

# **EXPERIENCING GOD :**

a sermon praught by the Rev'd John Walsted  
in the church of St Mary, Staten Island, New York,  
during the Sung Mass for Easter III,  
25<sup>th</sup> April, 2004.

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**In the Name of God,  
Father, Son and Holy Ghost:  
AMEN.**



**I**N THE FIRST LESSON AND THE GOSPEL LESSON, we hear of people who had memorable experiences of the Risen Lord. The miraculous catch of fish, Saul's blinding revelation on the road to Damascus, and Ananias' hearing what he was to do for Saul.

These are religious experiences, right? They must be religious because they're experiences of God. Do they seem extraordinary? Do they seem to be the kind of experience you've never had? The kind you never expect to have?

We set our sights pretty low most of the time, don't we? Most of us probably think that such religious experiences won't happen to us. Good things happen to us; bad things happen, and our lives go on day by day. We may feel that there's quite a distance between our own ordinary experiences and the religious experiences we just heard read.

But maybe not. Martin Smith is an Episcopal priest and part of the Society of St. John the Evangelist in Boston, the Cowley Fathers. He wrote this: *Religious experience is ordinary experience interpreted in religious terms.*

We may expect a real religious experience to be unambiguously dramatic and clear. But even in today's lessons we see that's not always how it is. In the Gospel the man standing on the beach was unknown to the fishermen. It was only after they had caught the shoal of fish that one apostle begins to think it might be Jesus. Even at the end of the story, they "knew" it was the Lord, but there's still some ambiguity, because it says, "No one dared ask him, 'Who are you?'"

The apostles "knew" it was the Lord because they interpreted their experience that way. They might have done otherwise. I mean, what if their response to the great catch of fish had been to wave at the guy on the shore and call out, "Thanks, buddy!" or even to ignore the man and say to themselves, "Gee, what a lucky break."

I wonder how many times Jesus has been present to us in a situation or another person, and we have failed to "know" it was the Lord because we've interpreted our ordinary experience in ordinary terms. We've seen it instead as a lucky break or some nice little thing somebody did for us.

Religious experience is ordinary experience interpreted in religious terms.

Or in the Acts lesson, what if Ananias had said to his wife later that day, "I had the funniest idea this afternoon that I should go see that guy

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Saul that's up here from Jerusalem. That would've been crazy, wouldn't it? What's the latest on the King Herod scandal?"

I wonder how many times we've ignored or dismissed leadings from the Holy Spirit because it just hasn't occurred to us to interpret our ordinary experiences in religious terms.

Or even Saul's very dramatic experience on the road, what if he'd just seen it as some kind of freak accident? Years later his friends are overheard saying, "Remember that guy Saul? He had so much going for him. Then, remember, he went blind all of a sudden on some trip. He was lucky to get that little job at the tentmaking shop in Antioch, or he'd be a beggar."

I wonder how many times we haven't understood Jesus' voice in the bad things that have happened to us, and we've missed a world of opportunities because we have insisted on interpreting our experiences in ordinary terms.

Religious experience is ordinary experience interpreted in religious terms.

The main thing this means is that there is no "ordinary" experience. God is all around and in and through everything. Jesus is in every person we meet, in every situation, and in every bad and good thing that happens to us. We could see all of our experiences as religious experiences if we were prepared to interpret them that way.

But we generally lack such preparation.

First, we're conditioned by everything in our culture to interpret even our religious experiences in ordinary secular terms. We need to take every opportunity we can to break free of our cultural formation so we can begin to interpret our experiences in Christian terms.

We need church on Sundays and special days. We need to hear, read, mark. Learn, and inwardly digest the Bible stories. We need all these things so that we can interpret all our experiences in terms of God's presence and God's promises.

In the second place, even in Church, we are usually offhand about speaking of even thinking about our experiences of God. We don't want to seem holier than thou. We're reluctant to make ourselves vulnerable by talking about things that mean a lot to us. I think that we good churchpeople need to be a little more assertive about claiming God's promises.

He loves you. He's passionate about you. He has made you living members of the Risen Body of His Son Who died and rose again for you.

And you love Him. You're passionate about His Church. You want to give yourselves to the One Who gave Himself for you.

These are convictions, not beliefs. Somebody said that a belief is something you hold. A conviction is something that holds you. How we see the world is shaped by our deep-down inner convictions, not by our beliefs. We interpret our experiences by our convictions, not our beliefs.

And religious experience is ordinary experience interpreted in religious terms.

If we start seeing our ordinary experiences as experiences of God, I think we'll be amazed at how often we don't dare ask, but we know it's the Lord.

**In the Name of God,  
Father, Son and Holy Ghost:  
Amen.**



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The cover shows Tintoretto's *The Conversion of Saint Paul*,  
painted in about 1545, and now in the National Gallery,  
Washington D.C.

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## THE LECTONS

**For the Lesson**Acts ix <sup>1-19a</sup>

**A**ND SAUL, YET BREATHING OUT THREATENINGS and slaughter against the disciples of the LORD, went unto the high priest, And desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem. And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And he said, Who art thou, LORD? And the LORD said, I am JESUS whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks. And he trembling and astonished said, LORD, what wilt thou have me to do? And the LORD said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do. And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man. And Saul arose from the earth; and when his eyes were opened, he saw no man: but they led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink.

And there was a certain disciple at Damascus, named Ananias; and to him said the LORD in a vision, Ananias. And he said, Behold, I am here, LORD. And the LORD said unto him, Arise, and go into the street which is called Straight, and inquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul, of Tarsus: for, behold, he prayeth, And hath seen in a vision a man named Ananias coming in, and putting his hand on him, that he might receive his sight. Then Ananias answered, LORD, I have heard by many of this man, how much evil he hath done to thy saints at Jerusalem: And here he hath authority from the chief priests to bind all that call on thy name. But the LORD said unto him, Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel: For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake. And Ananias went his way, and entered into the house; and putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul, the LORD, even JESUS, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost. And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptized. And when he had received meat, he was strengthened.

**For the Epistle**Revelation v <sup>6-14</sup>

**A**ND I BEHELD, AND, LO, in the midst of the throne and of the four beasts, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent forth into all the earth. And he came and took the book out of the right hand of him that sat upon the throne. And when he had taken the book, the four beasts and four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of saints. And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; And

hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth. And I beheld, and I heard the voice of many angels round about the throne and the beasts and the elders: and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands; Saying with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing. And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever. And the four beasts said, Amen. And the four and twenty elders fell down and worshipped him that liveth for ever and ever.

### **The Holy Gospel** John xxi <sup>1-14</sup>

**A**FTER THESE THINGS JESUS SHEWED himself again to the disciples at the sea of Tiberias; and on this wise shewed he himself. There were together Simon Peter, and Thomas called Didymus, and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the sons of Zebedee, and two other of his disciples. Simon Peter saith unto them, I go a fishing. They say unto him, We also go with thee. They went forth, and entered into a ship immediately; and that night they caught nothing. But when the morning was now come, JESUS stood on the shore: but the disciples knew not that it was JESUS. Then JESUS saith unto them, Children, have ye any meat? They answered him, No. And he said unto them, Cast the net on the right side of the ship, and ye shall find. They cast therefore, and now they were not able to draw it for the multitude of fishes. Therefore that disciple whom JESUS loved saith unto Peter, It is the LORD. Now when Simon Peter heard that it was the LORD, he girt his fisher's coat unto him, (for he was naked,) and did cast himself into the sea. And the other disciples came in a little ship; (for they were not far from land, but as it were two hundred cubits,) dragging the net with fishes. As soon then as they were come to land, they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid thereon, and bread. JESUS saith unto them, Bring of the fish which ye have now caught. Simon Peter went up, and drew the net to land full of great fishes, and hundred and fifty and three: and for all there were so many, yet was not the net broken. JESUS saith unto them, Come and dine. And none of the disciples durst ask him, Who art thou? knowing that it was the LORD. JESUS then cometh, and taketh bread, and giveth them, and fish likewise. This is now the third time that JESUS shewed himself to his disciples, after that he was risen from the dead.