

# The Mystery of God

by Rev John A. Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> May 2018 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Isaiah 6:1-8, Romans 8:12-19, John 3:1-17  
(Lectionary readings for Trinity Sunday, Year B)

## Introduction:

In the film *Keeping Mum*, Rowan Atkinson plays a vicar who is speaking to a convention of clergy on the theme of "God's mysterious ways". He ends with these words:

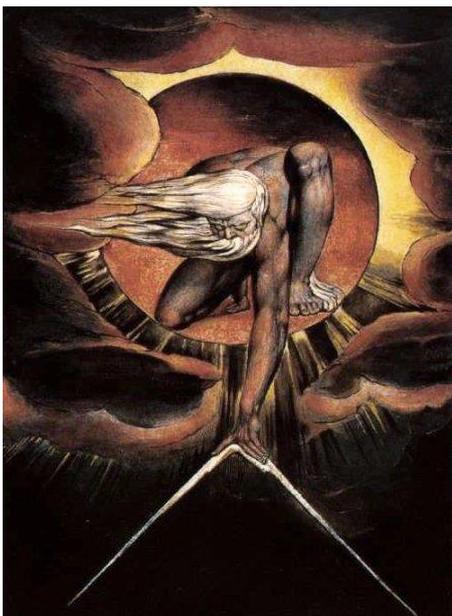
'Isaiah chapter 55 verse 8 "My ways are not your ways". And I think, what he basically means by that is "I'm mysterious, folks. Live with it".'

Today's sermon is not about the *ways* of God, mysterious though they may be, but about the *nature* of God, which is mysterious in itself.

How do you think of God? Do you have a picture of God in your mind, or a particular description of God? I remember a chaplain at my school saying he thought of God as a big comfortable armchair – not quite how I imagine God myself!

It's also far away from the description of God that we read in Isaiah's vision (Isaiah 6:1-8). Here the picture is of the glory and majesty of God, that fills the temple and the whole earth, and leave the prophet awe-struck and conscious of his own sin in the face of God's utter holiness. We need to cultivate something of that sense of awe in our own worship here in church and in our prayers.

## Images of God



If I were to ask you, who is God? there are many ways you might respond.

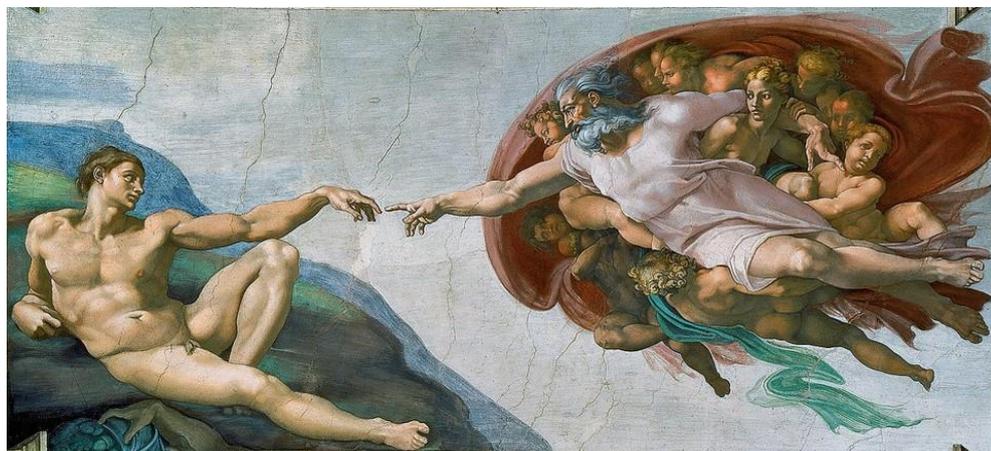
One of the most obvious would be to say that God is the Creator of the Universe, which is how he is depicted here by William Blake. The dividers God is holding show him as a craftsman, carefully measuring.



Here's a more modern representation of God's creation of the universe.

Here God is an artist, creating something beautiful. Psalm 19:1 says that the heavens

declare the glory of God, and Paul in Romans chapter 1:19-20 speaks of how the created order reveals much about the nature of God. If you want to spend some time reflecting on the wonder of creation, with all its amazing complexity and vitality, you could do worse than meditate on Psalm 104 – or watch a programme by David Attenborough.



According to the Bible, God's final triumph in creation was to make human beings, as we see here in Michaelangelo's famous painting from the Sistene Chapel in the

Vatican. One of the things that strikes me in this picture is how the artist represents the relationship between God and Adam. God's forefinger reaches out to touch Adam's, and the two characters are looking straight at each other. God is slightly higher than Adam, representing his superior status, but only just. Humanity is, in the words of the psalm, only "a little lower than the angels" (Psalm 8:5). God here is not a distant creator, but the artist represents a God who reaches out to the human race.



Do any of you recognise where this representation of God comes from? It's God in the Simpsons TV show. God is seated in what looks to me like an office chair. He's the Boss. As in 2 of the previous pictures, he has a beard – here quite a long one – representing the fact that he is old – eternal, in fact.

I don't know what else the chair represents for you, but it reminds me that God is also the Judge.

What else do you notice about this representation of God? When God is seen in the Simpsons, we never see his face. It's a recognition by the artist that it is impossible to show what God is like. No representation could begin to properly describe the Almighty. In fact, both Judaism and Islam forbid any representation of God. I suppose the fact that Christian art dares to show any representation of God at all must be due to the fact that Jesus encouraged us to call God Father. Jesus has made God much more approachable and personal, so we sense that perhaps he wouldn't mind too much if we paint him as an old man.

The Old Testament contains some indirect references to God as Father, some of which Sarah Ashton mentioned in her sermon a few weeks ago. For some people whose experience of a human father has been negative or traumatic, thinking of God as Father may have negative associations. But when God is described as Father in the Bible, it is as kind, compassionate and forgiving, as in this example from Psalm 103:13-14:

*As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him.*

*For he knows of what we are made; he remembers that we are but dust.*

God is also described as being like a mother:

*As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you (Isaiah 66:13)*

Imagine a child who is frightened or hurt, clinging to his or her mother. It's a powerful image of God.

Let me summarise what we have uncovered about the mystery of God so far: God is the Creator, he is the Boss, the Judge, and he is also a compassionate Father or Mother.

## The Son of God



So much is revealed in the Old Testament, in which God revealed himself to the Jewish nation. But in the New Testament God goes one stage further. He reveals himself to the world by taking the form of the man Jesus. John's Gospel opens with a famous passage in which the Word of God, the Son of God from all eternity, became flesh and dwelt among us. As John writes,

*No one has ever seen God. God the only Son, who is at the side of the Father, has made him known. (John 1:18)*

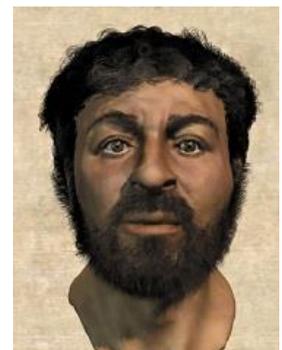
Jesus the Son of God reveals God to us. The important thing about Jesus was not that he was a man rather than a woman. God is neither male nor female, and according to Genesis 1:27 men and women are equally created in the image of God. Besides, had Jesus been a woman in the patriarchal society of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century AD, social conventions would have prevented him from having the ministry that he had.

How do you imagine Jesus? Perhaps like Robert Powell's portrayal of him in Zefirelli's TV series *Jesus of Nazareth*?



Or here's a painting of Jesus speaking to the Samaritan woman at the well. Most Western art like this shows Jesus as a rather good-looking young man.

But perhaps he looked a bit more ordinary. This is an anthropological reconstruction by a medical artist of how a typical Galilean working-class man in the first century might have looked.





Other representations of Jesus are symbolic rather than realistic, like this icon painted on a wall in the Hagia Sophia church in Istanbul with Jesus' halo that includes a cross, his hand raised in blessing and a book, representing the gospel, in his left hand;



or this famous painting by Holman Hunt, entitled *The Light of the World*, which shows Jesus as a priest, with a kingly crown that contains thorns, as well as a lantern, knocking on the door of the human heart.

Do you find it easier to pray to God the Father or Jesus Christ? Or both?

What about praying to the Holy Spirit?

### The Holy Spirit

Perhaps the Holy Spirit is the most difficult person of the Trinity to represent in art. This image (*right*) combines the flame of Pentecost

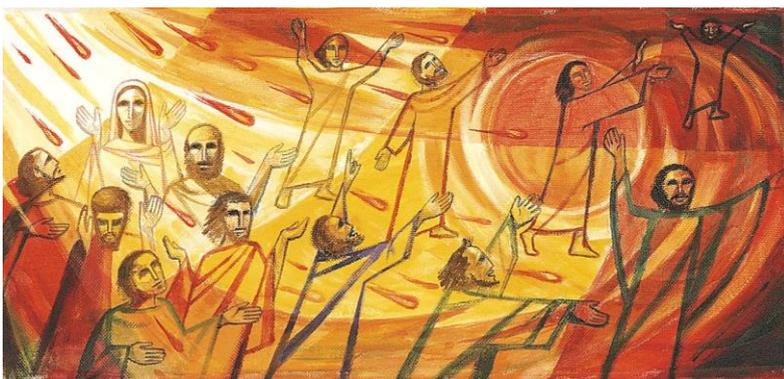


with the dove, which descended on Jesus at his baptism, as we see in one artist's representation of Jesus. Here the artist has given the dove a luminous, ethereal quality – it is, after all, the Holy Spirit.



The image that Jesus uses in our gospel reading from John 3 is of wind. The Greek word for spirit is also the word for wind (pneuma), and the same is true in Hebrew (ruah). The Spirit of God, like the wind, is invisible, and blows where it

wills. What we experience is the effect that the Spirit has. Jesus speaks of being “born of the Spirit”, or “born from above” or “born again”.



It is through the work of the Holy Spirit that we can enter into a personal relationship with God, a relationship where we know God as our Father, not just in theory but in our own experience. This was the Spirit who came upon the disciples on the day of Pentecost, when they heard a mighty wind and saw tongues of

fire, and each of them was filled with the Holy Spirit, who sent them out into the world to proclaim what God had done in Christ.

This personal experience of God is what Paul is writing about in the passage from Romans 8:14-16.

*All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God... You have received the Spirit of adoption. When we cry "Abba, Father", it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our Spirit that we are children of God.*

Just as Jesus is the Son of God, and was filled with the Spirit at his baptism, so Christians have been adopted as children of God through the Holy Spirit, who enables us to have that same intimate relationship with God as our Father.

This God is not just the "first cause" of the universe, nor is he just a King who rules the universe and will one day judge it, though these are real aspects of his nature. He is also a loving Father who wants to have an intimate relationship with each of his children. This was the God whom Jesus came to reveal, a God we can know personally through the mysterious but very tangible workings of his Holy Spirit.

The Trinity is not a puzzle that we have to solve, a formula to try to understand. It is a God whom we can know for ourselves, when we are willing to trust him, to receive his love into our hearts and to love him back.

### **Conclusion: the Relational God**



This well-known painting by the Russian artist Rublev shows the three persons of the Trinity. They are gathered around a table, a symbol of fellowship. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are in relationship with each other, and invite us to join them in their bond of love. The doctrine of the Holy Trinity speaks to us of a God who is *relational*, and wants to share his life with us.

We've explored the mysterious nature of God, and seen how he has revealed himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We don't need to see the Trinity as a mathematical puzzle to solve, rather as how three ways that God is, and three ways we can relate to him.

How will our exploration today help you to pray and to live as a Christian? I invite you to spend some time each day this week reflecting on your relationship with each person of the Trinity. Ask God to show you more of his nature as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And then think about this person of the Trinity as you go about your daily life.