

God speaks our own language – and then some!

I was taking an antibiotic recently to treat an ailment. It came with all those cautions listed that leave you worried whether you should take the pill at all! The remedy prescribed is related to all kinds of side effects from the mumps to sudden mortality. The one I was taking warned me among other things that I might start hearing voices. And sure enough on the evening I took it for the first time I felt like I was in a crowded room – echoes all over the place and nobody there. Scary.

Today's first reading from the Hebrew Testament's *Book of Deuteronomy* claims the same thing – that we are destined to hear voices. The Book narrates the last words of Moses before his death and Israel's entry into its promised land. It amounts to Moses' second presentation of the Law God gave him at the time of the Exodus from Egypt – when the Lord spoke at Mt. Horeb out of a dense black cloud and the midst of fire – too much for a human being to stand. And so in today's reading God promises Moses that he will speak in the future less directly but rather through prophets, inspired human beings, or as the text puts it: *I will raise up . . . a prophet like you . . . and will put my words into his mouth*. This committed God to speak thereafter in human similes and metaphors.

For instance, all we can *rationaly and objectively* say about the mother of Jesus is that she was a woman, that she gave birth to Jesus, that she lived 2000 years ago, was probably Jewish, felt concern about Jesus' safety . . . and that's that! Ordinary, logical, scientific speech can only go so far – assume some obvious or probable *facts* about her. Not so with the writers, the dramatists of the birth narratives in the Gospels. They apply imagination, art, composition to present her and Christ's birth in ways that charm us to his day, make of winter a time of light, hope, joy. They reach our hearts.

The word metaphor means literally in Greek *transformation*. The Gospel writers and the early Church preachers, from whom they collected their parables and other dramatic passages, had no intention of giving us a newspaper or academic version of Christ's career – prosaic, footnoted to confirm veracity. Rather, like Shakespeare, they embellished, transformed the career of Jesus into a powerful narration that became the conscience of our civilization. In other words, God and even nature itself being mysteries that tease and draw us toward fullness of life, we learn to rely on poetic language to plumb these elusive dimensions of our existence, our destiny.

Scientific discourse is wonderful; the more of it the better but it can leave you feeling very lonely, an atom among atoms. But your imagination, your faith, our biblical prophets and other poets have no intention of leaving you so bereft. Take for example John Keats. Upon first opening George Chapman's translation of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* Keats felt he had entered into a new world. His education left him with much knowledge of the ancient past and even current science but Chapman's poetic discourse so opened Keats's vision of reality that at the end he had to compare himself to a Spanish conquistador who having reached the heights of Panama saw for the first time the vast Pacific; and again: *Then felt I like some watcher of the skies / When a new planet swims into his ken*.

That's what poetry, literature, and especially our heritage of Sacred Scripture can do for *you*: open up new visions of hope, new understandings of oneself. Moses' own conviction of this benefit is evident in that passage from the *Book of Numbers* (which that genius William Blake once quoted): *Would that all God's people were prophets [poets]!*