

THE ME-SHAPED GOD

the universal in the particular

God is, for each one of us, God as we are granted to perceive him. The relationship is unique and personal, the revelation specific to our circumstances, temperament, time-slot in history, place in the scheme of things. We cannot know God for one another and can only surmise that others who claim it know him too. Meanwhile, however, God remains 'Who He Is', uniquely Himself in His transcendence. Faith tells us all the same that we are not alone in being loved of God and in being enabled to respond in return, and this awareness is no coldly calculated conclusion of our reasoning powers. We pick up intuitive links, recognise our kinship with fellow-believers, a deep, underlying network of relationship that in theory at least we sense has no limits. God is infinite and everyone, *everything*, exists in Him. We believe in unity, and yet somehow it eludes us. Everything breaks up into fragmentation and we find even ourselves to be at war, with others and within ourselves, not least with the God who has so specifically shown himself to us.

This, most obviously, is sin staring us starkly in the face. Sin is division and separatedness, where the satan has his field-day. What he can draw away from God and keep there he gleefully and subtly does. Yet he is not the victor. Unity, wholeness, harmony, **LOVE** are our destination and are the mould and groundwork of that me-shaped space in each of us which is God. Ours it is to believe this against all odds, to correspond with God's self-gifted revelation to us and to resist consistently the divisive opposing forces which seek to drive a wedge between ourselves and God, ourselves and one another. We must believe in Unity to the point of metaphorical blood, sweat and tears, if not to actual martyrdom itself. No one touched by God can do less than leave all to follow.

Our concern, naturally, is not with hosts of self-contained island fortresses each secure in the god of their own creating. Nobody indeed *is* an island, least of all in the fellowship of believers. All the me-shaped spaces belong to an incredibly unified and harmonised whole, reflecting the infinity of God. Just as the parts of the body are mutually necessary for the organism, as St.

Paul reminds us, so we can never be content to wallow in self-satisfaction within our own little area of God-awareness, open to the infinite, and unique though it might be. “See that you do not despise one of these little ones” Jesus tells us. Others know God too.

What is true of our relations with one another individually is true as well of our relatedness as church families. Like-minded and hearted people, cliques and groupings, quite naturally cling together for mutual support and encouragement. We don't really want to hold on to our me-shaped bit all on our own as it turns out. It is good to sense that others meet up with a similar God in similar sorts of ways. But beware, natural though this is. In a fallen world we **do** indeed have to band together since there is more safety in numbers, usually. But it is only too easy to let the satan slip in and foster discord - among the members of the group or between one group and another - since groups, not surprisingly, mushroom. We know all this alright, since it is exactly what has happened between the churches and is why we are all in such a sorry state now. We **must** recognise the me-space of God in others and allow them to be. Did not Jesus say that there are many rooms in his Father's house and that nobody who is **for** him can be said to be **against** him (John 14:2; Luke 9: 49-50). The sin of exclusiveness is ours to own.

The world of nature can be excused for its predatory character, every species and genus for itself, the survival of the fittest and the devil take the hindmost. There are traces of course of maternal instinct in animal life, a spontaneous desire to preserve the species, but there remains much redness in tooth and claw. Whose fault? Ours maybe since it is humans who have knowingly sinned and dragged creation down through their fall. Creation awaits **our** full redemption, groaning together with us, as St. Paul reminds us (Romans 8: 19-23), until everything is perfected in Christ. In the meantime there is discord, strife, competitiveness all round, but mercifully God does not disown the world of nature or ourselves.

In fact scripture depicts our Creator God not so much as a powerful autocratic force standing over and outside the universe he deigns to allow to be, but rather as One who lovingly desires to bring it to birth, through great travail, and then stays with it, coaxing, cajoling rather than coercing. Psalm 104 is a wonderful hymn of praise to such a Creator God and to the universe he has brought forth, in all its marvellous variety. Throughout the psalm we sense God's overarching providence and meticulous care for every creature and every detail in the wonderful mosaic. Nature in return responds:

These all look to you to give them their food in due season; when you give to them they gather it up; when you open your hand they are filled with good things. (verses 27,28)

These words rebuke us. By analogy with St. Paul we might ask, “Is it only with beasts and cattle that he is concerned?” (Cf. 1 Corinthians 9:9; 1 Timothy 5:18; Deuteronomy 25:4). God **is** concerned with the world of nature, yes, but there is a moral for **us** too. No one who looks to God is turned away empty. “He who comes to me I will not cast out”, Jesus said. We have sought God and been found by him? Yes indeed, there was a unique me-shaped encounter. But we are not the only pebbles on the beach. We are not alone in turning towards God seeking food and sustenance. If he has sent his sun and rain on the just and unjust alike, revealed himself in a myriad of differing me-shaped ways, who are we to claim a monopoly for ourselves, or for our own little group or church allegiance? If we see the fruits of holiness, clear and indisputable evidence of God’s presence and activity, elsewhere, even amongst those who seem to us the most unlikely of people, and if we then respond with even an inkling of derisive scorn or fun-making, we stand rebuked.

God is the God of all his world and of all his ages. He is at work revealing himself as, how and where he will. We can in no wise hinder him. Our petty opposition and wilful refusals are but grist to the mill of his succeeding. We fear that his purposes will not come to fruition if we don’t dig in our heels and defend his cause. We prefer to be closed in in our ivory towers of defensiveness, me-shaped holes of our own contriving. We fear the influence of thoughts and ideas outside our usual ken. We fear not only those other weird church practices and beliefs we come across, but much more the strange, new cultures and religions pressing in on us from ethnic groupings round the corner. **Our** God cannot possibly be giving **them** their food in due season. Or can he? That is our threat, or rather our challenge.

A true ecumenism, a true belief in, and self-offering for unity, cannot stop short here. William Blake, English Poet and Mystic, writing over two hundred years ago, forestalls us here. It is not merely new-fangled ideas that we are turning out then. In his poem ‘To mercy, pity, peace and love’ (found in many of our older hymn books) Blake reminds us that **all** humanity is made in the image of God and **all** humanity (even without being able sometimes to name the deity) turns to the source of mercy, of pity, of love at those times of distress common to humankind. God’s response was to become himself the creature he had made – become in Jesus Man-made-

in-the-image-of-God. Thus **all** humankind is now enfolded in him. There **need** no longer be definitive separations because of race or creed (heathen, Turk, or Jew, as Blake puts it).

There need not, but for the time being alas there are. We seem powerless to change things. But we can **want** to do so. We can open the me-shaped God space in ourselves to meet others there. We can seek to love and welcome even the strangest of strangers, overcoming prejudice and fear, even if we have to meet these things ourselves in face of the stranger's reaction to us.

*And all must love the human form
In heathen, Turk or Jew;
Where Mercy, Love and Pity dwell,
There God is dwelling too.*