

***“Amazing Grace, Extravagant Love, Intimate Friendship”***

**(2 Corinthians 13.14)**

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***Introduction***

The playwright, David Hare, opens his drama, *‘Racing Demon’* – a play about the Church of England in crisis – with a priest speaking on stage:

*“God. Where are you? I wish you would talk to me. God. It isn’t just me. There’s a general feeling. This is what people are saying in the parish. They want to know where you are. The joke wears thin. You never say anything. All right. People expect that. It’s understood – but people also think... You see, I tell you, it’s this perpetual absence. Yes? This not being here – it’s that. I mean, let’s be honest, it’s just beginning to get us down. You know? Is that unreasonable? There are an awful lot of people in a very bad way. And they need something besides silence. God. Do you understand?”*

We *are* going through a crisis in our belief in God. Hare wrote this play in 1990, but it could just as easily be ‘now’! The old construct, of a supernatural being dwelling in heaven, who intervenes periodically in our world, is no longer making sense of people’s experience of life. The God we used to know... doesn’t seem to be there any more. Carl Jung wrote, way back in 1959, *“We are tired of the excessive effort to believe, because the object of the belief is no longer inherently convincing.”*<sup>1</sup>

Today we celebrate Trinity Sunday. I like to think of it as *‘God Sunday’*... for in a liturgical calendar full of many stories and many people, this is the one day we focus purely on how we *see* God. And how we *see* God... will have a huge impact on how we try to *connect* with God.

***God is Spirit***

Jesus said to the Woman at the Well,

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Jung, *Letters 1959*

*“Woman, believe me, the time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. (Indeed) the hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth... God is spirit and those who worship must worship in spirit and truth.”* (John 4. 20-24)

The time comes, Jesus says, when we need to recognise God as Spirit... and then we will adjust our prayer, our worship, our connection... accordingly.

All of us here are products of a church that focused very much on a God who ruled in distant heaven – a god with many rules, who judged us accordingly, rewarding us or punishing us depending on our level of compliance. A god who sat above us at a distance... intervening occasionally and miraculously in response to our prayer. A god we visited episodically, sometimes in prayer but most commonly by attending public worship. A god we could turn to every now and then for comfort or assistance. But our now-empty churches, bear witness to a 21<sup>st</sup> century truth... that people don't find that sort of god believable or attractive any more. And that's a feeling many of *us* also carry secretly in *our* hearts.

Jesus says the time comes... indeed it is here now... when we need to 'grow up' and recognise God is Spirit. Here is his conversation with the Woman at the Well again,

*“God is sheer being itself – Spirit. (From now on) those who worship God must do it out of their very being, their spirit... their true selves...”*<sup>2</sup>

When we come to recognise God as Spirit... the way we pray, worship and seek to connect, must change accordingly.

We can describe this change simply... as a movement *from* projecting God into a separate distance, *to* instead seeing God and relating to God in closeness and intimacy. From *distance* to *intimacy*...

### **Metaphor**

Last week, Pentecost Sunday, we celebrated Paul's revelation... that *the new temple of God is the human person*. God is spirit... and this divine spirit resides... makes Her home in... us! Paul says,

*“Surely you know that you are God's temple, where the Spirit of God dwells... the temple of God is holy and you are that temple!* (REB 1 Corinthians 3.16-17)

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<sup>2</sup> Eugene Peterson's translation of John 4.24

How can we speak about this – what language, what metaphor is available to us as we explore such breath-taking intimacy of divine presence?

Two metaphors that I find really helpful...

- *God is the sea in which I swim...*
- *God is the air that I breathe...*

These are simple short-hand reminders that I can return to a dozen times each day – they locate God for me in the many times I feel myself lose that connection.

And there's one more that I think is really good, even though it's less poetic and takes a little more work to access. *'I am a sponge in the great ocean of God.'* Sponges are amazing creatures... Seawater is not only the world in which they live, the medium that surrounds them and envelopes them 24/7... but they are also amazingly porous, so that the sea is also constantly flushing *through* them... Indeed the sponge cannot survive without this constant flow *in and out*. The sea is the home of the sponge, and the sponge also plays host to the sea. It's a metaphor the apostle Paul surely would approve of... *'I am a sponge in the great ocean of God.'* The Spirit of God is my home... surrounding me every moment of my life... *and...* at the same time... God also chooses to make Her home in me.

### ***'You Must Tell Them'***

Richard Rohr tells *this* story... He was staying in a Trappist monastery. The Trappists are well known for their strict rule of silence... and they have different levels within their practice. So beyond the daily silence of the 'ordinary' monks (which is rigorous enough by our standards), there are some who live as *hermits* in cabins outside the monastery, only joining the others *once* a week. And then there's another level again... the *recluses* who live further out in the woods, and only speak when they join the community *twice a year...* for Easter and Christmas.

Richard Rohr was walking in the woods one day when he saw Father Flavian, a venerable recluse, coming towards him on the same path. Richard stood aside on the path's edge, head bowed, eyes averted, in order not to break the old man's silence... but to his astonishment, Father Flavian stopped and grabbed him by the shoulders with a cry... *"Richard... you can preach... I cannot. You*

*must tell them!*" Then waving to the sky, *"You must tell them... God's not there!"* Then beating his chest, *"He's here!"* With a final *"You must tell them"*, the old monk returned to his path.

This was his wisdom distilled from years of silence. This was the wisdom that the world *must* know. *"God is not there... He's here!"* Richard Rohr believes the health of the Christian church in the next century, depends upon whether we have the courage to live out of this truth or not. I agree... indeed I believe *our* health... (yours and mine as we sit here today)... depends on it. I think Christ Jesus was telling us something critical and urgent,

*"God is sheer being itself – Spirit. (From now on) those who worship God must do it out of their very being, their spirit... their true selves..."*<sup>3</sup>

He says, *'The time is coming... indeed it's already here!'*

### **Conclusion**

The Spirit of God is our home, surrounding us every moment of our lives... *and...* at the same time... God chooses to make Her home *in* us. What's it like to be a sponge in the great ocean of God?

Here's how Paul speaks of it in his benediction to the Corinthian Church from our Second Reading... He says it's like being enveloped in

- amazing grace,
- extravagant love;
- intimate friendship...<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Eugene Peterson's translation of John 4.24

<sup>4</sup> *The amazing grace of the Master, Jesus Christ, the extravagant love of God, and the intimate friendship of the Holy Spirit, be with all of you."*