

SERMON: FOR THE FEAST OF THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD: 11/1/2026:
GEOFF CHADWICK: DIOCESE OF BUNBURY:
PS 29 AND MTT 3:13-17
MYSTERIUM TREMENDUM ET FASCINANS...

Psalm 29

¹ Ascribe to the Lord, you powers of heaven:
ascribe to the Lord glory and might.
² Ascribe to the Lord the honour due to his name:
O worship the Lord in the beauty of his holiness.
³ The voice of the Lord is upon the waters:
the God of glory thunders,
the Lord upon the great waters.
⁴ The voice of the Lord is mighty in operation:
the voice of the Lord is a glorious voice.
⁵ The voice of the Lord breaks the cedar-trees:
the Lord breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon.
⁶ He makes them skip like a calf:
Lebanon and Sirion like a young wild ox.
⁷ The voice of the Lord divides the lightning-flash:
the voice of the Lord whirls the sands of the desert,
the Lord whirls the desert of Kadesh.
⁸ The voice of the Lord rends the terebinth trees,
and strips bare the forests:
in his temple all cry ‘Glory.’
⁹ The Lord sits enthroned above the water-flood:
the Lord sits enthroned as a king for ever.
¹⁰ The Lord will give strength to his people:
the Lord will give to his people the blessing of peace.

Matthew 3.13-17

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’ ¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.’ Then he consented. ¹⁶ And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’

Mysterium Tremendum et fascinans...

How good is your Latin?

Can you work out what it means?...

Mysterium Tremendum et fascinans...

This phrase was coined by the Catholic Theologian Rudolf Otto in his book *The Idea of the Holy* in 1923.¹

It can be translated as an: *awe-inspiring and tremendously fascinating mystery*.

I wonder if you've known such an experience?

Perhaps it is your spouse or some adolescents that you know? They surely are *awe-inspiring and tremendously fascinating mysteries!*

At New Year, countries around the world put on light shows to create some sort of awe-inspiring spectacle. Perhaps you went to one or saw some on the TV. The latest involve drone displays- even depicting flying horses in the sky.

Awe inspiring, they are!

Fascinating, they are!

But are they a mystery?

Perhaps for those of us who wonder how computer programmers might get drones to fly in perfect formation. But in the end, we know it's all to do with clever technology.

¹ **mysterium tremendum et fascinans**, [Latin](#) phrase coined by [German](#) scholar of [religion](#) and [theologian Rudolf Otto](#) (1869–1937) to describe the essence of religious experience in his book *Das Heilige* (1917; *The Idea of the Holy*, 1923). The phrase can be translated as “an awe-inspiring and fascinating mystery.” It can be further glossed as a mystery (*mysterium*) before which humanity experiences awe-induced trembling (*tremendum*) and yet also finds enchanting and fascinating (*fascinans*); an [enigmatic](#) essence to which humans are both repelled and attracted. The phrase has been influential in the [study of religion](#), particularly the subfield of [phenomenology of religion](#), and often appears in studies of [mysticism](#) and [psychology](#) of religion.

You see, we must not confuse puzzles with mystery. Puzzles may be awe inspiring but are designed to be solved. Mysteries however have no solution. The wonder lies in the fact that they have no explanation.

That's what Rudolph Otto was getting at. For him *mysterium tremendum et fascinans...* was about meeting God. It's a description of *religious experience* that has no real explanation. It is not a puzzle to be solved. It's an encounter with God, which attracts and repels you at the same time. It's an experience of opposites, where God both draws us in, and simultaneously demands our caution. *Fascinans* demands our attention, yet we are humbled by *tremendum*. We are both pushed and pulled.

There's a prayer that expresses this so well:

*Lord, I want to love you, yet I am not sure.
I want to trust you, yet I am afraid of being taken in.
I know I need you, but I am ashamed of the need.
I want to pray, but I am afraid of being a hypocrite.
I need my independence, yet I fear being alone.
I want to belong, yet I must be myself.
Take me, Lord, yet leave me alone.
Lord, I believe; help me with my unbelief.
O Lord, if you are there, you do understand, don't you?
Give me what I need, yet leave me free to choose.
Help me work it out my way, yet don't let me go.
Let me understand myself, yet don't let me despair.
Come unto me, O Lord. I want you there.
Lighten my darkness, yet don't dazzle me.
Help me to see what I need to do, and give me the strength to do it.
O Lord, I believe; help me with my unbelief.*

(From "Prayers for the Twelve Steps" A Spiritual Journey, also the *Oxford Book of Prayer*)

I hope you've had such an encounter with God. Maybe not directly, but by being in awe of someone, something, or an event.

Awe-inspiring, if we allow it, will become *God-inspiring!*

So what's this got to do with today's readings?

It's the psalm that has caught my attention. The writer has been inspired by a literal thunderstorm experience. A reminder:

*7 The voice of the Lord divides the lightning-flash:
the voice of the Lord whirls the sands of the desert,
the Lord whirls the desert of Kadesh.
8 The voice of the Lord rends the terebinth trees,
and strips bare the forests:
in his temple all cry 'Glory.' (Ps 29:7-8, NRSV)*

This psalm expresses the writer's very own fascinating, awe inspiring, mysterious experience of God. A physical thunderstorm has pointed to the spiritual reality of God's majesty.

In our world, where there is much unbelief, we may be losing our ability to wonder.

Also our busy lives may crowd out our wonder. We are too busy to attend to the fascinating world around us.

Theres' a curious little incident in the book of Exodus, when Moses finds the burning bush. It goes like this:

*There the angel of the Lord appeared to [Moses] in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.
3 Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up."
4 When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am."
5 Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." (Ex 3:2-5, NRSV)*

So let's get wondering!

Of course, I cannot finish this sermon without mentioning the Baptism of Jesus, which is today's feast day.

This too, is a day of awesome wonder!

John the Baptist, who resists Jesus' request for Baptism is told:

'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness. '
(Mtt: 3:15, NRSV).

And then, wonder of wonder, and awe upon awe, the tremendous presence of God is released:

And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased. (Mtt 3:16-17, NRSV)

Mysterium Tremendum et fascinans indeed!

And an experience that would change the world!

Now we, may not experience such grand events, but if we do turn aside; if we do notice the little fascinating things around us, we will get a glimpse of God.

And a glimpse of God is all we need!

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.