
“LET ALL MORTAL FLESH KEEP SILENCE”

Version: 12 May 2020; 4, 5, 8 December 2020

Paraphraser: Gerard Moultrie (1864)¹

Source: The Liturgy of St. James² (3rd century CE)

Habakkuk 2:20 –

²⁰ But the LORD is in his holy temple;
silence before him, all the earth!^{j 3}

Sung versions: Fernando Ortega in his album *Storm* (published 2002); Benedictines of Mary, Queen of Apostles in their album *Angels and Saints at Ephesus* (published 2013).

J.R. Watson, editor and commentor, *An Annotated Anthology of Hymns* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 12-13 – “This hymn is based on the ‘Prayer of the Cherubic Hymn’ in the Liturgy of St James, which dates probably from **the fourth century**.... Although his text dates from 1864, in *Lyra Eucharistica*, Moultrie may have known the prose version. It began: ‘Let all mortal flesh keep

¹ See: https://hymnary.org/text/let_all_mortal_flesh_keep_silence - Moultrie, Gerard, M.A., son of the Rev. John Moultrie, was born at Rugby Rectory, Sept. 16, 1829, and educated at Rugby and Exeter College, Oxford (B.A. 1851, M.A. 1856). Taking Holy Orders, he became Third Master and Chaplain in Shrewsbury School; Chaplain to the Dowager Marchioness of Londonderry, 1855-59; curate of Brightwaltham, 1859; and of Brinfield, Berks, 1860; Chaplain of the Donative of Barrow Gurney, Bristol, 1864; Vicar of Southleigh, 1869, and Warden of St. James's College, Southleigh, 1873. He died April 25, 1885.

² Also, at Hymnary.org (see above) is this notation: “Evidence suggests that the Greek text of ‘Let All Mortal Flesh’ may date back to the fifth century. **The present text is from the Liturgy of St. James, a Syrian rite thought to have been written by St. James the Less, first Bishop of Jerusalem.** It is based on a prayer chanted by the priest when the bread and wine are brought to the table of the Lord.” Concerning Moultrie’s paraphrasing of the Greek text into these English lyrics: “Gerard Moultrie (b. Rugby, Warrickshire, England, 1829; d. Southleigh, England, 1885) translated the text from the Greek; his English paraphrase was first published in Orby Shipley’s *Lyra Eucharistica* (1864) and entitled “Prayer of the Cherubic Hymn.”

^j Ps 11:4.

³ *New American Bible*, Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Habakkuk 2:20.

silence, and stand with fear and trembling, and ponder nothing earthly in itself.' The hymn is a sublime command, and the invocation to silence adds emphasis to the awe-inspiring greatness of God, which is signaled in his hymn. **The is the opposite of those hymns which express the kindness and closeness of God ('What a Friend We Have in Jesus'): here God appears in majesty and light, accompanied by the glory of the heavenly host....** In the original Liturgy of St. James, it was used as the bread and wine were brought into the sanctuary. It brings out the full drama of the occasion."

1 - Let⁴ all mortal flesh⁵ keep silence⁶,
and with fear and trembling stand;⁷
ponder nothing earthly-minded,⁸

⁴ "Let" does not mean "to allow", as if asking someone for permission. It is a subjunctive form of a Command, as, for example, we hear when a host says to the guests: "Let us go to dinner now." The "subjunctive" form of this Command indicates that the speaker of the Command is showing courtesy to us so commanded, a courtesy appropriate to the Divine Majesty Who now descends to meet with all of us.

⁵ "mortal flesh" is a pleonasm, because we know of no "flesh" that is immortal ... unless that be the immortal flesh of the resurrected Christ.

⁶ Notice that the word is a noun, "silence", rather than the adjective "silent." So the command to "keep silence" is suggestive of the deliberate commitment of, say, a Monastic community to maintain silence throughout the Monastery. The command to "keep silence" is in the context of a spiritual Retreat a requirement, **so that day by day the Retreatants (those who come on Retreat and commit to doing it fully) learn how to hear things, both interiorly and exteriorly, that normally they completely miss.** Finally, the commitment to "keep silence" was one of the most striking contrasts non-Catholics used to notice about Catholics at their Eucharistic celebrations: Catholics were expected from the moment they entered the Church to "keep silence", no socializing invited or asked – this was God's time not our social time. Catholic practice has largely surrendered the commitment to "keep silence", though not utterly.

⁷ Obviously this "fear and trembling" is not about being "afraid" of God; rather, it is about having, such as did Isaiah in his "inaugural vision" in the Temple recorded at Isaiah 6, an experience so profound of God Himself unshielded that we are nearly overcome with awe, we feel so utterly "small" (in all ways) in the presence of the Holy Mystery. Notice how in "fear and trembling" we have both an experience of fear/awe which our body participates in – "trembling".

⁸ This command – "ponder nothing earthly-minded" – can mean, and with good reason mean, that we regularly (always?) come before the Lord with a much-divided consciousness, what in Zen language is referred to as the "monkey mind" (always jumping about, never focused and steady). We are commanded to get beneath all of the distractions with which our minds are occupied whenever we seek to become *really present* to God. But this command can also mean that we are enjoined to "put on the mind of Christ", as St. Paul enjoins, so that more and more we look at our reality with God's eyes. That is, we habitually try to comprehend the way of Christ within our too human, self-serving patterns of thinking, rather than being taught by the Spirit how to think and feel and act the way Jesus Christ did and does. Consider this from **1 Corinthians 2** – "For the Spirit scrutinizes everything, even the depths of God. **11** Among human beings, who knows what pertains to a person except the spirit of the person that is within? Similarly, no one knows what pertains to God except the Spirit of God. **12 We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the things freely given us by God. 13 And we speak about them not with words taught by human wisdom, but with words taught by the Spirit, describing spiritual realities in spiritual terms.** [*New American Bible, Revised Edition.*]

for⁹ with blessing in his hand,¹⁰
Christ our God¹¹ to earth descendeth,¹²
our full homage¹³ to demand.¹⁴

2 - King of kings, yet born of Mary,¹⁵
as of old on earth he stood,¹⁶

(Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), 1 Co 2:10–13.]

⁹ “**for**” means “because”, explaining why we have been commanded to “keep silence”, because God Himself is descending to meet us personally, to feed us with bread from Heaven.

¹⁰ A beautiful image – “**with blessing in His hand**” – meant to evoke the Eucharistic sacrament where the consecrated “bread from Heaven” is given us at Holy Communion through the hands of the Priest, who in such a moment stands in the place of Christ, who at the Last Supper gave us Himself when He shared the Passover Meal with his disciples.

¹¹ “**Christ our God**” is a less common way of speaking of Jesus Christ. But it clarifies that He Who now *descends* is Jesus Christ, our risen Lord, Who sits at the right hand of God the Father. In other words, this hymn appeals not to the earthly Jesus, Who lived and taught and gave Himself to the end. Rather, we attend to the *ascended* Christ (the completed Paschal Mystery: Passion, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension). This understanding suddenly gives multiple ways of understanding the “Second Coming” of Christ, because sacramentally Christ comes again whenever “two or three are gathered” in His Name.

¹² This traditional “**geometry**” of the spiritual life - God is *up*; we are *down*; Hell is *farther down*, etc. – is interesting, but also needing to be carefully thought about, lest a metaphor becomes in our mind something that describes something real! For example, we might prefer to say that God withdraws or hides Himself, but Who then emerges or reveals Himself. The former metaphors speak of *location* (where God is located); the latter metaphors speak of a mysterious personality trait of the Godhead “Who loves to hide” (how God acts). The metaphors make us think in very different ways, and so we should pay attention to the metaphors we deploy.

¹³ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the earliest 14th century noun “**homage**” has its meaning in a feudal master-vassal relationship: “Formal and public acknowledgement of allegiance, by which a male tenant declares himself the vassal of the king or lord from whom he holds land; the existence of such a relationship, typically entailing payment, oaths of fidelity, or obligations of service (esp. military); an instance of this.”

¹⁴ To our ears putting “**homage**” together with something that someone can “**demand**” of us makes no sense, because we too completely link “homage” with a *feeling* we either feel or do not feel. But (see the previous footnote), when “homage” means (as it does in this hymn) a formal expression of allegiance, established by oath, by which a vassal *owes* one’s Master unbreaking allegiance, only then can we understand why God, our Master, can *demand* our allegiance.

¹⁵ This stanza captures what the Creed does about the “crossing over” of “God the Father Almighty / Creator of Heaven and Earth” into “human vesture” – And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord / Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit / born of the Virgin Mary....” Notice that “**born of Mary**” rather than the more traditional “Born of the Virgin”. I prefer the former because it finds the location of freedom in Mary – all that she was as a young girl, and all of her willingness to participate so intimately in God’s plan – rather than her freedom confined to a particular fact of her sexual nature: that she had not had sex.

¹⁶ “on earth He stood” is what came as a result of the Incarnation: a human being on earth, the God-Man, born of Mary. But the *descent* that this hymn is about is not about a re-incarnation, or Incarnation 2.0, because the “body and blood” of Jesus Christ *remains* with the Second Divine Person for eternity. “Christ our God” *returns* in

Lord of lords, in human vesture,¹⁷
in the body and the blood,¹⁸
he will give to all the faithful¹⁹
his own self for heav'nly food.²⁰

3 - Rank on rank the host of heaven²¹
spreads its vanguard²² on the way,
as the Light of light descendeth²³

this descent; He does not re-incarnate.

¹⁷ “**King of Kings / and Lord of Lords**” cannot help but remind us of Handel’s “Hallelujah Chorus” of *The Messiah*.

¹⁸ “**in the body and the blood**” means, in this context, the consecrated Eucharistic elements. But we should not miss how this stanza is all about articulating the mystery, the wonder of God become fully, actually human with “body and blood.” Remember how significant, how necessary, it was for St. Thomas to confirm the resurrection Lord standing in front of them all was still “of body and blood”.

¹⁹ “**to all the faithful**”. Hmm. My friend and most significant mentor, Fr. Gordon Moreland, SJ, when he prays for the dead, for years now has not prayed for “the faithful departed”; rather he has prayed for “the faithful and the unfaithful departed.” This is exactly right. Just because we receive Communion, having the “right” to it by virtue of our Catholic identity, does not mean that we are faithful Christians at all. In fact, what we finally recognize about ourselves is that in contrast to the holiness of God, we are but fools, if we imagine that we are faithful in any sufficient way to that which God gives us.

²⁰ “**His own self**” – The greatest gift any free person can give to another is himself or herself. And because God’s freedom is so free, making by contrast our freedom look as something chained with a thousand chains, **God alone can truly give us Himself, fully**. (This is for many reasons, among which is that only God fully **has** Himself.) Such a thought, as the Psalmist exclaims, is “too high for me.” When we humans “give” ourselves to someone, we, because we are not so vastly free, succeed in **giving the best that we have to give, which is not, cannot be, our whole self ... because we are just not that free**.

²¹ “**the host of Heaven**” – We are reminded of the “heavenly host” that appeared to the Shepherds on the night that Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea. **This imagery reminds us that God is not alone, but One who dwells inside of intense and vivid relationships. It also reminds us that God’s power, in great part, comes from the fact that God is widely and profoundly connected with many**. If, then, a malign Power of earth would seek strike at God, that Power has a vast throng to contend with. Recall how important it was for *the* malign Power, for the Satan, to strive to get Jesus all alone (apparently) before he, the Satan, would make his moves on Him (e.g., the temptations in the wilderness, or Gethsemane).

²² “**vanguard**” – The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the noun “vanguard” - *Military*. “The foremost division of an army; the forefront or van.” This military language reminds us that Earth is “occupied territory” (an expression of C.S. Lewis). God knows that to descend to Earth means to expect hostility – “for men preferred the darkness to the light” (John 3, Jesus in his conversation with Nicodemus).

²³ God, even in stanza 3, is still in **the process of descending!** It creates a powerful sense of motion in this hymn to describe the descent as slow, majestic, awe-inspiring, and overwhelming, rather than, “in the twinkling of an eye”, for example, God just appears in our midst, as the resurrected Jesus abruptly appeared inside the Upper Room where the disciples hid, “for fear of the Jews.” The hymn wants us to contemplate a majestic arrival of God back to Earth in ways very reminiscent of Ezekiel’s vision of the “chariot of God” rising up from the rubble of

from the realms of endless day,²⁴
that the pow'rs of Hell may vanish²⁵
as the darkness clears away.²⁶

Wisdom of Solomon 18 –

¹⁴*For when peaceful stillness encompassed everything
and the night in its swift course was half spent,
¹⁵Your all-powerful word from heaven's royal throne
leapt into the doomed land,¹
¹⁶a fierce warrior bearing the sharp sword of your inexorable²⁷ decree,
And alighted, and filled every place with death,
and touched heaven, while standing upon the earth.^{m 28}

Jerusalem and beginning its long commute to Babylon.

²⁴ “**realms of endless day**” is such a beautiful line. But we notice “realms”, in the plural. This suggests that there is not just one Heaven, say, as in it having one address and one door only. “Realms” suggests a vision of Heaven that is filled with “heavens” (plural). A wonderful, surprising thought.

²⁵ “**the powers of Hell may vanish**” – What pure longing that we feel that God descend and do this, to erase from our Earth the hells into which we have trapped ourselves. So much pain, so much violence and ugliness inflicted on people, on the natural world, and on our sacred histories. Some Christian theologies like to articulate “spiritual combat” as what we Christians must engage, and then end up imagining that we are given the power to face down “the powers of Hell.” **Only God has such a power**; and that is what God came in the Divine Son to do.

²⁶ “**as the darkness clears away**” – This imagery suggests to me that “darkness” here is not a moral thing, but simply darkness inside of which things malign hide – notice the use of “as”. We might think of the literature of Vampires, whose great and terrible power *to take power* from humans (the image of sucking the blood of persons) can only happen in the dark. The Sun, if a Vampire is caught in its beams, is immediately destroyed. In the classic Vampire stories, the Vampire during the day must return into the coffin where it “sleeps” during the day. **When the Great Light descends, Evil vanishes, in the sense of, it runs in terror, looking for darkness in which to hide itself. God does not have to fight the evil Powers of Earth, or of any other place. Rather, God's holy Presence is enough to send the evil Powers fleeing away in terror.**

* These verses attribute to the personified “word” the actions of the Lord mentioned in Ex 12:13–17 (note the role of the “destroyer” in Ex 12:23 and compare Wis 18:22, 25).

¹ Wis 9:10; Ex 15:3.

²⁷ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**inexorable**” – “Incapable of being persuaded or moved by entreaty; that cannot be prevailed upon to yield to request, esp. in the way of mercy or indulgence; not to be moved from one's purpose or determination; relentless, rigidly severe.”

^m 1 Chr 21:16; Heb 4:12; Rev 1:16.

²⁸ *New American Bible*, Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Wis 18:14–16.

4 - At his feet the six-winged seraph²⁹,
cherubim,³⁰ with sleepless eye,
veil their faces³¹ to the presence,
as with ceaseless voice they cry,
“Alleluia, alleluia,
alleluia, Lord Most High!”

For stanza 4, see **Revelation 4** – In the center and around the throne, there were four living creatures covered with eyes in front and in back. ⁷ The first creature resembled a lion, the second was like a calf, the third had a face like that of a human being, and the fourth looked like an eagle* in flight. ⁸ The four living creatures, each of them with six wings,* were covered with eyes inside and out. Day and night, they do not stop exclaiming:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God almighty,
who was, and who is, and who is to come.”^{d 32}

²⁹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the noun “**seraph**” (plural is “seraphim”) – “By Christian interpreters the **seraphim** were from an early period supposed to be a **class of angels**, and the name, associated with that of the cherubim, was introduced in the Eucharistic preface and subsequently in the *Te Deum*, and thus became extensively known. **The presumed derivation of the word from a Hebrew root meaning ‘to burn’ (see above) led to the view that the seraphim are specially distinguished by fervour of love** (while the cherubim excel in knowledge), and to the symbolic use of red as the colour appropriate to the seraphim in artistic representations. **In the system of the Pseudo-Dionysius, the chief source of later angelology, the seraphim are the highest, and the cherubim the second, of the nine orders of angels.**”

³⁰ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**cherubim**” – “**One of the second order of angels of the Dionysian hierarchy, reputed to excel specially in knowledge (as the seraphim in love)**; a conventional representation of such an angelic being in painting or sculpture. As the Christian notion was simply super-imposed as a kind of gloss upon the Hebrew, the two are not usually separable in medieval Latin or English. Milton completely blends them, as did e.g. Durandus in his *Rationale Divinorum Officiorum* (1286). **In early Christian art, cherubim were apparently coloured red, but according to some, blue, the seraphim being red.** In modern art, a cherub is usually represented as a beautiful winged child, or as consisting of a child's head with wings but no body.”

³¹ As high (highest!) as these first two Ranks of the Angels are, they still feel compelled (cannot help it) to veil their faces to the Holy Presence. Even to them, the full disclosure of the Divine Trinity is awe-inspiring, perhaps frightening.

* *Lion ... calf ... human being ... eagle*: these symbolize, respectively, what is noblest, strongest, wisest, and swiftest in creation. *Calf*: traditionally translated “ox,” the Greek word refers to a heifer or young bull. Since the second century, these four creatures have been used as symbols of the evangelists Mark, Luke, Matthew, and John, respectively.

* *Six wings*: like the seraphim of Is 6:2.

^d Is 6:2–3 / Rev 1:4, 8; 11:17; 16:5.

³² [*New American Bible*](#), Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Re 4:6–8.