



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

2nd Sunday of Lent-Year C-March 17th 2019

***Readings: Genesis 15:5-12 17-18, Psalm 26, Philippians 3: 17-4: 1,
Luke 9: 28-36***

In 1917, as the First World War continued to take its gruesome toll of the youth of Europe, a member of the German Parliament and theology professor at a Lutheran Seminary, Rudolph Otto, published a slim volume entitled 'Das Heilige'. In English it was translated as 'The Idea of the Holy' and it has never gone out of print.

Otto argued that, while rational enquiry was vital, there was a dimension of the divine experience that superseded our human capacity for such definition and formed an experience of the 'wholly other'. It was not rooted in ethics or intellect but experienced wholly as divine encounter, irreducible, mysterious, overwhelming, sometimes terrifying, life changing, immense – beyond the vocabulary or clumsy categorisation of Man.

Otto wrote: 'The feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing, as it were, thrillingly vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away, and the soul resumes its non-religious mood of everyday experience. It may be developed into something beautiful and pure and glorious. It may

become the hushed, trembling, and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of—whom or what? In the presence of a Mystery, inexpressible and above all creatures.’

He called it the *Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans*.

The Tremendum was the reference to the Awe of the encounter. (‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom’.) The Fascinans referred to a more primitive and ecstatic response.

The word that Otto gave to theology departments, above all, was ‘Numinous’. He employed this Latin word to describe the whole experience. Numen has two key meanings. One is simply a ‘nod of the head’ in the sense of giving a command or direction. The second is a reference to an expression of the divine will. To put it memorably, it is a ‘nod from God’, an invitation to His Presence. This sense of the numinous has been key to the experience of religion and to the practice of the Faith.

In the ultimate expression of religion, the final revelation in Christ, the believer exists in a tension between two poles of experience – the transcendent and the immanent – the almightiness and wholly otherness of God and His self-revelation in man, His ultimate personal accessibility in Jesus Christ. If we simply concentrate on the transcendent we are in danger of disappearing into a sterile deism – God as a distant tyrant who has wound up a clockwork universe and walked away. If we are limited to the immanent, the danger is that Christ is reduced to an eccentric if well-meaning humanist made in our image.

Today’s readings are profound reminders of who we are, who God is and who Jesus is in the divine economy of salvation.

In Abram we witness the *mysterium tremendum*. He is called to stand under the night sky and gaze into the depths of the universe and hear the call of the One who created it all and more. He is amazed. He is terrified. He hears words of promise that he could not have fully understood and, maybe, struggled to believe. He is encountering the Almighty – God Himself.

In the Gospel, the road to Jerusalem, to the Calvary, to the glory of the Third Day, is hidden to the disciples as they plot and plan their positions in the government of the Messiah Jesus. They know He is of God but just what this implies is obscured until the three of the inner circle, Peter, James and John, are taken up into the Mountain of the Transfiguration. There they witness the metamorphosis, the transformation. There they see clearly in the blinding light of revelation the unique connection of the divine and the human that is in Christ Jesus. They walk into the mountain with the man, they kneel at the summit before the radiance of the Godhead. They have experienced the ultimate numinous, the indescribable radiance of the Presence.

As ordinary worshippers, seldom on the mountaintop, more often on the plain, our experience of the numinous may be limited – but not absent. We may, like Abram, stand out under a clear night sky and gaze upon its apparently infinite depths. (The nearest star is more distant than our feeble kinds can calculate or comprehend - 25 trillion miles). And yet, in this overwhelming vastness, we know that the God who made all this made us and loves us.

We may stand in the most beautiful cathedral with its soaring vaults and sense the *tremendum*. Or in a little whitewashed highway shrine with a simple ikon and be swept by the *mysterium* of the surrounding of prayer.

We may kneel in our parish church, before the Blessed Sacrament and be suddenly powerfully aware of the Presence. Our reality is being swept up into the eternal reality as if we have suddenly tuned in to the frequency of the eternal. These are the moments when the curtain of the Holy of Holies is twitched to reveal glory. This is the desert sky of Abram and the mountaintop of Jesus Christ. These are not passing events. (We are the passing events). It is the truth of all that is – into which God momentarily invites us, encouraging us on our way. It is the promise of the future. It is the vision of Heaven. It is ‘the nod from God’, *the numen*, transcending rational thought and leading us to the encounter. On the feast of St. Nicholas 1273, the Angelic Doctor, St. Thomas Aquinas, had an experience at Mass that was so overwhelming that he put down his pen, left his Magnum Opus, the Summa, unfinished. What he had seen, he said, before he died three months later, made all his writing ‘seem like so much straw’. In the context of the beatific vision, the glimpse of Heaven, all things take their proper place. Stand under the night sky. Kneel before the Blessed Sacrament. Gaze into the dazzling radiance of God, the infinite mercy of Christ and let all else slip away as we take this Lenten Road to the Calvary – and beyond.