

Dear Friends,

I was sitting one day in a park nearby, enjoying the warm sunshine, ducks on the lake, trees rustling in the breeze - not thinking anything in particular, just relishing the experience of being there and a welcome moment of relaxation. Then some people I knew came along and started talking to me about something to do with religion, going on pilgrimage to Lourdes. I was happy enough to talk to them about that, but also felt slightly bemused because I felt I was in touch with God just by being there and did not need to think of anything else that we call religious.

I once heard the idea that there are two books written by God: the book of Scripture that is the basis of our religion, which has existed for about 3,000 years, but before that the book of Creation, which has existed for countless billions of years. We can read it to see the hand of God at work just as much we can through reading the words of Scripture. An American writer whose work I like, Sam Keen, says that the starting-point of all religions is the experience of one single person who goes off to be on his own, maybe in a desert place, and there has an overwhelming sense, powerful and unmistakeable, of the sacred, the holy, of God. We can think of Moses, Christ, Confucius, the Buddha. What he sees is that the world is one: there is no division of physical and spiritual, rather everything that exists is filled with and given life by the presence of God. Moses' burning bush is a brilliant symbol of the God-given oneness of the world, the natural plant that burns with the radiance of God and so is not consumed.

Because the founder's experience of God is so personal it cannot easily be communicated to others, but being undeniably and recognisably authentic it marks him out as a person of immense power and attraction, who naturally draws other people to him, people who become his followers, who want to learn from him, imitate him and share his knowledge of God.

The followers try to convey the impression the founder makes upon them by telling stories about him and his great works, miracles of healing, feeding and transforming, of his own overcoming of death itself. As well as telling stories, being human we also want explanations that make sense. We want to use our minds, our ability to think and reason and devise theories or ideas of who and what God is - the God whom the founder knows at first hand in the depths of himself and in the world at large. And so our stories and theories inevitably drift ever further away from the original experience of the founder. They are not so much misleading, but simply cannot express the fullness of what the founder knows. They can, however, become not just remote from the knowledge of the founder, but downright misleading, if they function as a substitute for the experience of God, an end in themselves. Rituals and doctrines, beliefs and doctrines have their place in religious systems, but it is very much a *secondary* place: it comes after the primary knowing of God in ourselves and in the world. Without that they have no meaning.

A writer I have come to admire is the Benedictine John Main, who was at Ealing Abbey, and taught the prayer of meditation which is constantly spreading around the world when people want only to know not religion, but God. He says that meditation 'is about deep conversion of heart. Religion is meaningless if it is confined to external and ritual acts of worship. Liturgy and ritual only have meaning when they are inspired by conversion of heart.'

This can be one of the dangers of religion: that if we do what we think are the right things and believe the right things, this means that we truly are in touch with God. We have many warnings in the Gospels against this danger in the example of Jesus himself. Think of the times he upbraids the disciples for getting it wrong, for having minds too small to encompass what he is wanting to show them of God. Or think of how often he berates religious leaders who place too much reliance on the letter of the law and ignore its spirit: those who lay heavy burdens on others - you must do this, you must believe that - but do not lift a finger to help them bear the burdens! We can certainly think of parallels in our own Christian religion!

This Sunday after Pentecost is unusual in our calendar as being a day on which we celebrate not an event - the Resurrection, the coming of the Spirit; or a person, Christ or the saints - but an idea, that God is one. If it stays at that level, it can easily degenerate into nothing but a sum in arithmetic, a mathematical conundrum - how can three be one? It may be more helpful to think rather of how we experience God, how we know God. We know him as Father, the one who creates and gives life to everything; we know him in our own human make-up, as sharers in the human-divine life of Christ; and we know him in the depths of ourselves, in the Spirit dwelling within us, the Spirit poured into our hearts. It is clear from Scripture that people experienced God in these three ways from early times. The three angels whom Abraham welcomed into his tent and gave hospitality to are described very much as a sign or symbol of the triune God. The doctrine of the Trinity came in time to be formulated and expressed in exact theological terms, which can seem rather overbearing, but this is only codifying how people already knew God - not as a theory, but as a reality, a real presence in their lives.

It is also a noticeable feature of human experience that the more deeply and truly people do come to know God, the more they know him as one - going beyond all our attempts to describe, explain and codify his nature, a mystery not a puzzle; a mystery we can only know not in our minds, but through love, through giving of ourselves to God.

A fine passage from the Year A readings for Trinity Sunday gives us the ending of Paul's second letter to the church of Corinth:

*Brothers and sisters, we wish you happiness;  
try to grow perfect; help one another. Be united; live in peace,  
and the God of love and peace will be with you.  
Greet one another with the holy kiss. All the saints send you greetings.  
The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God  
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*

The simplest and deepest insight we have is that God is love. And so it is above all in the giving and receiving of love that we will know God best. The more we are united with each other in love, the more we will know the one God who draws all things together in himself.

Wishing you every blessing, Fr. Robin

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