

# Seasons/All Saints' 10



I have a complicated relationship with food. I am at my happiest eating with people I love. Lunch is also where I get things done, with others or often on my own. But I am also seriously overweight — 15 stone 8 when I last checked — and always conscious of it. The medical term is obese, but that is so nasty a word that I cannot believe I can write it down.

This week, my month-long diet-and-exercise regime has come to a juddering halt in a series of back-to-back lunch and dinner meetings in New York. To cap it all, I have just been out for dinner with a friend who is now the restaurant critic of *The New York Times*.

I don't want to look at the scales. And I feel I never want to eat again. Food can be the currency of enormous joy, and also the occasion for crushing self-disgust.

Given all of this, it was to be expected that Frank Bruni's wonderful little book *Born Round* (Penguin, 2009) was going to touch a nerve. Bruni is a former restaurant critic of *The New York Times*, a man who has always struggled with his weight, and then in 2004 accepted a job that involves eating from eight to ten big rich meals a week. Sometimes he would eat two meals in a night. He really understands the love-hate relationship that many people have with food.

Gluttony is, of course, one of the seven deadly sins. But what exactly is the sin: having too much when others starve? The inability to say no? In my own odd self-analysis, I put much of my overeating down to the way in which communal dishes at school mealtimes encouraged a deep instinct for competition. I learnt to eat really quickly because only the people who finished first got seconds. This suggests that part of the sin may be to do with an aggressive sense of what is mine when looking out at the world.

Yet, whatever the exact nature of the sin, the accompanying sense of shame at having been gluttonous is palpable, especially to the greedy eaters themselves. Such is the power that this feeling of shame can exert that, even when overeaters control their desire, their relationship to food is still viewed negatively.

I heard someone once describe a fat person as someone whose greed is greater than his vanity, and a thin person is someone whose vanity is greater than his greed. This moral trap offers no release for the food-obsessed. This week, my sin is greed. Next week, when the diet and exercise start again, my sin will be self regard. I have certainly got something wrong somewhere.

Giles Fraser

I know that bush,  
Moses; there are many of them  
in Wales in the autumn, braziers  
where the imagination  
warms itself. I have put off  
pride and, knowing the ground  
holy, lingered to wonder  
how it is that I do not burn  
and yet am consumed...

R. S. Thomas

**"God is whoever raised Jesus from the dead, having before raised Israel from Egypt."** This is the hallmark sentence of Robert Jenson's *Systematic Theology*. It is an elegantly simple but dauntingly deep sentence, which took Jenson a lifetime of theological reflection to write.

To write such a sentence requires that we discipline our presumption that we know what we are saying when we say the word "God." For it turns out that we are most likely to take God's name in vain when we assume we know what we are saying when we say "God."

Indeed, one of the ironies of the recent spate of books defending atheism is the confidence these "new atheists" seem to have in knowing which God it is they are sure does not exist. They have forgotten that one of the crimes of which Romans accused Christians - a crime whose punishment was often death - was that Christians were *atheists*.

The Romans weren't being unreasonable. All they wanted was for the Christians to acknowledge there were many gods, but Christians were determined atheists. Christians were atheist because they assumed the primary problem was not atheism but idolatry. Idolatry, moreover, has everything to do with thinking that you know God's name.

In *The City of God*, Augustine even argues that the reason the Roman Empire had fallen on hard times was because the Romans worshiped corrupt gods. He assumed rightly that there is a direct correlation between the worship of God, the character of our lives and politics.

Augustine argues, therefore, Rome fell because the people of Rome lived immoral lives by emulating the immorality of their gods. Needless to say, Augustine's account of idolatry was not well-received by the Romans themselves.

So depending on which god or gods the new atheists think they are denying, they might discover that Christians are not unsympathetic with their atheism.

For example, it should not be surprising that in a culture which inscribes its money with "In God We Trust," atheists might be led to think it is interesting - and perhaps even useful - to deny god exists. It does not seem to occur to atheists, however, that the vague god which some seem to confuse with trust in our money cannot be the same God who raised Jesus from the dead, having before raised Israel from Egypt.

This is but a reminder that the word "god" can be very misleading, particularly for those who worship the One who raised Jesus from the dead and Israel from Egypt. For the word "god" can invite us to confuse the One who raised Jesus from the dead with the general designation "god" used to describe the assumption that something had to start it all.

Those who assume "god" is the designation we use for naming the assumption that something had to start it all also think that such an assumption implies there has to be more to life than birth, sex, and death. Many who believe in such a "more" often agree with the new atheists that there is little evidence that such a "more" exists, but they nonetheless refuse to deny its possibility.

Moreover, they assume that such a "more" has many names, for to think otherwise is to risk intolerance.

But the Scriptures constantly remind us that naming God matters. For instance, God asks Moses to bring his people, the descendents of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, out of captivity in Egypt. God - who seems to have been reading Jenson's *Systematic Theology* - tells Moses that he should tell the Israelites that Moses has been sent to the people of Israel by the God of their ancestors, that is, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

But Moses, who knows the Egyptians well, knows that escaping from Egypt is going to be a risky business. Moses knows that those whom he is asked to rescue will want some assurance that Moses is authorized to undertake the dangerous business of escaping from Egypt.

At the very least those that he has been asked to lead will want to know the name of the One that he serves. So Moses asks God for some identification to which God responds, "Tell them, 'I am who I am has sent Moses to them.'"

"I am who I am" (or as some have translated, "I will be present to whom I will be present") I suspect was not a reply that pleased Moses. But it has been an unending delight for Christian theologians and philosophers to reflect on the metaphysics of God's existence.

Aquinas, for example, thought that God's response rightly suggests that only in God are existence and essence inseparable. Put in more colloquial terms, this means only God can act without loss. For Christians it is, therefore, never a question about God's existence, but rather what it means for all that is not God to exist.

"I am who I am" may be a helpful metaphysical response, but it is not a name. At best, as philosophers like to say, "I am who I am" is a grammatical remark that suggests God is known by what God does. "I am who I am," therefore, is but another way to say you know all you need to know if you know that God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

It is as if God is saying to Moses "Tell them not to worry. Just as I have been there for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob so I will be there for you." In effect God is saying, you can trust me but you cannot possess me.

We, like the people of Israel, would like to think we get to name God. By naming God we hope to get the kind of God we need, that is, a god after our own likeness. We can make the "more" that must have started it all after our own image.

But God refuses to let the people of Israel - or us - assume that we can name the One who will raise Israel from Egypt. Only God can name God. That, moreover, is what God does.

"God also said to Moses, Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations." God's name is YHWH, but it is a name that Israel could not say.

That God's name could not be said indicates that God's name is a holy reality sharing in God's holiness. To know God's name is to know God. As Karl Barth observes, "'I am that I am' can scarcely mean anything else than just I am He whose name proper no one can repeat is significant

enough; but the revealed name itself by its wording is to recall also and precisely the hiddenness of the revealed God."

The burning bush that is not consumed wonderfully displays Barth's point that the very revelation of God, God's unrelenting desire to have us know him, means we must acknowledge that we cannot know God.

Moses could not help but be drawn to the fiery bush. How could the bush be on fire yet not be consumed? He drew near, but the Lord called to Moses - named Moses - out of the burning bush telling him he was on holy ground. He was to remove his sandals and come no closer. Moses did as he was told hiding his face, fearing to look on God.

For if God is God, how could we hope to stand before God? How could we hope to see God face to face, and live? The burning bush was not consumed, but we cannot imagine that confronted by this God we could see God and live.

Israel knew that there was no greater gift than to be given God's name, but that gift was a frightening reality that threatened to consume her. Israel, who would be tempted by the idolatrous presumption she possessed God's name, rightly never forgot she could not say God's name.

Israel could not possess God because God possess Israel.

For Christians, we believe we have been given God's name. We believe we can say the name of God. Paul in his letter to the Philippians tells us:

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality of God  
as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.  
And found in human form,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death -  
even death on a cross.*

*Therefore God also highly exalted him  
and gave him the name  
that is above every name,  
so that at the name of Jesus  
every knee should bend,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.*

The fire that burned but did not consume the bush is Jesus Christ. Just as the fire did not consume the bush, so our God has come to us by becoming one of us.

Yet the humanity of the one he became was not replaced or destroyed. Rather our God is incarnate. Our God is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There has never been a time that God has not been Trinity.

The God that came to Moses in the burning bush, the God who called Moses to deliver his people, the God who gave Moses his name, is Trinity. Only this God can be very God and very man.

The God we worship is not a vague "more" that exists to make our lives meaningful. The God we worship is not "the biggest thing around." The God we worship is not "something had to start it all." The God we worship is not a God that insures that we will somehow get out of life alive. The God we worship is not a God whose ways correspond to our presumptions about how God should be God.

That God has come near to us in Christ does not mean that God is less than God. God is God and we are not.

Yet we believe that the God we worship has made his name known. We believe we have been given the happy task of making his name known. We believe we can make his name known because the God we worship is nearer to us than we are to ourselves - a frightening reality that gives us life. We believe that in the Eucharist, in the meal of bread and wine, just as Jesus is fully God and fully man, this bread and this wine will, through the work of the Spirit, become for us the body and blood of Christ.

To come to this meal in which bread and wine become for us the body and blood of Christ is to stand before the burning bush. But we are not told to come no closer. Rather we are invited to eat this body and drink this blood and by so doing we are consumed by what we consume becoming for the world God's burning bush.

By being consumed by the Divine Life we are made God's witnesses so that the world may know the fire, the name, Jesus Christ.

God is whoever raised Jesus from the dead, having before raised Israel from Egypt. There is no God but this God.

Stanley Hauerwas



Two postcard portraits of the recently-beatified John Henry Newman have graced my office for years. One is a miniature painted by Sir William Charles Ross in 1845, the year of Newman's reception into the Catholic Church. The second, by Emmeline Dean, gives us the aged cardinal, a year before his death in 1890, in cardinalatial house cassock and walking stick. Between those two portraits lies a spiritual and intellectual pilgrimage within Catholicism that, combined with Newman's pre-Catholic journey from evangelicalism to high-church Anglicanism and the Oxford Movement, remains one of the most compelling such tales of modern times—a path the Church has now officially recognized one marked by heroic virtue, miraculously attested...

I once had the honor of spending time in Newman's rooms at the Birmingham Oratory, which are much as the aged cardinal left them at his death in 1890. Over the altar, which occupies one side of the room, are tacked-up notes by which Cardinal Newman reminded himself of those for whom he had promised to pray. In the sitting room, a tattered newspaper map, also tacked to a wall, bears silent testimony to Newman's interest in Kitchener's efforts to lift the siege of Khartoum and rescue General Gordon from the Mahdi, a 19th century jihadist (Gordon died with Newman's poem, "The Dream of Gerontius," in his pocket). Perhaps most touching are Newman's Latin breviaries, which he began to use as an Anglican, causing much controversy about such popish practices.

It is as a man of faith that the Church beatified John Henry Newman, however: the kind of man of faith who could write the following (which I take from another prayer card I've had for years, given me by Catholic Worker artist Ade Bethune):

*God has created me to do him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission. I may never know it in this life but I shall be told it in the next. I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. He has not created me for naught...Therefore I will trust Him, whatever I am...He does nothing in vain. He knows what He is about. He may take away my friends. He may throw me among strangers. He may make me feel desolate, make my spirits sink, hide my future from me—still, He knows what He is about.*

Blessed John Henry Newman, pray for us and for the unity in truth of Christ's Church.

George Weigel

... God's in the wilderness next door  
that huge tundra room, no walls and a sky roof –  
busy at the loom. Among the berry bushes,  
rain or shine, that loud clacking and whirring,  
irregular but continuous;  
God is absorbed in work, and hears  
the spacious hum of bees, not the din,  
and hears far-off  
our screams. Perhaps  
listens for prayers in that wild solitude...

- Denise Levertov