

Week 4 - The Mystery of Relationship and Reconciliation

Readings

- Joshua 5:9-12
- Psalm 32
- 2 Corinthians 5:16-21
- Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Starting out - The Others in our Lives

A therapy called 'Human Sculpting' is often used with families as a way of visualising relationships, but it can also be used as a form of theological reflection to help people see the complexity and web of our personal and spiritual relationships. How it works is to take a scenario – a real life situation like going into hospital for instance, or a Bible story – and to think about all the people who might be involved in such a scenario, no matter how distantly. In a hospital scenario, that might mean the patient, their family, nurses, doctors, therapists, others on the ward, tea providers, taxi drivers, the hospital chaplain, the parish priest and all the church family praying for the person. Lots of people are somehow involved with the patient and with each other.

The group members position themselves as one of the characters in the scenario and decide where to stand, sit or kneel in relation to each other. Once everyone has put themselves in position every person is invited to look around at the web of relationships. Nothing has to be said; it's not role play.

The exercise is done several times as the scenario develops – who else do you need to be close to, or further away from? Who is dominating the scene, blocking the view of others? Who is left out? Who is being taken into the heart of the sculpture? Gradually people change places and each time there is a pause to look at who is inside and who is on the outside. Once the exercise has been done a few times, the group 'freezes' and takes time to absorb the final web of relationships. People are then invited to review where they were and whether they wanted to move or not.

All kinds of issues emerge about power, loss, separation, divided loyalties, inclusion and exclusion, faith, care, danger, loneliness and so on. Surprising things can be revealed, especially who is affected by the scenario. It often makes people realise just how complex our relationships are and how we relate to people around us daily. What keeps the relationships together or drives them apart? As a form of theological reflection, there is another perspective to the final form of the sculpture, when we begin to ask: where is God?

Something to talk about - Different relationships

Questions

- In the hospital scenario suggested above, how many different sorts of relationship can you think of?
- What other kinds of relationships do we have beyond those we have with other people? What about objects, houses, pets, wealth?
- How do you think our relationships with our neighbours, our families and others affect our relationship with God? How would you talk about that with someone who was not a Christian?

Some scripture to ponder - Being reconciled

So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate.

(Luke 15.20-24)

Questions

- What do you think this story tells us about the nature of God?
- What do you think Jesus' hearers made of the love and reconciliation in this story?

For a prayerful meditation:

Prayer brings together two lovers, God and the soul, in a narrow room where they speak much of love.

(The Cloud of Unknowing)

The Mystery of God - God's Longing for us and Reconciliation

In the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament), we sometimes hear about God as utterly beyond human comprehension and experience.

'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts'

(Isaiah 55.8-9).

This makes God sound essentially unknowable, so far beyond human reason and imagination that the mystery of God is impenetrable, so that we can only respond with awe, wonder and silence. What would we have to say to God, whose thoughts and actions are so far beyond us?

When Job ponders on human existence, God stuns him with the amazing miracle of creation, so much vaster and more incredible than a human lifetime: *'where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?'* (Job 38.4). We can only know *'the outskirts of his ways'* (Job 26.14). We can only ever scratch the merest surface of the mystery that is God.

Many theologians and Christians following the mystical tradition, such as St John of the Cross and the author of The Cloud of Unknowing, have followed this 'apophatic' tradition, contemplating the mystery of God which is always greater than human knowing and through which more is always being revealed.

In other places in the Hebrew Scriptures though, we come across different ways to describe God. Sometimes God's power comes to the fore as a king or a judge or a warrior, but in other places God is imagined as a nurturer, a shepherd or a gardener, or as a parent, as a woman in labour in Isaiah 42.14 or as a father:

'I thought how I would set you among my children, and give you a pleasant land, the most beautiful heritage of all the nations. And I thought you would call me, My Father, and would not turn from following me'

(Jeremiah 3.19).

But one of the most extraordinary things Jesus did in his life and ministry was to tell his friends that they could relate to the mystery that is God, by going beyond metaphors and likenesses to being in immediate, intimate relationship with God. Is this what Jesus realised when he stayed behind in the Temple, in 'his Father's house'?

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches his disciples and followers to call God 'Abba', (father) and teaches about God not just in terms of metaphor but active relationship. To call God Abba, expresses trust, honour, respect, and confidence in that relationship.

Through Jesus we discover that God longs for us, searches us out, rejoices in us and brings us home. To be out of this relationship is the utmost abandonment and desolation, as we see in the story of Dives and Lazarus, in the destitution of the Prodigal Son and in Jesus's own cry of despair from the cross.

And in his death and resurrection, Jesus makes sure that relationship with God is never lost to us – if we offer ourselves to that relationship. We can always go home to where God waits for us. So St Paul can say,

'For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord'

(Romans 8.38-39).

Questions

- If you say the Nicene Creed slowly and carefully, thinking about each section, what do you learn about God as Trinity and God in relation to human beings?
- How do you think people reflect the love of God to others through their own relationships?

Something to pray

Loving God,

We know you as Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
You are a mystery of wonderful relationship,
Creating, Redeeming, Sustaining,
Reconciling the world to yourself
And making new.

Amen

We finish by joining together in saying the Lord's Prayer.