

At Whitsuntide and Trinity Sunday: Encounters with God

By Hugh Bryant

How well do you know Jesus? At Whitsuntide, Pentecost, we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit among the disciples, as *Ruach*, πνευμα, a rushing wind (with tongues of fire). Ruach and πνεύμα are Hebrew and Greek words which mean a wind, which by metonymy come to mean 'Spirit' in the sense of the Holy Spirit. A divine wind.

As Christians we understand God as the Trinity. God the Creator: God as human: God the Spirit, replacing the human God when He has gone back to 'heaven', back into the Godhead. 'The Lord is here. His Spirit is with us'.

It's a way of understanding the third act of the drama. Act one. God created the world. Act two. God was born in human form, as Jesus, lived and died. Act three. Jesus was resurrected from the dead, but then eventually he left to join the Godhead, or more familiarly, to 'sit at the right hand of God in heaven,' and was replaced by the Holy Spirit.

To explain the mystery of 'God in three persons' is a rite of passage for every preacher in training assigned to preach the parish sermon on Trinity Sunday. But perhaps a greater challenge arises in connection with Ascension and Pentecost.

There may be many faithful people who are content to hold 'in tension' apparently contradictory ideas about 'heaven': that it is in some sense 'up there', but at the same time that God is not delimited in time and space, so there is nowhere, up or down, where God is particularly at home.

I used the term 'Godhead' deliberately. If God is in 'heaven', it begs the question where exactly He is. So an alternative way of thinking on the Ascension would be that Jesus was somehow subsumed into the 'godness', the heart of being, the Godhead (cf. the ideas of Paul Tillich in John A T Robinson, *Honest to God* (1961)).

It is said that Yuri Gagarin, the first man in space, reported back that he had 'looked and looked, but I couldn't see God up there'. But it wasn't simply a matter of his seeming to confirm Marxist atheistic dogma. Gagarin was a Christian. He believed in God: it was just that he hadn't found him in space.

We make a rather easy move, I think, to dismiss the very long tradition that high places, being 'on high', say, on Mount Olympus, or above the clouds, are somewhere reserved to the divine. In the Old Testament, the Deuteronomist is concerned, in identifying divinity with the One True God, that the former places of worship, worship of idols such as Baal or Asherah, described as 'high places', should be eradicated. But Yahweh lived in heaven, and he was worshipped on the Temple *mount*, a high place in itself.

If what we are looking towards in God is ultimate power, truth and authority, again this is most simply imagined spatially: God reigns *over* the earth. The Enlightenment challenge is almost the same as Yuri Gagarin's. If God is, if

heaven is, 'up there', then why is He not observable and susceptible of scientific analysis? Because, indeed, He isn't. Wittgenstein put this propositionally, that metaphysical statements could not be verified in the same way as ordinary empirical ones.

So whereas we can agree about what it is for something to be a chair, or a nut cutlet (the humour of which, in concept, has not lasted so well since it convulsed the lecture theatres in the 1960s), we cannot say what would verify the truth of a statement about what it is for something to be good, or for someone to be the Son of God.

'That whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must remain silent', Wittgenstein wrote at the end of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. He meant that his theory of meaning could not cover metaphysical concepts, and therefore he had nothing to say about them. But again, like Gagarin, Wittgenstein was a believer. He went to church throughout his life.

So we can infer that Wittgenstein, and presumably Gagarin, did not take the fact that their chosen means of verification had drawn a blank as proof that there was no God. Just because in earth orbit in VOSTOK 1, Gagarin did not perceive God with his senses, and just because Wittgenstein could not identify a way to verify metaphysical statements, neither of them took those failures as evidence of falsehood.

Obviously by the time that the early twentieth-century Vienna School of philosophers including Wittgenstein, Carnap, Neurath and its founder, Schlick, had been written up by A.J. Ayer in *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936), the doctrine of 'logical positivism' had assumed an atheistic face, or at least an anti-metaphysical one. Bertrand Russell, who was Wittgenstein's tutor at Cambridge, was militantly atheistic, as was Ayer.

Logical positivism is heavily influenced by mathematics. It distinguishes between 'first order', logical truths, such as that the same number cannot be both positive and negative at the same time, and 'second order', contingent truths that can be inferred or observed from first order truths - that something is a red cow, for instance. This has no room for the Platonic or Aristotelian ideas of metaphysics - *μετά τα φυσικά*, things after, or on top of, physical things. So there is the Platonic concept of Ideas, essences. Not just that something is a table, but that it has the qualities, which make it a table, the essence of tablehood.

Plato understood a dualism of body and soul. The soul of a person was that person's essence, what it is for someone to be that particular person. So it was a short step to a concept of immortality, based on a transmigration of souls, a nether world, Hades, where the souls of the dead go across the river Acheron, and from which the blessed emerge into Heaven above, into the Elysian Fields.

The logical positivists had nothing to bring to this understanding. In a binary world or any other world conceived mathematically, it was impossible to find room for souls.

But more recently, Oxford philosophers of religion, most notably Richard Swinburne, have looked again at the apparent conflict between logic and metaphysics. Quantum theory has produced mathematics described as 'fuzzy logic'. $2 + 2$ does not necessarily equal 4. Logical proofs can be constructed so as to demonstrate that a soul could exist independently of a body.

But even if one allows that metaphysical entities can exist, how do they 'work'? What are we to make of the concepts of 'salvation' or 'redemption', in a sense of reunion with God? If sin is ἁμαρτία, literally, 'missing the mark', salvation lies in being recovered into the divine safe haven where the Godhead is.

Except it isn't a 'haven', in most Christian understanding. It is 'heaven'. But first let us go back to sin. The ingredients include, of course, not just sin, but sins, bad acts. It seems to me that this might also lead to an examination of theodicy. Why would a good God allow bad things to happen?

It is argued that, for instance in the Book of Job, when Job rails against the injustice of God, we are almost led into concluding that God is not in fact all-good. But suppose one brings in the traditional answer to this 'problem of evil', which is that humans have free will: we can choose freely to do what is bad, evil, as well as what is good.

In so doing, we are opposing the good God. If what we do goes against the goodness of God, it is taking away from, missing, the love of God - and it is therefore sinful. But it doesn't make God into a bad God - indeed, just as Jesus wept, at the death of Lazarus, it may even sadden God.

But consider St Paul's discussion in Romans 7, which arguably muddies the waters by positing limits to free will. Paul sins not because he has chosen the bad over against the good, but because he 'couldn't help it'. In other words, he feels himself not to be a free agent. So perhaps free will isn't an explanation for apparent divine cruelties.

Traditionally, theologians have argued that sin and bad conduct are not the same. To follow the Ten Commandments will make one morally good, but one could still be sinful, it is argued. I am not sure, however, that Pelagius was entirely wrong. It may be that one cannot earn one's way into heaven by good deeds; but to the extent that one's good deeds draw one back into God's entrance yard, they may bring one closer to salvation.

But what about the cross, and Jesus' 'atoning sacrifice (ἱλασμον)'? It seems cogent that, again, a good God would not want his own son to be offered as a human sacrifice.

We are back to the question of knowing God. How do you know that God loves you? By being aware of Jesus' sacrifice of himself on the cross. 'Greater love hath no man ...' There are examples of sacrifice - people standing in front of a gun pointed at someone else; standing in for someone else who is going to be harmed. The stories of a Maximilian Kolbe or a Jack Cornwell.

But specifically, taking upon oneself the burden of someone else's sin? Being punished for someone else's transgressions? What is really happening? A suggested model is the Jewish idea of a 'scapegoat'.

Sacramentally or symbolically, the sins of the congregation are laden on to a goat (or a sheep or any other docile domestic animal to hand): the poor animal is then cut loose to fend for itself, and probably starve, in the desert outside. How exactly are the sins 'loaded' on the poor animal?

We are in the realm of classical drama. Achieving catharsis ('cleaning out' your soul) comes through pity and fear, according to Aristotle. Watching someone suffer, to some extent you suffer 'with' them. What does that 'with' mean? The difficulty is that I cannot know what it feels like to be you, or to experience what you do, and you can't feel what I feel either.

Maybe this 'atoning sacrifice' is not a transaction - an eye for an eye, say, buying off, placating, a wrathful deity - but rather more akin to complementary medicine; healing, by way of a sort of inoculation. If we take in some minor badness or do it, it can protect us, vaccinate us, against being overwhelmed by total badness. In doing this sacramentally, in entering into someone else's sacramental sacrifice, as the priest perfects the sacrifice, so we the congregation are blessed by an approving God, or, even, 'saved'.

This kind of salvation does not, though, imply intimacy. It does not lead one to say one 'knows' God, or more particularly that one 'knows' Jesus, in the same way in which one would know one's Aunt Florrie. The revelation experiences in the Old and New Testaments - the burning bush, the dove coming down from heaven, the 'gardener' at the empty tomb - none of these are at all comfortable. People who ask how well one knows Jesus cannot really be referring to those examples.

On the other hand there is the Pauline idea of Christians being 'in Christ', or 'in the Spirit'. Among others John A. T. Robinson has, in his 'The Body' (John A. T. Robinson 1952, *The Body - a Study in Pauline Theology*, London, SCM Press) argued on the basis that 'in Christ' means 'in the body of Christ', i.e. in the Church. I do not think this sits particularly well with those passages where e.g. John, in Revelation (1:10) says that he did something when he was 'in the spirit'. The NEB is stretching the Greek too much by translating *ἐγενομην ἐν πνεύματι* as 'I was caught up by the Spirit.' It clearly does not mean, 'as a member of the church I... [did something].' Another way to make sense of this is to invert the meaning, so to be in Christ means, to have Christ in you¹: and in that Christ has gone, has ascended, it is the Holy Spirit that will fill the believer in Jesus' place. The Spirit is the Comforter, the spirit of truth, the Paraclete or advocate, the barrister at the court of life.

At the first Pentecost the Spirit manifested itself miraculously, burning - or not burning - the disciples' hair as the burning bush similarly burned without

¹ See John Ziesler, 1983 (Revised 1990), *Pauline Christianity*, Oxford, OUP, p49f

being consumed, for Moses. The men of all the provinces listed in the Book of Genesis, from Parthia and Cappadocia and all, found themselves able to speak each other's language.

We don't have such astonishing experiences, however. What would it mean for one of us today to be 'in the spirit'?