

R C I A

Rite for the Christian Initiation of Adults

What Can We Say About God's Life?

The most important thing to say about God's Life is that it is real life. It is life in a quite different sense from our sort of life.

If we were the central fact about the universe (as some people believe, which makes them pretty obnoxious), we would have to take whatever our life is like as the norm, and compare everyone else to us, giving them credits for resembling us and faulting them for differing from us. Does this sound ludicrous? Think about it: some people you know do actually live like that. Equally, we would judge the meaning of the whole world simply in relation to ourselves, finding no significance in the lives of Gurkhas or Zimbabweans, crested newts or penguins, icefields, wetlands or rainforests (is this starting to look more familiar?).

In fact, even as humans, our individual life is dangerously lacking. We only have a little of the infinite variety of humanity: that's what being an individual means. We each have only one gender (that's cut us off from half the race already) and only one date of birth (which reduces our experience enormously; we'll never watch the Spanish Armada come up the Channel, or see the Fire of London). We are born in one place, with a single culture; I would hazard a guess that you'll probably never stick a bone through your nose on your thirteenth birthday, or habitually spend your day off sitting in an igloo. You have your allotted span of life, which may in your opinion be too long or too short, but you'll have very little choice in the matter. You will go through life showing one face and one figure, pleasing or displeasing as it may seem. When you think about it, the only choice you have about most things is whether you live your life with a good grace or a bad attitude.

We depend on multitudes of *conditions* for our life to continue, which all determine the kind of life we live. Our health, wealth, prosperous fortune, our need for other people, for so many things, constantly remind us that we are chronically dependent; and we know that we ourselves are passible, temporary, unreliable in the long term.

God's life is qualitatively different. God is not conditioned by anything. He lives, full stop; his life is total, sovereign, self-determined. He needs nothing, and chooses everything. He sets the course of his being and decrees his own necessity. He creates the Universe by a free act of will; and the Universe is not necessary to him, and is a total work of art.

Everything God has done is a spare time activity, because God is unconstrained by any need or rôle. When we say *God exists*, therefore, we use the word in a quite special sense. Our existence is dependent on his. Everything else exists because God exists, and then only as long as he orders it to exist. So he has a vital relationship with everything and everyone else, because he is the one who freely chooses their

existence, and decides by sovereign authority when they will cease to be. If anyone should freely choose not to have a relationship with God, they will lose the way to finding the meaning of their life. They will search, and search, but they will never find an end to their search so long as they rule out the possibility of God. But God will know the meaning of their life, and also the reasons for their own ignorance of it.

That is why God is the judge of humanity, and not *vice versa*.

The Church has always believed that God has designed us to come to knowledge of him; but this does not happen easily. We *could* have been created with a knowledge of God that came to us like our knowledge of our earthly parents, who teach us through touch, and taste, and scent, and voice, and visual signs that we are who we are, and so are they, and that there is love and faithfulness between us. Their teaching leads us on to trust others, in an ever-widening circle, so that the love we experience in our families can flow out to the people we learn with, work with, and eventually become friends, lovers, husbands and wives with. In a way there is a symmetry here, because the learning of the love of God is sometimes ulterior to those discoveries; but in another way it is different, because we can also have a penny-dropping experience at any point on that learning-curve; God is, after all, the maker of all of us, and in mysterious ways we learn about him in the womb, in our parents' arms, in school, in adolescence, in our every experience of love. We do not list God in our acceptance-speech at the Oscars, alongside mother, uncle George, and the lady who does our hair. The learning of God is something total, which grounds every other deed or word. In some ways, God is too big to learn at all: as a lobster on the sea bed says, *Water? What is this alleged "water" I keep hearing about? It seems like conjectural nonsense to me....*

Everything I've said so far tonight has used the singular term *God*. In that sense I could have been a Jew talking to you. But in encountering Jesus Christ we changed our way of talking about God. He spoke to us of a God who is his Father, making himself in some quite special way the Son of God. This phrase had been used before, typically of the King of Israel in Jerusalem, who was said to have been adopted by God on the day of his coronation. It is also used poetically of the angels at certain points, though without alleging any relationship of equality. It is used of Israel as a whole, insofar as the people can be understood as a kind of corporate child of God, a beloved son. But Jesus used it in none of these senses. He spoke of an exclusive relationship with God which belongs to him alone, and which gives him his rôle and mission in the world. He also draws his authority from this relationship, because in the human search to know God, he is the all-important piece of the jigsaw, the final, complete, and indispensable factor. He thought of his lifetime as the consummation of all previous revelation or of Scripture itself; and his own life would itself have a consummation, which would reveal the ultimate truth of human history. Increasingly he began to associate this moment with his death. We find him, unlike any other Jewish teacher, proclaiming *himself*; he claims to be the Message, complete in all its details, final in its importance, critical in its function. Human history will be judged by its reaction to him; the urgent need for everyone is to decide what they say about him.

At first glance this is the language of megalomania; but the supreme humility and patent holiness of the man, together with his readiness to suffer and die as a criminal for what he had said, raises him to a unique level of moral authority; he makes the greatest possible claim for himself, whilst admitting, even insisting that he will die of

the claim he makes. Jesus is condemned for claiming to be the Son of God, and thus making himself equal to God. But this is truly the necessary moment for the innermost divine truth to break out: the truth that God, who holds the meaning of the universe, is not a monad, like a lonely earthly super-emperor, but a *communion of Persons* - a little like a human family. The relationship between the Father and the Son is the locus of the life of God; and the Father and the Son are expressed towards each other, and understand themselves by their value to each other. As a loving husband understands himself first and foremost in his relationship with his wife, and vice versa, so in the heart of the Godhead the Giver of life and the Receiver of life understand themselves in relating to each other. Their generosity towards each other is total, so that Jesus can say *everything the Father has is mine*. He can also say *the Father and I are One (thing)*. It is in meditating on these, and other statements by Jesus, that we have made our way into the mystery of the life of God.

What about the Holy Spirit?

People can mostly get their heads round Father and Son when they think of the Holy Trinity. But the third element in the account - God the Holy Spirit - usually remains dim and unimaginable, the nexus of mystery in the whole enterprise of understanding. We hear Jesus speaking of “the Paraclete” (*encourager, advocate, comforter*) in John’s Gospel, and always as a person, and as a Gift: we have cited the words of the Baptist about Jesus: *The Father gives him the Spirit without reserve*. In some sense the gift of the Spirit is everything the Father and Son give to each other; they are giving their whole lives to each other: but that means they are giving *divinity* to each other; divinity is God, and this gift cannot be less than God. It is as if the Father *in begetting the Son* constitutes him as divine, as God. It is in relating to the Father as divine Son that the Son reflects back divine life to the Father. This divine self-gift is so perfect and complete, that it is “the gift of God”, God the Holy Spirit. This tells us that we can know God in three qualities: as the eternal Begetter, as the eternally Begotten, and as the Divine Gift.

Our minds are challenged beyond their powers by this mystery, but we should not be afraid: it’s still the *inexpressible* mystery, and if we can never say we have finished our work of understanding, this is a blessing for us. If we lived our life around something we had invented, something less than we are, we should come to grief and become stagnant and self-enclosed. So it is no shame and no pity that we find our language breaking down and our imagination silenced before the God who demands our lifelong worship. It will help if we tell ourselves constantly that all of our fallible mental apparatus is being marshalled in the attempt to understand the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth; all our materials for this work are drawn from what we know of him. In the Person of the Trinity who is close to us - the Son - we can see how total his self-gift is by watching him die on the Cross; John’s phrase for this is his “going to the Father”, and when he dies John says “he gave up the Spirit”. We can also see the perfection of the Father’s answering Gift of the Spirit in Jesus’ resurrection and ascension to divine life and eternal joy. He gives to the Father the life the Father gives to him; the Father responds by giving him the divine life he had emptied out for us, which he calls in his last prayer “the glory I had with you before time began”.