And she bore him a son, and he called his name Gershom: for he said, I have been a stranger in a strange land.

(Exodus 2:22)

1.

In Exodus chapter 2, we are told that Zipporah gave birth to a son, and that Moses named him Gershom because he, Moses, had ‘been a stranger in a strange land’. The name Gershom, in Hebrew, means ‘a stranger there’. In naming his son a stranger, Moses marks his own strangeness, recalling his flight from his first home, Egypt, his wandering exile in the desert, and his discovery of the satisfactions of domestic life in Midian. The naming also anticipates Moses’ ultimate return to Egypt, to a home that was always his but also never quite his, to free a people who are his people but also not quite his. We could say that Moses was both an Egyptian and a Hebrew, a prince and a slave. But we could just as well say that he was a stranger to both people, never quite an Egyptian, and never quite a Hebrew.

I have spent a lot more time in the West than I ever have in India, although I tend to describe myself, when forced, as Indian. I have spent much more time in churches than in Hindu temples. When I walk down the streets of Madras or Bangalore, everyone can tell, just from the way I walk, that I’m not really from there, that I’m an exile in my ancestral home. When I recall lines of poetry they are always from Homer or Wallace Stevens, never the great poets of Tamil or Sanskrit. I am in, a word, assimilated: unthreatening and familiar, indeed the embodiment of a certain modern political fantasy.
And yet, whenever I walk into a church, as I walked into this one today, I feel a small thrill of fear. I cannot but feel a sense of my own otherness, a sense that this is a space and tradition that is not really mine, no matter how welcome I have been made within it, no matter how legible its rituals and language are to me. Indeed, I could say this of Oxford generally, a place that has been my home, but also never quite, for the better part of the last decade. This is not meant as a complaint. It’s important to me to be reminded, from time to time, of my strangeness – reminded that my comfort in the institutions of the West is a legacy of a violent encounter between my ancestors and yours. What I fear is not my own difference, but being taken to be just like everyone else. I am afraid of being made so welcome in my home that I cease to be a stranger at all.

This paradoxical need to feel at home and at the same time a stranger may seem particular to those, like Moses, who are required to traverse and translate between different worlds: immigrants and refugees, of course, but also those, like many at Oxford, who find themselves in a world of privilege their friends and family back home would struggle to imagine. But I’ll submit that this paradoxical need only finds particularly acute expression in such cases. We all know something of this: the desire to belong, to be understood, to stand transparent in front of others – and yet, also to stand apart, to not be read, to be recognised as different, inassimilable, Other.

2.

Genesis tells not one but two stories of creation. In the first, God creates the heavens and earth, divides light from darkness and water from land, brings forth plants and animals, and finally creates two humans, male and female. In the second story, God creates a man from dust, before He has created the plants or animals; only after He sees Adam’s loneliness does God create a woman from his rib. Why these two, conflicting stories? In the first, we have a Creator God, separate from and in control of the world, a Divine Watchmaker. In the second we have the God of men: He breathes life into Adam, and asks him what he wants. This second God frets about Adam’s loneliness. But not just Adam’s loneliness. When God says that “[it] is not good that the man should be alone” (Genesis 2.18), is He not also speaking about Himself, His own divine loneliness?
The God of the first creation story, I’m suggesting, is a God who is content to be Other, to create a world of which he is master but not a part; while the God of the second creation story yearns for closeness, to be in the world, to be with man. On this reading, the Bible begins with the paradox I have described already, the paradox of wanting to be both inside and outside, understood yet strange.

Indeed we might read much of the Hebrew Bible as a playing out of this paradox. Traditionally, the stories of Abraham and Job are taken to be stories of faith, of man’s capacity to suspend his own judgment and trust in the Divine – what the philosopher Kierkegaard called the ‘teleological suspension of the ethical’. Abraham, hearing the voice of God, takes his one and only son to be sacrificed on a mountain in Moriah. Job – his family, property and body destroyed by God – insists that the “Lord gave and the Lord has taken away”. We are encouraged to read these stories as stories of unwavering faith. Of course, we don’t know what dark, sacrilegious thoughts Abraham might have had on that long walk with Isaac. And we shouldn’t forget that Job finally broke down and cursed his own birth. It’s too easy to think of either story as an account of one man’s unyielding faith. What if these stories weren’t even primarily about man? What if it were God’s drama, and not man’s, that was being acted out – God’s ambivalent need to be at once close and distant, known and incomprehensible?

Some time before God orders Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, He tells him of his plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham responds with an ethical challenge. “Wilt thou indeed destroy the righteous with the wicked?” he asks. “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Genesis 18:23-25). In other words, where does God stand?: within the ethical world of man, or outside it? God’s answer to Abraham is that he will not punish the righteous with the wicked, and indeed God, remembering Abraham, saves Lot. But the next day Abraham “went early in the morning…and looked down toward Sodom and Gomor’rah and toward all the land of the valley, and beheld, and lo, the smoke of the land went up like the smoke of a furnace” (Genesis 19:27-29). From Abraham’s perspective, God has revealed Himself to be separate from the ethical order, unanswerable to human demands for justice and fairness. It’s no surprise, then, that Abraham does not bother to argue with God.
when he is asked to sacrifice his one and only son. Of course, when the crucial time comes, God provides a sacrificial ram as a substitute for Isaac. But by then, it seems too late; Abraham, who had so often spoken with God, and questioned Him, and held Him to account, will never, at least as far as the Bible records, speak with God again.

4.

In the Book of Job we see a similar story, I want to suggest, of God’s ambivalence, His desire to be both close and distant, known and strange. God decides to test Job, His most loyal servant, by destroying everything that is dear to him. After days of quiet, faithful suffering, Job breaks down, curses his own birth, and cries out for a judge, a neutral third party to attest to his own righteousness: to acquit Job and convict God. God appears in a whirlwind, not to defend the justice of His actions, but to remind Job of his power. “Can you draw out Levi’athan with a fishhook,” He asks,

- or press down his tongue with a cord?
- Can you put a rope in his nose,
- or pierce his jaw with a hook?
- Will he make many supplications to you?
- Will he speak to you soft words?
- Will he make a covenant with you to take him for your servant for ever?
- Will you play with him as with a bird…
- No one is so fierce that he dares to stir him up
- Who then is he that can stand before me?
- Who has given to me, that I should repay him?
- Whatever is under the whole heaven is mine (Job 41:1-11)

God’s speech isn’t a defence of His actions, but an explanation of why no defence is needed. God is not merely all-powerful, but also Other, inscrutable, unknowable, fundamentally outside the world of human need and concern. And yet it is this same God who bothers to show up in the whirlwind, in order to give an account of Himself to a single, wretched man. God tells Job that His will not be held accountable by the human mind, but in so doing reveals His desire precisely to be held accountable.
There is a philosophical tradition, starting with Hegel, and elaborated most fully in certain versions of psychoanalysis, that sees this paradoxical need for communion and separation as central to the drama of human consciousness. Each of us starts life lost in an other; or rather, at the beginning of life there is no other, and no self, just the undifferentiated union of parent and child. The self is born through a traumatic act of separation, by coming to see itself as distinct from someone else. And yet that separation is never truly complete. For the self depends on the other in order to be itself. This is a desperate, unbearable situation. It is why we all, at some level, have the urge to destroy those we love, to assimilate the beloved into ourselves, to annihilate him or her completely.

What’s needed is a way through the paradox, a way of being at once familiar and strange, in communion but unassimilated. Christians, of course, will look to the figure of Christ, that paradoxical instantiation of both man and God. Perhaps in Christ God’s ambivalence is finally contained and expressed; perhaps by being born a man, God not only answers humanity’s longing, but also His own.

But perhaps we might also look, more mundanely, to our everyday encounters: when those most familiar to us suddenly strike us as utterly strange – and we are seen as strange in turn.