government. Few ask who will benefit from this development. I see it in the way multinationals are the new rulers of the planet and how all governments bow to their diktat. I see how groups like Monsanto rape our planet for their own wealth, how pharmaceutical companies profit on human misery, how the earth herself is groaning and the future of life is threatened as never before in human history. I see religious life worried about its own survival and engrossed in irrelevancies while the big issues of life pass them by. How can I recognise the God who cares when I am not interested in God's agenda, but in that of Church or Congregation? What am I embracing in the present? What is my dream for today?

You and I are aware that at the heart of Consecrated Life is the quest for God. If today Consecrated Life, as we have known it, is dying (if not actually dead), then it is because we are actually worshipping an idol. We have truly forgotten the God who gave us birth, as the author of Deuteronomy warned. I would like to speak a little about the God who is revealing Godself to us today. Again, you and I are aware that God is bigger than religion, bigger than Christianity, bigger than all the religions put together. In my country, Hindu wisdom understands this. At its best, it realises that it has much to learn from the wisdom of the different faiths of people. It can collect Gods and has altars to them all – a bit like the situation Paul discovered in Athens when he stumbled across the altar 'To The Unknown God'! So let us see the markers being laid down today.

PART ONE

Years back, as a young professor of theology, Fr. Ron Rolheiser wanted to write a book on the question of faith. His hope was to shed some light on why God is hidden to us. Why didn't we see God physically? Why didn't God simply show Godself to us in such a way that it would remove all doubt?

One day, he asked a colleague, an elderly priest what he thought on the issue: "*Why does God hide himself?*" he asked; "*Why doesn't God just appear, physically, beyond doubt, and then we wouldn't have to have faith, we would know God with certainty?*"

His answer took Rolheiser by surprise, especially because of its directness: He spoke very gently, as was his style, but, after his answer, Rolheiser decided he would not write that book after all. "*Your question is an interesting one,*" he said, "*If it is asked by a young person and asked with sufficient passion, it can*

² Adapted from John O'Donohue, *A Morning Offering*

seem like a profound question. But it is not, in the end, profound. What it betrays is a profound lack of understanding of the incarnation! But don't be discouraged. It is a perennial question. It's the one that Philip asked Jesus. The answer, therefore, that I will give you is the same one that Jesus gave him: 'You can look at all you have seen and heard and still ask that question? To see certain things is to have seen the Father!'"

To ask a question like this is tantamount to looking at the most beautiful day in summer, seeing all the trees and flowers in full blossom and asking a friend, 'Where is summer?' To see certain things is to see summer. In the same way *to see certain things is to see God*.

More than that, to see *in a certain way* is to see God. I believe that this is at the heart of the Christian way of life. If we are to see the God of Jesus, then we are invited to see in a certain way.

Recall all the stories of the healing of blind people in the Gospel. This did not happen by chance. The Gospels were not written to relate history, to tell us that this is what really took place. The Gospels are best understood as metaphor. There is a beautiful passage in Luke 4, where we are given the manifesto of Jesus as he comes out of the desert after his baptism. It is clearly apparent from here that the "*new sight to the blind*" is at the heart of his ministry.

We are constantly made aware of how hard it was for the disciples to understand what Jesus was telling them. They could not accept the God he was presenting to them and even tried to dissuade him from his path. Mark goes to some length to tell us that this '*blindness*' is not just among the Twelve, but is also something constantly troubling the Church.

Look at Mark 8:22 – 26. It is a central passage of the Gospel. It deals with the cure of a blind man at Bethsaida and the cure takes place in two parts. This is not history, but metaphor.

The first part of Mark's gospel deals with the gradual realisation that Jesus is the Messiah. Once that is understood, then Jesus tries to educate the disciples about the type of Messiah he is – a suffering, rejected Messiah who will be put to death by the authorities, political and religious.

With those thoughts in mind, I would like here to offer a set of questions that Karl Rahner used to ask people when they asked him about the veil of faith:

- ❖ Have you ever kept silent, despite the urge to defend yourself, when you were unfairly treated?
- ❖ Have you ever forgiven another although you gained nothing by it and your forgiveness was accepted as quite natural?
- ❖ Have you ever made a sacrifice without receiving any thanks or acknowledgement, without even feeling any inward satisfaction?
- ❖ Have you ever decided to do a thing simply for the sake of conscience, knowing that you must bear sole responsibility for your decision without being able to explain it to anyone?
- ❖ Have you ever tried to act purely for love of God when no warmth sustained you, when your act seemed a leap in the dark, simply nonsensical?
- ❖ Have you ever been good to someone without expecting a trace of gratitude and without the comfortable feeling of having been "unselfish"?

If you have had such experiences, Rahner asserts, then you have had experienced God, perhaps without realizing it.

“As Christians, we believe that we bear the image and likeness of God inside us, and that this is our deepest reality. We are made in God’s image. However, we tend to picture this in a naïve, romantic, and pious way. We imagine that somewhere inside us there is a beautiful icon of God stamped into our souls. That may well be, but God, as Scripture assures us, is more than an icon. God is fire – wild, infinite, ineffable, non-containable.” (Ron Rolheiser, June 25, 2006)

PART TWO

The people in exile experienced bewilderment and disillusion with the God of their ancestors. Wasn’t this the God who had saved them in the past, most noticeably at the time of their exodus from Egypt? Hadn’t this God promised them a land of their own? Wasn’t their king one protected by this God, ruling in God’s name, and sworn to take care of the people? Did this God not dwell in the Temple, served by a tribe of priests? How had all this turned sour?

In their attempts to understand this, they turned to their sacred stories, the memories that forged them into a people. In the retelling of these stories, they came across a deeper understanding of the nature of God.

I want to take you to a lovely passage in the Bible. “God spoke to Moses and said to him, ‘I am Yahweh. To Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, I appeared as El Shaddai, but I did not make my name Yahweh known to them.’” [Ex. 6:2-3]

The new name is not given as an end in itself. It is given because now there is a new mission awaiting the People of Israel. The name El Shaddai, often translated as ‘The Lord’, actually means the one who nurtures, the one who feeds at the breast, or the Breasted One. To the Patriarchs God is revealed as the one who will nurture them and walk with them and bless them. In the strength of that image they lived their lives. Now there is a new threat to the people and to cope with it there is a new name given to God – a new revelation of God. Now they have to deal with Pharaoh: the one who is the Father of the People, but not of all the people – only a favoured few. We have Pharaohs in every age. What name of God do we need to deal with these Pharaohs? Moses receives the name Yahweh, written only with the consonants YHWH, pronounced like a gasp! And it is in this God, this gasp, this breath, that he is asked to trust. Do you believe in the promises of Pharaoh or in the breath of God?

As the old gods (and the institutions that preached, preserved and protected the old gods) lose credibility, people begin to cast about for new gods – and new stories, new paths, and new understandings to make sense of their new realities. In the process, the old language fails, and people reach for new words to describe the terrain of their experience.

Elijah and the experience of *Bat Kol*.

The psychologist, Carl Jung, once told the story of a man who asked a rabbi why God was revealed to many people in days of old, but nobody sees God nowadays. ‘*Why is this?*’ he asked. The rabbi answered, ‘*Because nowadays no one bows low enough.*’ Perhaps we are looking for God in all the wrong places.