
THE NATURE OF GOD

A PERSONAL REFLECTION: BR NATHAN-JAMES SSF [DARRYL JAMES HARRIS]

Who or what is God; a question I am often asked by students during school visits. It is a question which is not easily answered as our human modes of language limit our clumsy attempts to communicate the Divine. It requires humanity to awkwardly express a transcendent personal lived experience in the simple immature sounds and scribbles we call language. We are asked to put into words something which can intrinsically only be experienced. The difficulty in answering this question then, I tell students, is that I cannot give them my experience of moments of awareness and communion with the Divine; which we call God. Even less, can I adequately put into words those moments of awareness and communion with the Divine and expect that this will be able to be transferred into their 'bank of experiences'; what it is like to see, touch, feel and indeed know God.

Knowing God is not an intellectual exercise it is an experiential existent pursuit; a lesson I learned from a Sioux Medicine Man, Grandfather Black Elk. He said that as long as we seek to know God through words and people we will never find God. That is, I can read all I want about who or what God is, or I can ask as many people as I can about who or what God is, but if I am not prepared to experience and meet God, then I will never know God. To know God, I tell students, requires us to do something hard, something difficult, and it requires us to be open to knowing God.

This is not necessarily a conscious thought, as one has in wanting to know the answer to a math question. It is preparedness in our very being to be open to see, touch, feel and indeed know God. Such preparedness requires total abandon of self, to one's ego. It requires a detachment of all that is of this world; to go empty, vulnerable and humbly into the world of, and for, others. It is in these moments of total abandon of self for others that Francesco Bernardone could look into the eyes of a leper and see God and that Mother Theresa could look into the eyes of a beggar and hear God. It is those moments of Grace that the veil between the human and the Divine is lifted and for a brief moment in time humanity experiences complete awareness and understanding of, and communion with, the Divine. It is there, in that moment of time, that humanity sees, touches, feels and indeed knows God. It is only here, in that moment of Grace, that all our theological study, preaching and participation in the worship and Sacramental life of the church can, and indeed does, make sense. It is here that we can know who and what God is; and how feeble are our attempts to articulate this in sounds and scribbles. Thus I can only describe the nature of God through my experiences of God.

Student's expressed concept of God is often an impersonal distant idle 'Being' at best, or at worst an irrelevant redundant myth. They look at the world around them in turmoil and suffering and view the notion of a loving creating God to be inconsistent; God either does not care for humanity, or simply does not exist. Either way God is of no consequence to them.

It saddens me to hear these students dismiss the possibility of discovering a personal and present God who is very much active in their lives. It saddens me because they miss out on the joy, peace and freedom that come from knowing and being in relationship with God. All I am able to do to help them to know the nature of God is to share with them the ways in which I have come to know and experience God in small moments of Divine Grace. It is only through my daily actions of being in the world, and being open to seeing the Grace of God in those moments, that I have been able to truly come to understand the nature of God.

One day I was observing a group of students playing basketball. A young lad walked by me; his shirt hanging out, shoelaces undone and his tie all twisted. I jokingly said to him 'you look as though no one loves you'. 'No one does, why do you think I'm at this [boarding] school' came his reply. 'Well God loves you'; the words came out before I had a chance to think. For a brief moment I could see him processing what he had just heard, he

smiled briefly and walked off. God's capacity to love us unconditionally is a powerful characteristic of God. I could see this in the face of someone who felt unloved, that felt loved even if momentarily.

A few years ago while doing a locum nursing placement on an old aboriginal mission a woman came into the clinic with infected mosquito bites. Her feet were all covered in dirt from the road and I had to wash them before I could attend to the bites. While sitting on the floor washing the dirt of her feet, a towel on my lap and a bowl of water at my side, it suddenly occurred to me that this was the very action of Jesus at the Last supper. For a brief moment I looked into the eyes of this woman and saw in her the face of Christ. I realised in that moment of Grace that God is with us in the daily actions of our lives. God is incarnate and dwells among us. God is not distant and impersonal but very much present in our daily lives.

A young man with Cystic Fibrosis was struggling to stay conscious. He knew he was going to die but wanted to die at home and not in his hospital bed. His ambulance transport was a low priority and was taking a long time. I sat with him while we were waiting, praying he would make it home. As I sat with my hand resting on his I could feel him drawing strength to stay conscious. I could feel too a presence with us in the room, which he appeared to be staring at. He managed to make it home, lay on his couch, called his dog to him and died. God is with us in our time of need. God is not an irrelevant being but one who shares in our sadness and sorrow, who gives comfort to the sick and dying. It is God who waits with us and welcomes us into his Kingdom when we die, gently lifting us into his arms as a mother embraces her newborn child.

'How do I know God exists', students ask, 'look at the world around you, into the eyes of the person next to you and tell me God does not exist' I often respond. My starting point for understanding the nature of God is to look at creation. For all our intelligence, science and the like humanity cannot bring life out of nothingness. There is something that brings so little as an atom into existence; there is something that precedes all existence, that which itself is neither created nor destroyed, that has existed before all and will exist even after all has been destroyed. I remember as a child laying down looking up at the night sky and being in awe as I realised that behind all the things I could see was God. I recall too the first time I saw a baby born, itself a symbol of the continuing re-creation of God in the world today. I am aware too that we are called to be part of the ongoing creation of God by caring for all of God's creation, nurturing and loving all that God has brought into being.

In assisting students to prepare for Confirmation I recall the following story. One lad I was helping to prepare for Confirmation seemed disinterested in the preparation activities. While he said he was keen to be Confirmed it seemed his heart was not really in it. A few days after he had been Confirmed I received a letter from him. He told me how since his Confirmation his life had changed. He felt the presence of God in his life. He and another lad helped start and facilitate a lunch time prayer group at their school and he started regularly attending and becoming involved with, Church. God comes to us in the Holy Spirit who communicates and reveals God to us. The Holy Spirit inspires us to hear the message of God.

At one of the schools I visit we have an early morning Eucharist before breakfast. It is not compulsory for students to attend. However, we often get between 10 and 30 students (depending on how cold it is) who brave the cold to come along. Most do not come to receive Communion. 'People come because you are here; they respect your life and want to show that', one lad said once; himself a proclaimed atheist. On one particular visit one of the lads who came every morning asked if there would be 'that thing' over the weekend. I explained that we had other commitments on Saturday and on Sunday we would be leading the service at the town Parish. He expressed his disappointment and asked to come along to the Sunday service, which he did, and participated fully, even taking Communion. Afterward I commented, 'you must be one of the most devout Anglicans in the school'. 'I'm not even a Christian, my parents aren't either' he said. 'But I'm very interested and want to know more' he added. God is not only present with us in the Sacraments of the Church, such as the Eucharist, but God reveals himself to us in and through the Sacraments, and invites us to enter into a personal, experiential relationship with God, in and through the Sacraments. This lad later asked me to send him a Bible so he could read about God for himself.

A man in his late 30s walked into a Church service after not attending Church since he was a teenager. At the end of the service the ministers stood at the front of the Church. 'We know that people in the Church have been hurt by the Church, they feel abandoned and wounded by things that have happened to them'. 'We stand here has representative of God and the Church'. 'If you have ever felt let down by the Church we want you to come

forward and tell us quietly, and we, as representatives of God and the Church, wish to acknowledge and apologise for how you were treated and how it made you feel'. The man went to front and revealed the secret he had been carrying for many years and the minister listened to his pain and grief, acknowledging and apologising for what had happened. The man left elated, a great burden lifted from him, in time he was able to let go of his pain and grief and move on in his life. *God is forgiveness, dare to forgive and God will be with you. God is forgiveness, love and do not fear.* The words of the Taizé chant express powerfully one of the realities of the nature of God, and that is forgiveness. God not only forgives us for the things we do but more powerfully shows us the love, peace and joy that comes from forgiving others. If we learn nothing about God from the life of Christ we should learn at least the overwhelming capacity God has to love and care for us and the great invitation that God offers us to participate in God's love and forgiveness through Jesus, God's only Son.

'Who or what is God'. I could talk about God in terms of the Divine Communion of the Person's of the Trinity. I could use words like *perichoresis* to refer to the compete communion of the Trinity who exist for others, through others and in others. Or I could refer to the *proper actions* of the Father as the source of all being. The proper action of the Son as revelation and communication, through the incarnation the Son acts to liberate humanity and establish the Kingdom of God. The proper action of the Spirit is creation through sanctification, to inspire humanity to hear the message of the Son and thus discover the reality of the Father. However, all this effort leads us away from becoming open and vulnerable and experiencing a living personal God who is very much present and active in our lives.

My earliest concept of God was one of fear. God was the all knowing judge who sat behind a table writing down every wrong thing I did, and when I died would condemn me to hell. It was the late 1970s and bible tracts were popular, as were films about the day of tribulation and the reign of the beast. The message was simple, if you did not believe in God, confess your sins and be saved, you would live a life of eternal punishment. I found myself saying the prayers of repentance on the tracts every night before I went to sleep to make sure I was saved. This image of God stuck with me well into adulthood. It was not until I discovered a personal, present and active God that this image of God changed.

Over the years that image of God, thankfully, has faded. I have experienced, by the Grace of God, a real and present God. I have come to know a God who is very much with us, in our joys, our sorrows, the high and low points of our lives. I have seen God in the face of a boy who felt unloved, in the face of a woman whose feet I washed, in the face of a young man who struggled for life, in the face of everyday creation, in the face of a boy filled with the Holy spirit, in the face of a boy seeking a personal experience with God in the Sacrament of Eucharist and I have seen God in the face of a man who experienced and learned forgiveness.

My image of God is not a fearful, vengeful God, but a God who is as real to me as my best friend is real to me. My image of God is one who creates, nourishes and sustains life, and from death brings new life. My image of God is one who invites us to enter into a deep relationship through which we become part of the Body of Christ and participate in the life giving work of the Son, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

God is not an impersonal distant idle 'Being'. God is not an irrelevant redundant myth. If we are willing and walk in the world vulnerably and humbly we can see in the turmoil and suffering of the world a God who does indeed care for humanity and all creation, a God who does exist, and a God who is very much relevant to our life today.