



# SEEING GOD

a sermon praught by the  
Rev'd Dr Richard Major  
to the Anglican church  
in Zagreb

(meeting at St Joseph's  
Chapel, in the Jesuit  
seminary of the Immaculate  
Heart of Mary),

for Easter V, 22<sup>nd</sup> May, 2011.

Acts vii<sup>55-60</sup>; Psalm xxxi<sup>1-5, 15-16</sup>

I Peter ii<sup>2-10</sup>; John xiv<sup>1-14</sup>.

From the Gospel:

Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father.

## The Epistle

(NRSV)

**F**ILLED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT, Stephen gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

“Look,” he said, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!”

But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”

When he had said this, he died.



## The Holy Gospel

(NRSV)

**D**O NOT LET YOUR HEARTS BE TROUBLED. Believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to Myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.'

Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where You are going. How can we know the way?'

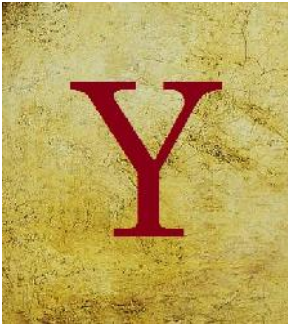
Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me. If you know Me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know Him and have seen Him.'

Philip said to Him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.'

Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know Me? Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own; but the Father who dwells in Me does His works. Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me; but if you do not, then believe Me because of the works themselves.

Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in Me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in My Name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in My Name you ask Me for anything, I will do it.





YOU'VE PROBABLY NEVER GIVEN ST PHILIP a moment's thought. And fair enough. Although Philip was one of the Twelve Disciples, he wasn't prominent among the Twelves. Nothing about his character sticks in the mind. Our information about his life is sparse and unreliable.

Yet St Philip is a memorable figure for one reason. As we've just heard, Philip uttered the most shocking remark in the New Testament. *Lord*, said Philip, *show us the Father, and we will be satisfied*.<sup>1</sup>

Let's see, suggests Philip, the whole of the abyss out of which comes being. Display to us the self-existent ocean in which the worlds are bubbles of spume. Let us have a quick glance at the infinitude that rests on every electron. Give us a look over the eternity that contemplates every passing second. Let's survey the omniscience beholding the fall of every leaf. Show us God in Himself – and that'll do us.

It's the most staggering thing anyone says in the whole Bible. In a way it's the stupidest thing anyone says. In a way it's unutterably profound. In any case, it was an astonishing remark, and it must have produced a moment's amazed silence, that Thursday evening in Jerusalem, in the upper room, after the Last Supper, when Jesus spoke of Himself at last and nothing was hidden.

Think of those dark serious urgent wide-eyed faces thrust forward in the candle-light; only eleven faces, for Judas has already crept off into the night. In the centre is the pale face of Christ, calm, drawn, troubled, triumphant. Christ speaks and speaks, He answers everything that is put to Him, He reveals things that had been secret since before the universe was created – and suddenly Philip shouts *Show us God the Father, then*; the most audacious thing anyone had ever asked for in Jerusalem, in Israel, anywhere. I imagine a silence fell for an instant (the eleven faces opened their eyes even wider) before Christ answered Philip, and revealed the ultimate mystery.

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'God', 'God', 'God': we do bandy that word around. For instance: every time we say *Good-bye*, we're saying *God be with you* – which is a whole oratorio and a whole theological essay squeezed into one word.

It's fair enough for us to use the word 'God' lavishly. But we have to remind ourselves every so often what we mean by it. Occasionally we have to endure the splendour and terror, and think about God in Himself.

Our planet is like a drop of water in the Adriatic in the immensity of the galaxy, and the galaxy is a drop of water in the immensity of the heavens; and yet the whole of this little, little universe rests in God's palm like a walnut. He loves it because it is lovely, tiny and fragile.

But that isn't the right way to think of Him. God is not big, He is infinite. He is an ocean without a shore. We cannot begin to think of His might, His complexity, His knowledge. That endless understanding is inexhaustible: the whole of it rests on every mote of dust moving through

<sup>1</sup> John xiv<sup>8</sup>.

the air of this chapel – God knows and knows and knows about it. He knows and knows and knows about us. There are no words to say how utterly He knows you.

He made you. He willed you to exist. He wills you to exist. There is no other reason for your existence but the will of God. And every molecule in the remotest star can say the same thing: *I exist only because God utters me forth, I lie before His face and He loves and causes me.*

Think of the ferocious burning joy and brightness of the sun at noon: that light so full of light it defies sight, and cannot be looked upon: the furnace in which worlds are forged. That is a dingy echo of what the face of God is like. And the face of God is everlastingly turned upon you.

Our years are everlasting too. We shall spend eternity glimpsing a little, and then a little more, of God, so that we shall blaze with almost intolerable joy, more and more, forever. And still we shall not have seen the least part of the glory.

He is the abyss: into the thought of God the Father our thoughts plummet like comets, and vanish. He is unthinkable. We've all experienced the dull ache in the brain that comes with trying to think about God. We know the vertigo. The mere concepts of infinity and self-existence exhaust us (although to be fair, the much milder paradoxes and enormities of physics exhaust us too). We know that God, the Father of everything, is unknowable. Of course He cannot be *seen*, as if He were just another object.

Yet one spring evening in Jerusalem, St Philip remarked *If only we could be shown God the Father, we'd be perfectly satisfied.* And instead of being shrivelled into ash for blasphemy, Philip was satisfied. He got precisely what he asked for. History's most astonishing request received history's most astonishing answer.

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[Let's pause for a moment, and speculate about Philip.<sup>2</sup>

We gather that he was the most Hellenised of the disciples; at least he was the disciple the certain Greek tourists approached when they wanted to meet Jesus<sup>3</sup> This was on Maundy Thursday afternoon – too late. A couple of hours later, perhaps with their conversation on his mind, Philip uttered his incredible request.

It's the most obvious truism of Greek philosophy, as much as Jewish religion, that *no man hath seen God at any time.*<sup>4</sup> Every thoughtful person in the ancient had grasped that the infinite and self-existent One is unseeable. The pagan Greeks had the myth of Semele, a silly woman who

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<sup>2</sup> The account in *The Golden Legend* is remarkably bare and sceptical ([http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/goldenlegend/GoldenLegend-Volume3.htm#Philip the Apostle](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/goldenlegend/GoldenLegend-Volume3.htm#Philip%20the%20Apostle)); the *Acts of Philip* is an historically worthless fourth-century fantasia (<http://www.gnosis.org/library/actphil.htm>), which has excited some tiresome modern interest because of its *vegetarian* tendencies, ugh.

<sup>3</sup> John xii<sup>20-22</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> I John iv<sup>12</sup>.



demanded a favour from her lover Jupiter. When He said, *Anything, my dear, you have My promise*, she asked to see Him as He was. The sight did indeed blast her to ashes.<sup>5</sup>

But the point of the myth is not just that Semele was bound to be destroyed by seeing; she was also bound to ask to see. To see God is the supreme desire of all monotheists: we crave to ‘see’, in some fashion, the unimaginable goal of our pilgrimage, the unthinkable target of our adoration. Yet the claim to see Him seems impossible, scandalous, fatal, blasphemous – most of all in the Jewish tradition, with its nearly frantic insistence on the unseeability of God, its horror of the fraud of idols. In this evening’s second reading we hear how the Sanhedrin needled Stephen into his perilous ecstasy; Stephen shouted: *Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God. And they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord.*<sup>6</sup>

Yet Judaism itself had a passion to glimpse God. Moses himself, in the supreme days of revelation at Sinai, suddenly gasped out *I beseech Thee, shew me Thy glory*, although He knew, even before God told him, *Thou canst not see My face: for there shall no man see Me, and live*. What God offered Was a sort of near-seeing. Moses was to crouch in a cleft of the mountainside, his face covered by God as the unspeakable glory went by; then, just as the unseen vision vanished, the hand would be withdrawn so Moses could see the back of infinity receding: not God but an authoritative trace of God, a wisp of the essence: a self-portrait, in fact.<sup>7</sup>

A portrait is what, I imagine, Philip demanded. His demand was provocative, but it wasn’t insane. He was the spiritual heir of Moses, not of *naïve* Semele. At the supreme moment of revelation, in the midst of the Last Supper discourses, desire overcame the typical Jewish dread of false divine images, and Philip burst out with that breath-taking *Shew us*. Let us see a picture.

Now, a good portrait does not reproduce its subject. All portraits are miniatures. A person, even a dull person, is massive – vastly extended in time, complex and important. A portrait, even a great one, is only a little coloured grease smeared on an oblong of canvas. And yet a portrait can be a revelation. A few swirls of paint and we cry ‘That’s her to the very life!’ We never see the woman herself in the same way. The artist pares away inessentials so what is left, small though it is, captures the essence of his subject, and shows us what we have never seen before, and yet recognise.

So what would a portrait of God be like? How might He be represented?

Surely by the sun. *The heavens declare the glory of God, most of all the sun, which runneth about unto the end of it again: and there is nothing hid from the heat thereof.*<sup>8</sup> There is nothing like the sun in

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<sup>5</sup> Gustave Moreau, *Jupiter and Semele* (1889-95). The best source of the Semele myth is Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/latin/ovid/trans/Metamorph3.htm#476975710>), published in A.D. 8, probably the very year the youthful Christ appeared and taught in the Temple!

<sup>6</sup> Acts vii<sup>56</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Exodus xxxiii<sup>18-23</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> Psalm xix<sup>1,6</sup>.

human experience: it is alone, it shines everywhere, it is unspeakably splendid, it is the source of all life, and it is, like God, unlookable-upon. Its excess of brightness makes it in a sense invisible. The sun is the obvious emblem of the one God, and indeed the Roman Empire's last attempt of paganism to resist Christianity was the worship of *Sol Invictus*, the unconquerable sun. The cult of the Sun was, we might assume, a thin and artificial sort of montheism. But it was virtually the official religion of the Empire for that last century before its conversion, and a century after Augustine was still taking pains to denounce the religion of the sun.<sup>9</sup> Turner, one of whose stupefying solar paintings is attached to this sermon, reputedly died murmuring "The sun is God." Why *not* worship the sun, if the sun is the best image we can have of the infinite Deity?

Yes; but what if isn't the best portrait? What if the sun is too dim? What if Isaiah was right when he said the sun would be *ashamed* when God Himself appeared on Mount Zion?<sup>10</sup> What if the sun itself could be dazzled by the true portrait, when It came?]



*HOW US GOD THE FATHER*, Philip beseeched Christ. And Christ said Here, Philip, here. *Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know Me? Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"?*

For three years Philip and the rest of them had been travelling about with Jesus, talking with Him, eating with Him, washing with Him, sleeping beside Him in taverns. They were intimate with Him, and therefore they knew that He was the greatest man who had ever lived, that He was the perfection of humanity. They realised He was the Messiah, the one Whose coming had been promised since the beginning of the world. What else? What more had they grasped about Him?

I think their minds tottered on the verge of understanding. They knew Jesus had a closeness with God the Father more than the closeness of any holy man. They had heard Him risk stoning by speaking of God in terms of identification: *I and my Father are one.*<sup>11</sup> Their imaginations, at least, touched on the truth: that here with them was God Himself. [Here was the divine self-portrait, God the Maker of all making Himself a creature.] And of course this truth was so appalling, so unspeakably and insupportably glorious, so crippling and terrifying, that they hid it from their waking minds. *My Lord and my God!* cried Thomas, a week after the Resurrection;<sup>12</sup> that cry had been a long time coming. Thomas and Philip and the rest of them had failed to understand for

<sup>9</sup> Augustine, 'Sermo in Nativitate Domini', vii, *PL* xxxviii, 1007 and 1032.

<sup>10</sup> Isaiah xxiv<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> John x<sup>30, 31</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> John xx<sup>28</sup>.

three years, and I suppose they forced themselves not to understand, even when they heard Jesus say *Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father*. The disciples simply shied away from knowing Who it was, What is with, that stood amongst them.

Christ, within an hour or two of His conversation with Philip, was in the hands of the police, being beaten up in the cells. A few hours more and He was being tortured to death in public. Philip did not see that. Like all the disciples except John, Philip had gone to ground and was trembling in some hidden place, listening to the terrible groans and howls of the holiday mob coming through the shutters. But we have seen it. We are seeing it at the moment. It is hanging on the wall behind me, carved in wood. It's an image that is never out of sight in church, never far out of sight in the streets of any Christian country, never long out of our imaginations. *Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father*, said Christ, and here we are, seeing Him: beholding this broken, tormented Body, abandoned, stripped, and *in extremis*.

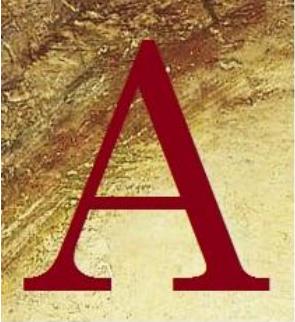
Here is God's portrait of Himself, painted in human flesh, as an artist paints in oil. [It is *nothing like the sun*.<sup>13</sup> We claim that this one Man, this provincial five foot eight, let us say, with eyes and hair of a certain colour, is the *shining-forth of the glory* of God, the *very character of the divine reality*,<sup>14</sup> and that the portrait is most vivid at the moment when Jesus died in His scaffold: but these are, so to speak, dark colours.] What does the portrait reveal? Not God's power, for here is absolute weakness – the Figure is nailed down, too weak even to lift Its head. Not God's immortality, for this Figure is dying or dead. Not God's universality, for It is bound to one spot on earth, to one obscure provincial city, to one dingy afternoon long ago. It does not reveal God's beauty: what we see is tormented, grotesque, hideous. [Not even God's knowledge is revealed here, for at the supreme moment of destruction even Christ's mind was darkened, and God thought Himself abandoned by God.]

But it does reveal perfect love. As He died, Christ was busy caring for His mother, caring for the other two condemned men, forgiving even His enemies who were doing this to Him: giving His death to the universe so that the universe might be recreated and live.

The crucifix is a portrait of God because it is a portrait of infinite love. And that is enough. Whoever has seen this has seen the Father. This dreadful image is an *adequate* portrait of God, for the deepest reality of God is not His power, not His beauty, not His knowledge, but His love. [

<sup>13</sup> Shakespeare's Sonnet cxxx.

<sup>14</sup> Hebrews 1<sup>3</sup>. My translation, or rather my transliteration: the Greek really does have *charaktēr* and *hypostasis*. *The brightness of His glory*, says the Authorised Version, *the express image of His person*.



ALL PORTRAITS LEAVE THINGS OUT. The emblem of the sun captures the life-making power of God, but leaves out the mercy. A crucifix dazzles us with the love, but leaves out the power. For while God is joyous, powerful, immortal, and beyond pain just as He is beyond old age, Jesus was *a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief*,<sup>15</sup> nailed up to die at 33. What does it mean, then, to insist that Christ crucified is the better image of God than the sun? What does it mean to say that the appalling light breaking from Golgotha is brighter than the sun (which, the synoptic Gospels insist, was darkened that

noon)?

Surely that we can pare away almost all the divine attributes and still have a good portrait. A weak God is still God. A bound God is still God. A dead God is still God. For the innermost essence of God is not power or immortality. The essence of God, the *very character of the divine reality*, is perfect love. An unloving God would not be God. But we can eliminate everything but infinite love from the picture and we can still say we have seen the Father – seen His heart, His core.

John says *No man hath seen God at any time. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us*.<sup>16</sup> This is a startling paradox. No finite creature can see God; but we been given a portrait of God so accurate that with it a believer can do more than see God, he can somehow interpenetrate God – he *dwelleth in God, and God in him*.<sup>17</sup> That portrait is the life of Christ, especially the death of Christ, in which love was made tangible. We cannot see God, but we have seen enough to find our way into Him. We cannot now possess anything like divine power or immortality, but we can have, we can even *dwel* in, love, which is the divine essence.

St John's great saying, *God is love*,<sup>18</sup> is, like all great sayings, dangerous. *Is* is a tricky word. One silly route out of Christianity is to regard God merely as a personification of love – asserting, not that *God is love*, but that *Love is 'God'*. It would be less perverse to say that love is the personification of God. Love is how God, Who is real but unimaginable, shows Himself to us as a person, as a Man. Because love is His essence, that portrait is overwhelming – especially at the extreme moment on Golgotha when power and life were gone, and only love was left. Broken and dangling obscenely in the dingy, eclipsed light, Jesus was still the shining-forth of the glory of God, the very character of the divine reality. For God, Who *has* infinite power and life, *is* love.

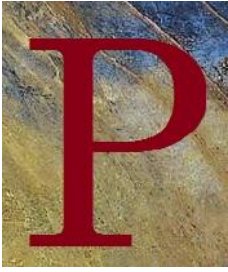
Love was what there was to see at Golgotha: the violence and despair were almost incidental. Love is what there is to see in Jesus: the wit and anger and charm and so forth are almost incidental.] That is why anyone who has seen Jesus (that Man, looking much like any other man, living in a certain time and place like every other man, dying and then dead and then buried like any other man) has seen God. If we have seen Jesus we have seen perfect love, and we have therefore glimpsed God the Father, in the only sense we can glimpse Him.

<sup>15</sup> Isaiah liii:<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> I John iv:<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> I John iv:<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> I John iv:<sup>8,16</sup>.



HILIP AND THE OTHER DISCIPLES,, you might think, had a strange, terrible and wonderful fate, going about as they did, cheek by jowl, with God in human form, seeing Him morning and evening for three years. The fate of the Twelve Disciples was indeed wonderful and strange; that's why we make such a fuss about them.

But all Christ's lesser disciples have a similar fate, down through all the centuries as far as us. You and I, almost as much as Philip and the Twelve, live cheek by jowl with the Man Who is also God. When we hear or read the life of Christ, we are strangely intimate with Him. When we pray to Him, we are strangely close. Most of all, when we come to His feast, we see the same flesh Philip saw.

*Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father*, said Christ at the Last Supper, when He gave us Himself, to see and have forever. And at that same Supper when Christ gave Philip the truth, He also gave him, and the other disciples, and every other disciple ever since, His Body.

The Last Supper began one evening, but it has never stopped. It won't stop until the world ends, and Christ is all in all,<sup>19</sup> and we have no need for it. Until the world ends this is what we have: the Eucharist. In a few minutes' time, I shall be holding up before you the Body of Jesus, a Man Who lived and died. There's no difficulty about human beings beholding other human beings – we're perfectly visible to each other. There'll be no difficulty about our seeing Him. The Eucharist is a miracle, of course, but it's a human sort of miracle: we will be seeing what any idle passer-by would have seen, exiting Jerusalem by its eastern gate that Friday afternoon, hurrying past the place of execution. Yet [the Host outdazzles the sun; when we receive It,] we shall be seeing and handling God. And we shall be, as St Philip cheekily put it, satisfied.

We come now, this evening, to where, before Christ, mankind never thought or even hoped to come. We stand at the edge of the ocean of eternity, we stand at the brink of the abyss of being Itself, we stare into a limitless fire from which all things come, *to see God* – and we are not merely dazed. God has come down to us and made Himself very small, and merely visible. For He loves us so infinitely He dares even lay aside for us His infinity. He dares to be weak and human to reach our weakness and our humanity. God's essence is love; He is thus Himself even when He is little. He is Himself even now, when He drops Himself into our hands.

**To God, therefore,  
Father, Son and the Holy Ghost, ever One,  
be glory and honour now,  
and in the ages of ages: Amen.**

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<sup>19</sup> I Corinthians xv<sup>28</sup>.

## SEEING JOSEPH MALLORD WILLIAM TURNER

Sermons are shallow. Pictures are better. This sermon tries to flesh itself out by reproducing, with misgiving, Turner's remarkable, and remarkably named, *Light and Colour (Goethe's Theory) - the Morning after the Deluge - Moses Writing the Book of Genesis*, painted in about 1843, and now on display in the Tate Gallery. The misgivings are because Turner, the greatest English artist, simply doesn't reproduce. His work is a spiritual experience, a revelation; this painting, overwhelming when you see it, comes as close as anyone ever has (I suspect) to painting seeing the Father. But you have to take my word for this. In reproduction it looks *kitsch*.

What are we seeing? First, *Light and Colour* is a mood painting, capturing in its colours a certain mood of exulted exhilaration. Being a mood, it passes, and Turner appended to the painting his own verses from 'The Fallacies of Hope':

*The ark stood firm on Ararat; th' returning sun  
Exhaled earth's humid bubbles, and emulous of light,  
Reflected her lost forms, each in prismatic guise  
Hope's harbinger, ephemeral as the summer fly  
Which rises, flits, expands, and dies.*

The Tate offers this caption: "This triumphant explosion of light brilliantly exploits the warm side of the spectrum.... [but] Turner's verses rather undermine the optimism of the religious message by emphasising the transience of the natural phenomena engendered by the 'returning sun'." This caption tells us quite a lot about the man who writes captions for the Tate, and nothing at all about Turner's work.

Secondly, *Light and Colour* is a technical exercise in colour. We needn't bother much about Goethe's scheme of 'prismatic' colours, which are visible in the 'bubbles'; see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theory\\_of\\_Colours](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theory_of_Colours) and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flag\\_of\\_Colombia#History](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flag_of_Colombia#History) if interested.

Thirdly, it's a religious meditation (it seems to me) on the invisibility of God. Turner was a great theologian, although those unfortunate last words of his obscured the fact. We can never be too careful about what we say on our deathbeds – and perhaps we should start preparing our remarks for the occasion now. "Turner – glorious in conception – unfathomable in knowledge – solitary in power –", wrote Ruskin, is "sent as a prophet of God to reveal to men the mysteries of His universe, standing, like the great angel of the Apocalypse, clothed with a cloud, and with a rainbow upon his head, and with the sun and stars given unto his hand" (*Modern Painters*, III, 264, first edition). True enough.

Here Turner the prophet shows us three things. We see the morning the Flood receded: the world is recreated, God promises never to destroy it again. We see Moses writing the story of the Flood. And we see the impaled bronze snake which, according to Hebrew legend, saved from death whomever looked on it: *as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up* (John iii<sup>14</sup>). These three events show us what God is like; they show us, in three oblique ways, redemption on Golgotha; they show us, as far as we can ever see Him, God Himself; and behind them, holding them together, is the uncreated Light, full of choring seraphim in ecstasy.

By way of contrast, here is Dore's illustration of the climax of the *Paradiso*:

*my sight, becoming purified,  
Was entering more and more into the ray  
Of the High Light which of itself is true.*

*From that time forward what I saw was greater  
Than our discourse, ...*

*almost utterly  
Ceases my vision, and distilleth yet  
Within my heart the sweetness born of it;*

