

## CHAPTER ONE: 'GOD'

In seeking to know Jesus we will be speaking a lot about 'God'. What are we referring to when we speak of 'God'? What was Jesus referring to when he spoke of, and prayer to, 'God'?

### Knowing

We know something when the judgment we make about it is in accordance with the way it is. We experience something through our senses, or we experience a feeling, an emotion, a thought or desire in our inner world. We know what we experience in the outer or inner world when we focus on it, and when our inquiry into our experience leads to insight, an insight that stands up to scrutiny. The first thing we must state is that God is not among the objects that we experience in either our outer or our inner world.

In the New Testament the Beloved Disciple expresses this truth when he states: 'no one has ever seen God' (John 1:18; see 1 John 4:12). Likewise Paul: 'No one has ever seen or can see God' (1 Timothy 6:16). They are stating a fundamental truth that they found in their tradition. There is a story in the Book of Exodus (33:18ff) in which Moses is portrayed as pleading to see God. God tells him that it is not possible: 'you cannot see my face' (Exodus 33:23). God assures Moses that he will pass close to him. God covers Moses' face and removes the cover only after God has passed by. Moses has to be content with seeing what the writer calls God's 'back'. That is to say, Moses has to be content with the Torah, which shows the path we must follow to be in communion with the mysterious God whom we cannot see.

Since we do not experience God we do not know God in the sense that we can form a certain judgment about God that is based on insight into experience.

### Believing

We don't have the time or the skill to check everything for ourselves. In every field of learning, a person has his or her contribution to make, but we would scarcely make any progress in any field without believing the results of other peoples' work. We can be mistaken and may have to adjust, but progress in knowledge requires belief. However, when it comes to God, everyone suffers from the same limitations: we cannot experience God. No one can. So we cannot believe in God based on the fact that other people experience and know God, and we believe them. No one can experience God. So no one can know God based on experience.

Sometimes we choose to believe because others believe. We trust them because of the quality of their lives and the good that flows from their belief. It is here that we must look when we speak of belief in God. We choose to believe in God because others whom we trust believe in God, and because their belief, while going beyond what we know, does not contradict it. We choose to believe in God because we see that their lives are richer because of their belief. We choose to continue to believe because we find that our lives are enriched by this belief.

As Christians we believe in God because Jesus believed in God. Jesus is our 'leader in faith' (Hebrews 12:2). As Paul writes: 'I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me' (Galatians 2:20).

## The concept of God

In every act of experiencing two things are happening. There is the experiencing of the object, and there is at the same time a consciousness of myself as the one experiencing. This is true when our focus is on something outside. It is also true when we reflect back and focus on ourselves. Consciousness of the self is an essential dimension of any act of experiencing.

Let us look first at the objects that we experience. None of them has within itself sufficient grounds for the fact that it exists. Everything we experience depends on something outside itself to account for its existence. Nothing would exist if there did not exist a non-dependent Reality that has within itself all that is needed to exist. It is this Reality that is the sustaining cause of everything that exists. We call this Reality 'God', 'in whom we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28).

A study of religions shows that people have sensed that there is this creating and sustaining presence in their lives, and have associated it with the 'spirit' of a grove of trees, or a spring, or a mountain, or fire, or thunder and lightning, or the sun, or the moon, or the star-studded heavens. Others associate this Reality with an event in their history. For the Israelites it was the Exodus from Egypt.

The time came when people came to think that there is only one ultimate Reality: that the sacred presence somehow intuited in myself is the same presence intuited in the grove of trees and in the spring, and in the words that come to us through special people who touch our hearts and confirm our sense of ourselves. People came to experience everything as connected, as belonging, as held in existence by one and the same sustaining Presence, one and the same 'God'. People came to see the whole cosmos as an explosion of God's Self-giving, and as expressing something of God.

This is reinforced when we focus on our consciousness. We experience objects *as we are*. Is it not true, for example, that when we are loved we seek differently, we focus differently, we see differently? It is reasonable from the fact that we are conscious of ourselves as loved to infer that there must be someone loving us. Similarly with the consciousness of receiving life as a gift, and the consciousness of being called, and being inspired, and led. We speak of such experiences as mystical. To a greater or lesser extent everyone is conscious of having such experiences. We infer from this that there must be someone loving me, gifting me with life, calling, inspiring and sending me, and we call that someone 'God'.

The history of religions witnesses to the myriad ways in which peoples have built up a concept of God. It is here that Jesus of Nazareth has a special importance. Being human Jesus could not experience God, but he was conscious of himself as deeply loved, and he shared the way he conceived God as Love. Impressed as they were by Jesus, his disciples grew to share Jesus' faith and, impressed by the quality of the lives lived by believers, people down through the centuries have wanted to believe in the God Jesus believed in, and they have continued to believe because of the way this belief has enhanced their lives. This belief has been the contribution of the Christian community to the world.

A key conclusion from the above is that when we use words to speak of God we must do so only with the most profound humility. We must begin with the realization that no words can comprehensively express a Reality that transcends our necessarily limited experience. We must begin also with the conviction that everyone has a contribution to make here: every culture, every thinker, every artist, every lover.

### Believing as Jesus of Nazareth believed

For the moment let us simply recall that Jesus lived a beautiful life, and that he saw his life as an expression of his communion with God. This is something that those who knew him well came to see. As one of us he shows what a human being is capable of when we live out our communion with God. Because he did this he revealed something wonderful about God.

The history of religion demonstrates how we project onto God our hopes, our desires, our fears, and our prejudices. Jesus cleared a way through all this. His disciples came to believe that God, the mysterious Presence that holds us in existence, is Love (1 John 4:16). Well, that is the best word that Jesus' disciples could come up with to speak of God as revealed by Jesus. They came to see that the universe is God's Self-gift. Everything is an expression of this Love. No wonder we look for love, and seek to know more so that we can be in deeper communion. We do not experience God as an object, but we do experience ourselves as receiving existence and as loved. When we choose to 'be-lieve' this (when we choose to 'be' in this 'love' that sustains us in existence), we believe in God as Jesus believed in God, and we live in gratitude to Jesus who showed us this amazing truth: that God, the sustaining source of everything, is Love.

Believing in Jesus includes a commitment to get to know Jesus better, to listen to his words and watch his way of relating to people. He believed in God as Love and his disciples came to believe that everything Jesus was and everything he said and did flowed from the intimate communion he experienced with the One whom he and his contemporaries called God.

Relating to God is fundamentally and necessarily an experience of myself, the knowing subject, as receiving existence, and as being loved and inspired. When we pause to enjoy communing with nature (the grove of trees, the spring, or a mountain, or the moon), we sense a sacred presence that draws us to the heart of nature, and at the same time mysteriously transcends what we are experiencing. This is especially so in a loving relationship. We find ourselves, to some degree, in communion with God.

Jesus wants us to share in his experience of being loved, and in the God who he believed was loving and inspiring him. Jesus drew people into this experience, an experience that was already happening in the core of their being, but they did not dare to believe it till he encouraged them by the example of his love. For Jesus God is the source of all he is. God is self-giving love. No wonder Jesus was open to everyone. No wonder he believed in people. He knew that he was loved, and he knew that this was true for everyone. We don't have to change our lives to be loved by God. Of course we want to change our lives, for we want to 'live and live to the full' (John 10:10). But this is not a pre-requisite for being loved by God. Quite the contrary, it is God's love that offers us the grace to change, if we would only believe in God's love and welcome it.

If by the word 'God' we mean the God that Jesus revealed, we have to make space in our lives to reflect on what we really long for. We want to belong. We want to be at home in the universe. We want to be in communion with God, which is to say communion with the sacred mystery that is at the heart of everything and everyone. God is what we all share, and we all belong to each other. We are one with the universe. Everything is a radiance of God. Jesus believed this. Any God who is less than this is not yet truly the God who sustains us in existence. Every creature yearns for communion with this God.

Jesus' religious heritage believed that the whole of creation is an expression of God's 'Word', an expression of God's will to share God's Being. This is expressed beautifully in the biblical drama where we hear God say: 'Let there be light' (Genesis 1:3). When, out of his communion with God, a prophet spoke, this too was received as an expression of God's 'Word', God's Self-revelation. The Prologue of the Gospel of the Beloved Disciple reaches its climax when he declares: 'The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us' (John 1:14). He is speaking of Jesus. The Genesis account speaks of human beings as created by God to be 'in God's image and likeness' (Genesis 1:26). Here in Jesus, at last in the history of the human race, is a man who is completely open to God's grace, completely open to welcome the love he experienced and to let it bear fruit in his relationships with people.

He experienced the weakness, the fragility that is part of what it is to be human (this is what the word 'flesh' expresses), but, as the Letter to the Hebrews states, while he was like us in everything (including all that is expressed in the word 'flesh'), 'he did not sin' (Hebrews 4:15). That is to say, he never said No to love, he kept trusting his experience of being loved (even while he experienced being crucified). This is how he revealed that God is love.

### Jesus and God

The New Testament uses the word 'God' nearly twelve hundred times. The reference is to the One Jesus believed in, prayed to, and spoke of, the God he called by the affectionate word 'Abba', the God he revealed in all he was, in all he said and did. In the man Jesus God is manifesting God's presence. When, before knowing Jesus, the disciples had sought an answer to the question 'Who is God?' they had looked to the Exodus event and seen God revealed as a liberator and saviour, as the God of faithful, covenant love. Now, having come to know Jesus, and having experienced a new covenant of love and a new liberation and fullness of life, they looked to Jesus to reveal God. They came to believe that 'God in Christ was reconciling the world to God' (2 Corinthians 5:19).

To answer the question 'Who is God?' Jesus' disciples learned to contemplate Jesus. To answer the question 'Who is Jesus?' they learned to look upon him as the presence and revelation of the God in whom he and they believed. They saw this in everything Jesus was, in everything he did and said. It was especially and finally seen on the cross: 'When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am' (John 8:28). 'I am' translates the Greek *ego eimi*, which translates a Hebrew expression that is linked to *YHWH*, the 'name' revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:15). Jesus revealed the One he addressed as Father (Abba) as the redeemer God. It was from the cross that Jesus' disciples experienced the power of Jesus' life-giving Spirit in their lives.

Matthew captures something of this in his final portrait in which he presents the exalted Jesus in glory on a mountain in Galilee. The Risen Jesus authoritatively commissions the Eleven to carry on his mission of bringing about the reign of God. He promises them in words that speak of the presence and power of God: 'Know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time' (Matthew 28:20). These words are an echo of the promise made to Joseph at Jesus' conception: 'They will call him Immanuel, a name which means God-is-with-us' (Matthew 1:23).

Jesus spoke of God. Jesus prayed to God. His disciples shared his belief because of the quality of Jesus' life, and the fruit of believing that they experienced in their own lives. By the end of the first century we find the Christian community embracing the practice of including Jesus when they spoke of 'God'. We find this in a letter written in the opening years of the second century to the Christian community in Ephesus: 'Our God, even Jesus the Messiah, was borne in the womb by Mary according to the dispensation of God, of the seed of David and of the Holy Spirit' (Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch, Ephesians 18). In his letter to the Christian community in Rome Ignatius writes: 'Suffer me to copy the passion of my God' (Romans, 6). It is possible that an example of this practice is found in the Prologue to John's Gospel, composed in the last decade of the first century. Some early manuscripts read: 'No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, who has made God known' (John 1:18). Other manuscripts include the word 'God' in speaking of Jesus: 'It is *God* the only Son'.

The early Christians lived in a world that associated the word 'God' with a range of objects, including the emperor. Christians wanted to include Jesus, of course in a way that is consistent with strict monotheism. What set the Christian use of the word 'God' apart from its use by every other group was that Jesus' disciples believed that to speak of God we must keep our eyes on Jesus. For them it is Jesus who reveals the one true God. This practice also witnesses to the fact that they were not content to admire Jesus while failing to listen to or watch God being revealed in and through him. The essence of Christianity is that in listening to Jesus and watching him, and in experiencing something of the intimacy of his prayer, we are truly being drawn into communion with God.

When we Christians say that Jesus is God, or say that Mary is the mother of God, we are not claiming that Jesus is another God. Jesus is a man, but in such an extraordinary purity that it is God, the one God in whom Jews and Christians believe, who is revealed in and through him.

Up to this point we have used the word 'know' to refer to a judgment of fact based on discernment of experience (see page 5). In Biblical language the word 'know' can refer to the experience that comes from communion in love. Using the word 'know' in this most intimate sense, Jesus assured his disciples: 'If you knew me you would know my Father also' (John 8:19). 'The Father knows me and I know the Father' (John 10:14-15). 'if you see me you are seeing the Father' (John 14:9). 'The Father and I are one' (John 10:30).

Christians came to speak of Jesus as having two natures. The word 'nature' is a scientific term born of observation. We come to know something's nature by observing what it does. When his disciples watched Jesus and listened to him his human nature was obvious. He showed them what we human beings can be at our best. But they came to see more than this: they

came to believe that what Jesus was saying and doing was revealing God, insofar as God can be revealed in a human being. That is Jesus' divine nature. He invites everyone to share this nature with him. In his Second Letter Peter prays that his readers 'may become participants of the divine nature' (2 Peter 1:4). Jesus wants us to share the intimate communion that he has with the one he believed is God, so that we, too, will speak God's words and be instruments to each other of God's life-giving love.

Jesus' followers were amazed at the purity and beauty of Jesus' love. Through Jesus' teaching and actions, they came to believe that God, the one God who is the source of all and who holds everything and everyone in existence, is Self-bestowing Love. They believed that the human Jesus was totally caught up in this divine love. It is God who heals through Jesus. It is God who loves through him. Jesus and the God he called 'Father' are one in a complete communion. It is their mutual love that is spoken of as the 'Holy Spirit'. Jesus believed that it was God's will that he share this Spirit of love with his disciples, and ultimately with every person on earth.

It was largely their experience of sharing in this love that explains the growth of Christian communities, and that attracted people to find in the Christian community a way of life that satisfied their search for meaning. As Paul wrote in his Letter to the Christian community in Rome: 'Hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Romans 5:5). And to the community in Philippi he wrote: 'If there is any appeal in the Messiah, any consolation from love, any communion in the Spirit, any movements of compassion and feelings of love, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being of one soul and one mind ... Let the same mind be in you that was in the Messiah Jesus' (Philippians 2:1-2, 5).

We cannot see the Transcendent God, but we believe that in watching Jesus we are watching how God reveals God's Self in a human being. The whole of creation is a 'word' of God. Jesus is the human expression (the 'incarnation') of God, and so reveals God in a human way. Jesus says: 'If you know me, you will know my Father also. Whoever sees me has seen the Father' (John 14:7, 9). When we speak of God's 'Word', we are speaking of God achieving God's will through creating and embracing in love. We Christians see Jesus as expressing this Word in a fully beautiful human way. We believe that this One God is constantly active in history, and Jesus helps us to see and feel what this loving presence and action is like. He enables us to find human words to direct us to better ways of thinking of God. He is a constant corrective to our tendency to misunderstand God by projecting onto God our limited concepts and dysfunctional habits of thinking.

The whole of creation exists because it is a finite participation in the very being of God. Everything is an expression (a limited, imperfect, but real expression) of God. Everything belongs, because everything is held in existence by, and gives expression to, the One God. This was Jesus' belief, and we are invited to share it. Never is our teaching concerning God intended to compromise Jesus' belief and our belief in the truth we share with our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters and others that there is one God. Seeing Jesus as the Word of God in human form reminds us to listen to all the ways God speaks to us. Watching Jesus inspired by God reminds us to wonder at the way God pours God's life-giving Spirit into each of us, embracing us in love and drawing us into communion with God. The God revealed by Jesus is a God of all-embracing, all-encompassing Love. Jesus' disciples began by getting to know Jesus.

It was obvious that he was human like them, but there was something quite special about him: his healing love. Gradually they came to see that this amazing love came from his special communion with God whom he called 'Abba'. Knowing (in the biblical sense) God as 'Father' Jesus knew himself as God's 'Son'.

The Gospel of the Beloved Disciple witnesses to the fact that misunderstanding the nature of the relationship between Jesus and God was already a factor in the debates of the last decade of the first century when the Gospel was composed. It is evident that Jews who did not accept Jesus as the promised Messiah (this group is called 'the Jews' throughout the Gospel) were debating with the Jews who accepted Jesus as the Messiah.

In John chapter 5 we find an account of Jesus healing a man. Because the healing took place on the Sabbath we are told: 'The Jews started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the Sabbath' (John 5:16). We are then given Jesus' response: 'My Father is still working, and I also am working' (John 5:17). The text continues: 'For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the Sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God' (John 5:18). That this is not how the Beloved Disciple understood Jesus' claim is clear from Jesus' response: 'Jesus said to them: Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that the Father is doing' (John 5:19-20).

When Jesus speaks of God he is speaking of his experience of being unconditionally loved. The Beloved Disciple expresses this beautifully in his Prologue: 'No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, who has made God known' (John 1:18). Jesus puts it this way: 'The Father knows me, and I know the Father ... The Father loves me' (John 10:15,17).

The Beloved Disciple in his Gospel constantly focuses on Jesus' communion with God: 'The one who comes from heaven (from communion with God in prayer) testifies to what he has seen and heard' (John 3:31-32). 'The one who is from God has "seen" the Father' (John 6:46). Jesus experienced himself as on a mission given him by God: 'The living Father has sent me, and I live because of the Father' (John 6:57). 'I know the Father because I am from the Father and it is the Father who sent me' (John 7:29).

Jesus' words flow from his communion with God. 'He whom God has sent speaks God's words, for he gives the Spirit without measure' (John 3:34). 'My teaching is not mine but the Father who sent me. Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own' (John 7:16-17). 'I declare to the world what I have learned from God ... I speak these things as the Father instructed me' (John 8:26, 28). 'I declare what I have "seen" in my Father's presence' (John 8:38). 'I know God, and I keep God's word' (John 8:55). 'Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak as from myself' (John 14:10). 'The word that you hear is not mine. It is from the Father who sent me' (John 14:24). In a prayer to God Jesus says: 'The words that you gave me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me' (John 17:8).

Jesus' words come from his prayer. So do his actions: 'My food is to do the will of the One who sent me and to complete God's work' (John 4:34). 'The Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that the Father is doing' (John 5:19-20). 'I have come from heaven (from his intimate communion with God), not to do my own will, but the will of the One who sent me' (John 6:38). 'I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of the One who sent me' (John 5:30). 'The deeds that the Father has given me to complete, the very deeds that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me' (John 5:36).

Jesus said, 'When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I AM, and that I do nothing on my own. The Father who sent me is with me and has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to my Father' (John 8:28-29). 'It is the Father living in me who is doing this work' (John 14:10). Jesus prays: 'I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do' (John 17:4). 'Jesus cried aloud: Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in the One who sent me. And whoever sees me sees the One who sent me. I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness' (John 12:44-46).

It was from his intimate communion with God that Jesus experienced the call and the grace to share with others the revelation that he received from God: 'I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me. And the one who sent me is with me. The Father has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to my Father' (John 8:28-29). 'I declare to the world what I have heard from my Father' (John 8:26). 'I declare what I have seen in the Father's presence' (John 8:38).

My aim in quoting from the Gospel of the Beloved Disciple is to state that neither Jesus nor his followers thought of Jesus as another God who claimed equality with God. On the contrary, Jesus acknowledged that everything he is comes from God, as do his words and actions. 'Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of the One who sent me and to complete my Father's work' (John 4:34). 'I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of the One who sent me' (John 5:30). 'The deeds that the Father has given me to complete, the very deeds that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me' (John 5:36). 'I do nothing on my own. It is the Father living in me who is doing this work' (John 14:10). 'Jesus cried aloud: Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in the One who sent me. And whoever sees me sees the One who sent me' (John 12:44-45).

Jesus is like us in everything except sin. Being human like us he did not, he could not, experience God as an object. He was conscious of himself as being loved, and, drawing on the tradition in which he was nurtured, he interpreted the experience as coming from the one he was brought up to call 'God'. When he declares that his whole desire was to do God's will, there was nothing blind or unthinking about his obedience. The word 'obedient' means listening (Latin *audiens*) and from close union (Latin *ob*). Jesus had to apply all his heart and soul and mind and strength to discern how best to respond to the love he experienced. He did this so beautifully and faithfully that his disciples attempted to follow his example and to live in the same Spirit. This is the essence of Christianity.

Jesus' disciples came to see him as the perfect human expression (the 'incarnation') of God. When we speak of Jesus' divinity, we are speaking of his intimate communion with God: 'I am not alone; the Father is with me' (John 16:32). Not everyone listened: 'You are trying to kill me, a man who told you the truth that I heard from God' (John 8:40). Such was the intimacy of this communion that Jesus could say: 'The Father and I are one' (John 10:30). Here again 'the Jews' misunderstood his claim: 'The Jews took up stones again to stone him. Jesus replied, "I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these are you going to stone me?" The Jews answered, 'It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you, but for blasphemy, because you, though only a human being, are making yourself God' (John 10:31-33). Jesus was never 'making himself God'. Nor were his disciples. Jesus' claim, and the claim of Christians, is that Jesus is 'God's Son' (John 10:36). He enjoyed such intimate communion with God that he could say: 'The Father is in me and I am in the Father' (John 10:38).

The Spirit of God filled his heart, his prayer, his life. Jesus revealed God in the love that flowed from this communion, a love, as noted earlier, that gave authority to his words, and healing and liberating power to his relationships. And Jesus wants everyone to experience this communion: 'The Spirit abides in you, and will be in you' (John 15:17). 'You will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you' (John 14:20). 'My Father will love you, and we will come to you and make our home with you' (John 14:23).