

## INTRODUCTION: RECONNECTING WITH GOD

In the 42nd Psalm the Psalmist cries "As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God." He has lost his sense of personal contact with God. Today a great many people share that experience. When in 1882 the prophetic German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche announced that God was dead it was a sign we were entering a period when belief in God was becoming problematic. Today increasing numbers of people find it hard to believe in God or find such belief unreal. Quite a few dismiss religious faith as obviously untrue without even seriously considering the possibility that it involves anything that passes for reality.

Today the great challenge for the Church is "In a world where the old certainties have gone can we still make God real? Can we reconnect our lives to God?" These studies are offered in the conviction that we can; that the experience which the Psalmist sought and found is still open to us today.

George Buttrick once preached a sermon on Psalm 42 called "The Thirst for God." It began with a reference to a novel called *The Great Desire* that told of a young writer coming from New England to New York and asking people the question "What do you want?" Perhaps, said Buttrick, Rudyard Kipling could have given him the answer, for when he stirred restlessly in a serious illness and the nurse asked him "Do you want anything?" he murmured in reply, "I want God." This is still our deepest need.

## STUDY ONE - HEARING THE STILL SMALL VOICE

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) is often called either "the father of modern theology" or "the father of liberal theology." Much modern Christian faith owes its origin to him. He was born into a pious family but then began to ask questions. He found that he could not believe much of the theology with which he had grown up but that God was still real in his life. Out of this experience he came to see that what is basic to religion is not theology (which often changes) but the underlying religious experience. It is this living experience which is vital to recover faith in God.

Quite simply the most powerful evidence for the existence of God is the fact that in every human society that we know people have experienced the presence of the divine. Theologies come and go, ideas about God change, but always there are people who hear a still small voice or encounter a marvel, mystery and wonder in which they find an inner meaning to life. As A. N. Whitehead wrote, "Only at rare intervals does the deeper and vaster world come through into conscious thought or expression, but they are the memorable moments of life. It is then, if ever, that the door to the invisible world silently swings open, and something of the wonder and grandeur of the spiritual universe is flashed upon the soul".

Such experiences are at the heart of religion.

Read

Isaiah 6:1-8

Mark 1:9-1

Now compare these experiences with that described by Leslie Weatherhead in a train at Vauxhall:

"For a few seconds only .. the whole compartment was filled with light. This is the only way I know in which to describe the moment, for there was nothing to see at all. I felt caught up into some tremendous sense of being within a loving, triumphant and shining purpose. I never felt more humble. I never felt more exalted. A most curious, but overwhelming sense possessed me and filled me with ecstasy. I felt that all was well for all mankind ... an indescribable joy possessed me. All this happened 50 years ago but even now I can see myself in the corner of that dingy, third-class compartment ...and the Vauxhall platform outside with milk can cases standing there. In a few moments the glory departed - all but one curious, lingering feeling. I loved everyone in that compartment. It sounds silly now, and indeed I blush to write about it, but at that moment I think I would have died for any one of the people in that compartment"

(*The Christian Agnostic* P40).

Paul Tillich describes his own experience: "We experience moments in which we accept ourselves, because we feel we have been accepted by that which is greater than we. If only more such moments were given us! For it is such moments that make us love our life, that make us accept ourselves, not in our goodness and self-complacency, but in our certainty of the eternal meaning of our life" (*The Shaking of the Foundations* P164).

I could personally think of half a dozen such experiences in my own life. For example, on one occasion I remember walking on Tennyson Down on the Isle of Wight. From the hillside you could see the sea and the sky. And suddenly everything seemed full of wonder and glory. And I knew that beauty like this did not come by chance: there was purpose and meaning to it and God was everywhere.

*Sharing:*

Have you ever experienced any thing of this sort? If you have, are you willing to share it?

*Consider:*

On the title page of *The Christian Faith*, Schleiermacher placed a motto from Anselm: "He who has not experienced will not understand". Do you agree?

*Consider:*

"God is real. The Christian life is about entering into a relationship with God as known in Jesus Christ. The relationship can - and will - change your life" (Marcus Borg).

## **STUDY TWO - DEVELOPING AN ADULT FAITH**

Part of the reason that many people have lost faith today is clear enough. There has opened up a gulf between traditional faith and modern knowledge and ideas. In that crunch, faith sometimes gets lost.

You see it so often with young people. A child starts off believing in God. Then they begin to grow up. Their childhood ideas are challenged and they can't make sense of faith anymore. As a parent I watch my own children beginning to struggle with this. How many people have given up on faith because the picture of

God they have is too small? If we are to reconnect with God, one of our most basic needs is to find our way to an adult faith.

In *Table Talk* Donald Hilton recalls an article in *Reform* some years ago which told of someone who at the age of 11 said to an adult confidante, "I used to think that God lived behind the curtain behind the minister, but I looked one day and there were only bricks". To achieve an adult faith she had to adapt her childhood faith to an adult one.

Today we have to let our ideas of God grow. In his book *The God We Never Knew*, Marcus Borg tells the story of his spiritual journey. He grew up in a traditional Church background with a very limited view of God. The minister of his Church was a "finger-shaker". He literally would shake his finger at the congregation as he preached. To Marcus Borg it seemed that God was something similar - always shaking his finger at us. This was God the lawgiver and judge. God the big eye in the sky. "Though told we were forgiven, we knew it was a close call". He saw God as a remote being who every now and then intervened in life to do something magical. Then what happened to many young people happened to Marcus. In his teens he began to doubt the existence of God. The more he learned about science, the less he could make sense of God. His faith drained away.

So far the story is like that of many other young people. But what happened next was different. Marcus went to Chicago University and studied theology. He faced the big questions: God, evil, pain, other religions. He discovered that the Jesus he had learned in his childhood was not historically true - the real Jesus was a far more human figure than he had ever imagined. Then in his mid-thirties he had a number of moments when in the wonder of nature he met with something holy, wonderful, and awe-inspiring. He gained a new understanding of God. "I realized that God does not refer to a supernatural being 'out there' but to the 'holy mystery which is around and within us'". God is Spirit, present to us all the time. This God was bigger than anything he could imagine.

If we want to reconnect with God, one necessity is for us to develop an adult faith.

1. *Read* Ephesians 4:11-16. Is thinking dangerous for the Christian or should a mature Christian grow in their understanding of the faith? Can you worship God with your mind?

2. *Read* Hebrews 5:12-6:3 How would you see the difference between milk and solid food? If your thinking never grows, is this a sign there is something wrong with your faith?

3. *Read* I Corinthians 14:20. What are the dangers of a religion which is mentally childish?

*Share* together your earliest childhood memories associated with God. Do any hymns or prayers stand out?

Was there a period in your life when your understanding of God changed? Does Marcus Borg's story relate to your life?

How do you think of God now?

*Consider:* "Some of us believe in a good God because we have long ago given up early childish, naive ideas of God that once we held" (Harry Emerson Fosdick). Does this make any sense to you?

### **STUDY THREE - OPENING THE HEART TO GOD**

"Do you believe in God?" I asked a fellow minister recently. "Sometimes," she said. I expect that speaks for many of us. Since God is the one in whom we live and move and have our being we are always in the presence of God. But often it does not seem like that. Often we are blind to the presence of God, separated from the Spirit, unconscious of any love. "God is always present to us and to all things; it is that we, like blind persons, do not have the eyes to see God" (Augustine).

The experience of the absence of God is common. The Psalmist felt it. Jesus cried, "My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me." Most of us have sympathy with Tennyson when he wrote

"I stretch lame hands of faith, and grope,  
And gather dust and chaff, and call  
To what I feel is lord of all,  
And faintly trust the larger hope".

It is wise to honestly recognize the absence of God as a common part of the lives of imperfect believers. "My soul cries out for the living God". How can we open the heart to God? I suggest five pathways into God.

#### **1. CULTIVATE SILENCE**

As a minister I know how often work expands to fill up the time available. Always there are sermons to write, calls to make, deadlines to meet. If one is not careful one is simply never still. But I have to learn that I cannot be of any help to anyone unless I have moments when I can be quiet. For all of us this can be difficult but sometimes we all need to change the pace and slow down; find renewal and refreshment.

Recently I was talking to a Scot. "To be honest," he said, "I'm not a religious person. But recently I was on holiday on the Isle of Mull and we climbed Ben More. It was a howling, windy day. But then suddenly, as we reached the top, the wind dropped. There was silence. And everywhere were the mountains and lochs stretched out. It was awesome. For the first time in my life I knew what people meant when they said they believed in God".

*Consider*

"All the evils of life have fallen upon us because men will not sit quietly alone in a room" (Pascal).

*Read*

I Kings 19: 8-12

## **2. SPEND TIME IN PRAYER**

There are some people who seem to pray as naturally as they breathe. I am not that fortunate. Prayer is not always easy for me. There are times when I do not seem to be able to pray in any worthwhile way at all. But when that happens I know it is not because there is something wrong with prayer, but because there is something wrong with me. And there are other times when prayer does become an inner source of power.

Busy as life is I have found that even a few moments of restfulness can be refreshing. When I'm feeling disturbed there is nothing more wonderful than to sit down for a moment, slow down the breathing and let my body relax. I have found Isaiah 30:15 "In returning and rest shall you be saved: in quietness and confidence, shall be your strength" to be one possible prayer for this purpose. You can match your breathing to the words. Breathe in ... in returning and in rest, breath out.. shall you be saved. Breathe in... in quietness and confidence, breathe out... shall be your strength. It's amazing what prayer like that can do. In only a moment something happens to your muscles and your mood. Try it for yourselves. It doesn't take away our problems but it makes us better able to live with them.

*Try this prayer:*

Lord Jesus Christ you are the light of the world, fill my mind with your peace and my heart with your love.

## **3. BE REGULAR IN WORSHIP**

Another way God can become real is in worship. Coming to a Church not just when the mood takes us but regularly is one of the ways we put ourselves where God can speak to us. Worship can open the heart, shape the imagination and nourish our inner life.

One can never tell through which part of worship God will speak. Sometimes it may be in the prayers. Sometimes music can speak more powerfully than words. Sometimes the sacraments can mediate the presence of God. Nor should we miss the importance of preaching. Preaching is a sometimes activity. Sometimes it can be so banal or irritating as to make one wonder how intelligent people can possibly sit through it. But sometimes at least one can begin to understand what Jitsuo Morikawa meant when he said the "hope of the world resides in preaching." Sometimes one can understand the thrill of a gospel that begins "Jesus came .. preaching" (Mark 1.14).

*Consider* what Paul Sherry said of the preachers of New York's Riverside Church: "In and through their sermons God has come to us in our times of need; we have been driven to our knees in repentance for our sin; visions of a world closer to God's intention have danced before our eyes; and despair has again and again been replaced by a renewed hope" (*The Riverside Preachers* Pilgrim Press, New York 1978 P 7). Has this ever been true for you?

## **4. OPEN THE SCRIPTURES**

The Bible isn't an infallible book. Some parts of it are hard to understand. But sometimes when you read the Bible the most amazing thing happens. You are

reading what happened long ago and far away when suddenly it begins to speak about your own life. And then you know what is meant when we say the Bible can become the Word of God.

Let me try to tell you how this happens with me. I have an academic training in theology. Often I study the Bible from that point of view. I want to understand who wrote it and why. I want to study the way the tradition has been shaped. I'm studying then as any scholar would study an ancient text. But then, suddenly, it happens. It stops being like that at all. The words leap out of the printed page and begin to live.

I remember once, when I was going through a very difficult period in my life, hearing the words of the 23rd Psalm: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me".

How often I had heard those words before. How well I knew them. And yet at that moment it was like hearing them for the first time. Suddenly I knew what they meant in a way I had never known before. The point was that now they were spoken to me. "Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me". That was God's promise. And it was true.

## **5. DO SOMETHING LOVING**

God's nature is not simply defined in the Bible as pure love, but the moments when we love are the moments when God's presence is most realized. The barrier between us and God can often be our own selfishness and self absorption. We get wrapped up in ourselves and become terribly self-centered. We get greedy. Or we get hurt by life and become unwilling to commit ourselves to anyone. Or we get brutalized by some experience. Or our own health begins to fail and we lose the capacity to care about anything beyond our own pain. Whatever the reason, many people grow harder as they grow older. We develop a protective shell of self-interest, a shell so thick that self-interest becomes the one spring of action and gratification.

The danger is that we never achieve the ability to care for others, or if we do find it we gradually lose it. There are perfectly respectable people by the thousands who are no longer moved by what happens to others, who no longer care greatly or care deeply. I think of the man I was speaking to the other day. "As long as it doesn't affect me or my family," he said, "I don't give a damn." People lose the ability to care for anyone else but themselves. When we become like that we fail others around us, but just as seriously we do something to ourselves.

Dorothy Day was an amazing American woman who started as a Communist and became a Catholic. During the Great Depression of the 1930s she worked with the very poor. She helped with the bread lines, she went on picket lines, she struggled against racial segregation. She was one those who gave through their compassion. And in her spiritual reflection on all this she took a phrase she derived from Dostoevsky: "Hell is not to love any more".

*Consider*

Jeremiah 22: 16 "He judged the cause of the poor and needy... Is not this to know me? says the Lord".

1 John 4:16b "God is love and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them"

#### **STUDY FOUR - FINDING GOD IN SUFFERING**

Life can be extremely difficult. The other day I was coming out of a psychiatric clinic in Swindon after a pastoral visit and passed a lounge with two locked doors. Two young girls were sitting in the lounge. There was no sign of any hospital staff and they opened the inner door. The outer door wouldn't open. "Just give it a push," said the girls. So I did. "No, actually a kick is better". I realized I was being had. The girls took their chance. "You're telling me you think there's a God of love?" said the first. She scoffed "That's a load of crap". The other shook with anguish. "I've been going to church but I'm losing faith. Why do the innocent always suffer while the wicked get away with it?"

Life is always throwing that kind of question at us. Jesus asked it. He died on the cross suffering extreme physical pain - open wounds, running free with blood, infested with swarms of flies, the scathing and burning heat of the sun, and the taunts and heckling of sadistic men. While he was dying, Jesus suffered emotionally as he recalled how one of his friends had betrayed him, another had denied him, all of them had run out on him. And then in the desolation of that moment, he cried out in those shrill and haunting and disturbing words, "My God, my God, why?"

The question is unanswerable and we do better not to try. But sometimes the fact is that it is in tragic times that God becomes real. Abraham Lincoln was a sceptic in religion. He grew up in a very narrow fundamentalist church full of hellfire. He rebelled. After the service he would gather a group of boys around him and mock the sermon in a derisive voice. Then when he was President, life took a hand. His son William became ill and died with typhoid. Lincoln was totally devastated with grief. Long after the burial he would shut himself in a room so he could weep alone. At night he would dream of his son.

Now his attitude to religion changed. Now it was personal in a way it had never been before. He underwent what he called "A process of crystallization" in his religious beliefs. He found comfort and reassurance in the Bible. One evening an old friend found him reading it. "Well" said the visitor, "if you have recovered from your scepticism, I am sorry to say I have not." Lincoln replied, "You are wrong. Take all of this book and you will live and die a happier and better man." On another occasion, taking a Bible he said "This great book is the best gift God has given to man."

Did anyone ever tell you life was going to be easy? If so you were misled. The truth is, life is frequently hard and tragic. Such experiences raise unanswerable questions and even the spectre of a cosmic sadist. But sometimes it is in those very moments that we most powerfully meet with God. As William Sloane Coffin says, "Few of us are naturally profound, we have to be forced down".

Nan-in, a Japanese religious teacher, was visited by a university professor who wanted to learn about his religion. After a while Nan-in graciously brought tea to his guest. He poured into the visitor's cup until it was full - and then kept on pouring.

Finally the Professor couldn't restrain himself. "It's full," he shouted. "Stop pouring!" The teacher replied, "Like this cup, you are full of your opinions. How can I show you God unless you first empty the cup?"

Suffering empties the cup. It renders us available again to all kinds of new truths. It faces us with the serious questions that otherwise we might never face. The difficult times of life can be used to make that connection with God.

In the apple growing section of the state of Maine, Harry Emerson Fosdick saw an apple tree so laden with fruit that the branches had to be propped up to keep them from the ground. When he inquired about it, the owner of the orchard said "Go look at that tree's trunk near the bottom". Then he saw that the tree had been badly wounded by a deep gash. "That is something we have learned about apple trees" said the owner of the orchard. "When the tree tends to run to wood and leaves and not to fruit, we wound it, gash it, and almost always - no one knows why this is the result - it turns its energy into fruit". How often I have seen that happen with people.

*Read:*

Romans 8:38-39. Have you ever experienced this?

*Consider:*

The important question is not **why** do we suffer, but **what** can we make of our suffering.

*Consider:*

"I never try to explain evil. If anybody asks me to explain suffering, I say I can't. I say I have a power that can surmount it." (Maude Royden).

*Consider:*

"The world breaks everyone, then some become strong at the broken places"  
Ernest Hemingway *A Farewell to Arms*.

## **STUDY FIVE - FINDING GOD IN CHRIST**

Some years ago the actor Alec McCowen gave a public reading of Mark's gospel. Reflecting on it he said: "Something absolutely marvellous happened in Galilee 2,000 years ago". That Jesus was a man in every normal sense of the word is without question. They said of him, "Is not this the Carpenter's son?" He experienced weariness, hunger, thirst, suffering and death. He made no pretence that he knew everything. He prayed to God as a human being to his maker. "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me. Yet not my will but yours be done". Sometimes he was astonished, sometimes tender, sometimes wracked by anguish - once we are told the sweat fell from him like great drops of blood.

I am fascinated by this strange Galilean. He is a Jew. But he breaks the boundaries of racial exclusiveness. "I tell you not even in Israel have I found faith like this". He breaks through social barriers. Lepers are feared and despised. He reaches out his hand and touches them. He is amazingly sensitive. They bring to him a woman taken in adultery and he says those marvellous words, "Let him who is without sin among you cast the first stone". What an extraordinary quality this life



has! One of Shakespeare's characters says to another, "He hath a daily beauty in his life that makes me ugly". I feel that about Jesus of Nazareth.

Above all there is Calvary. They break his body but somehow a strange beauty is born. As he dies his life flares incandescent at the last. He has time for the thief by his side. "I tell you this. Today you will be with me in Paradise". He turns to his killers. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do".

In the life of Jesus heaven and earth meet. The disciples saw his humanity but they saw something else. The more they knew him, the more it seemed to them that God had come to them in Jesus. So Peter says, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." He is not denying the humanity of Jesus, but he is proclaiming the revelation of God in him. As the disciples looked at Jesus they saw, as Paul put it, "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God" in his face.

Says Peter to Jesus; says Peter to the carpenter of Nazareth; says Peter to the one who spread out his arms on the cross and said 'Father forgive them for they do not know what they do'; says Peter to **him**, "You are the Son of God". What is God like? God is like Jesus. Says Michael Ramsey, "God is Christ-like and in him is no unChrist-likeness at all." Says Harry Emerson Fosdick, "Whenever I say God, I think Christ." Think what that means. Look at Jesus - loving, forgiving, suffering with us. That is what God is like. Says Peter to Jesus, says Peter to the friend of sinners, the man for others, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." The basic Christian conviction about Jesus is in John's Gospel, "He who has seen me has seen the Father".

For me the simple culminating heart of faith is this. I go to Calvary and see Jesus take upon himself the sins of the world. There is all that makes faith most difficult. Looking at Calvary I might conclude that life was a ghastly farce. Or that God was utterly indifferent. I might well feel:

"As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods,  
They kill us for their sport".

In fact the more I look at Calvary, the more I see the love of Christ, the more I believe that, despite everything, life has point and meaning and God is real and loving. Isaac Watts says it for me:

"Were the whole realm of nature mine,  
That were an offering far too small,  
Love so amazing, so divine,  
Demands my soul, my life, my all".

*Read:*

Luke 23:26-49

*Consider:*

If Jesus is the revelation then 3 things follow:

- 1) We can all know God.
- 2) We see divinity best in humanity.
- 3) We see God most clearly in love.

*Reflect:*

What evidence do you see around you of the love of God?

*Consider:*

“God is. God is as he is in Jesus. Therefore there is hope” (David Jenkins).

*Consider:*

“This however is certain, either that God is, or that he is not; there is no medium point... You must wager, this is not a matter of choice; you are committed, and not to wager that God is, is to wager that he is not. Which side then do you take?” (Pascal).

Some of us have made that choice and do believe in God, above all because of Jesus.

*Martin Camroux*