The God I don’t believe in …

Some years ago I had a student in one of my Religious Education classes who was struggling with everything to do with religion. It was clear there was some tension there and this was obvious from her manner, her confrontational attitude and her resistance to the course. One day, she put up her hand and said, ‘I just want to tell you that I don’t believe in God!’ What a great moment, a breakthrough, she finally had the courage to put it into words and speak it, and I said to her, ‘Tell me about this God you don’t believe in’. And she did! When she had finished, I said to her, ‘Well, I don’t believe in that God either!’ And that was the beginning of some great conversation about God and a whole new approach to RE. The God she described was the bearded old man in the sky, the judge, the one who punishes, the one who could stop bad things happening but doesn’t, the one whom Science has utterly dethroned and made redundant. It was the God that Gerard Hughes, in God of Surprises, caricatures as ‘Good Old Uncle George’, and this is what he says:

“God was a familiar relative, much admired by Mum and Dad, who described God as very loving, a great friend of the family, very powerful and interested in all of us. Eventually we are taken to visit ‘Good Old Uncle George’. He lives in a formidable mansion, is bearded, gruff and threatening. We cannot share our parents’ professed admiration for this jewel in the family. At the end of the visit, Uncle George turns to address us. ‘Now listen dear,’ he begins, looking very severe, ‘I want to see you here once a week, and if you fail to come, let me just show you what will happen to you’. He then leads us down to the mansion’s basement. It is dark, becomes hotter and hotter as we descend, and we begin to hear unearthly screams. In the basement there are steel doors. Uncle George opens one. ‘Now look in there dear’, he says. We see a nightmare vision, an array of blazing furnaces with little demons in attendance, who hurl into the blaze those men, women and children who failed to visit Uncle George or to act in a way he approved. ‘And if you don’t visit me dear, that is where you will most certainly go’, says Uncle George. He then takes us upstairs to meet Mum and Dad. Mum leans over and says, ‘And now don’t you love Uncle George with all your heart and soul, mind and strength?’ And we, loathing the monster, say, ‘Yes I do’, because to say anything else would be to join the queue at the furnace. At a tender age religious schizophrenia has set in and we keep telling Uncle George how much we love him and how good he is and that we want to do only what pleases him. We observe what we’re told are his wishes and dare not admit, even to ourselves, that we loathe him”.

Well, Uncle George is certainly a caricature, but sadly this is what has been emphasised in certain places and times, and unfortunately there is something of Uncle George lingering in many people’s God-imaginations. And there are other such images lingering there too. In addition to the demanding, patriarchal figure we may also have a Santa Claus notion of God: a figure of benevolence who gives us what we want. Or we may have a policeman like figure who is only interested in our faults, in catching us out and disapproving of most things. Somewhere in the long process of the development of the religious imagination these images of God have taken hold and have often become quite embedded in the religious psyche. I remember a Dominican priest once saying in a homily that the creation story in the book of Genesis says that God made humankind in God’s image, but that ever since, humanity has been returning the compliment! How true!
One of the greatest issues today in the falling away from traditional religion and belief in God has to do with the images of God and the language used for God. Language both expresses reality and creates reality. As it was for my young student, many people today have given up on this understanding of God, and rightly so. But they are also hungering for ways of understanding and imaging God that are intelligible in our contemporary world. Just a brief look back over time at the development of God language and God images reveals a few things. The God who is thought to exist ‘up there’ is the product of an ancient cosmology: the understanding of a three-tiered universe, the underworld, the earth, the heavens. God was said to dwell in the highest heavens, ‘up there’, above it all. Humanity has long known that this is not literally true yet religious language, including the language of prayer and liturgy, so often continues to draw on these understandings and images. The other issue is that Christianity has developed in a patriarchal culture and the language and images associated with the authoritative and powerful male figures in society have become those attributed to God. Another trend over time has been the shift away from the original story-telling culture in which images and metaphors of God originally emerged, and these images and metaphors have been taken as realistic and static descriptions of God. The verbs became nouns, and the ‘doing’ of God, God relating to humanity the way a father gives life and cares and protects his child, turned into a static description of God, imaged as a human father, and hence the ‘man in the sky watching over us’.

These images of God can make us fearful or resentful. They can lead to inner tension when they are no longer seen to be intelligent, and they can lead us to abandon God altogether. Our picture of God leads to expectations of how God should therefore act. For example, the omnipotent figure who is seen to be able to prevent bad things happening has become a deeply held idea, lingering somewhere in our psyche, and is the cause of much pain and angst when that doesn’t happen. Even when intellectually we know this is not true – of course, God is not an old man in the sky! – it is nevertheless much more difficult to shift our feelings, our deeply held expectations of what God is, and how God should therefore act.

... and the God I do believe in

I am reminded of a saying: ‘When the man in the forest discovers that the wooden image he has been worshipping is not God, it does not mean there is no God’. It is simply an invitation to re-imagine what and where God might be. As St Paul said: ‘When I was a child I thought like a child, but now I am a man I must put away childish ways’. We must ‘let God be God’, as Meister Eckhart said. We cannot contain this Mystery purely within our thoughts and our language, and there is something very real about acknowledging this and continuing the journey into understanding how to speak of God, rather than abandoning God altogether. The ways of understanding God which will be most life-giving and real today are both ancient and new: they are ancient because they have been there from the beginning, and they are expressed in Scripture, and have been held over the centuries in the minds and hearts of the mystics; they are new in that they are consistent with the language of our contemporary understanding of the universe.

The most biblically accurate way of thinking about God is as ‘verb’. As Thomas Aquinas said, ‘God is pure activity’. The first mention we have of God in Scripture is God as Spirit, hovering over the Deep, that is, chaos, and bringing order out of chaos. The first action of God is creation. God creates. God breathes God’s life into the creature made of earth. We have no description of God, rather we encounter God as pure event. Elizabeth Johnson says that God is the verb in which all beings participate. God is pure activity, calling creation to fullness and healing and wholeness, and that story is told over and over again in the Hebrew Scriptures. God calls, lures, draws: Abraham and Sarah, the Hebrew people, Moses, and so on. God reveals Godself to Moses as ‘I am’. The prophets are stirred to action for they experience ‘the word of the Lord’, disturbing them, drawing them, sending them. The God we encounter in Scripture is consistently word and event, bringing life where there is none, always bringing order out of chaos. God is liberating action: the Hebrews freed from slavery in Egypt, tell and re-tell this story of God’s liberating action.
God is the bringer of life to the ‘dry bones’ (Ezekiel): ‘I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live’. God is the cause of the life-giving water which flows from the Temple and brings life to all around. God as life and event streamed into Mary and was enmeshed in Jesus’ life as pure empowerment, healing, liberation, service to all, pure love. Jesus’ life, stories and actions show where and how God as event, is found. God is the persistence of the woman, in the story Jesus told, who eventually got the unjust judge to grant her justice: it is the persistence of God that finally draws us into God’s pure activity of wholeness, healing, justice. The God Jesus revealed, and surrendered to, and died into, is the God of life: life that continued into and through his death as pure event.

The scientific story of the universe can lead to God being redundant or seen simply as God-of-the-gaps - only invoked where Science cannot offer an explanation and to be ousted when that explanation is discovered. But the ancient understanding of God as Being, Event, Action, can be seen to be integral to the very understanding and story of the universe. God as ‘verb’ is the powerful evolutionary thrust of the universe. God as ‘life itself’ is that force of attraction that holds every particle together, as Richard Rohr says. In a more poetic way, we may say that God is the dance itself.

All this may seem rather distant and impersonal, for Christianity teaches that God is a personal God with whom we enter into relationship. And for many people it is easier to enter into a relationship with a God who appears as a ‘perfect’, ‘super’ version of ourselves. But we remember that God is love. This is one of the biblical affirmations about God. God as life itself, is known to us as, and through, love. Bonaventure says that God is self-diffusive love, and Mechtild of Magdeburg says that God is that great outflow of love that never ceases. St John, in his letter which we have in the New Testament, is the one who states that, ‘God is love, and all who live in love, live in God and God lives in them’. And it is love that is at the heart of the Christian understanding of God as Trinity: God the creator and source of life (the Father), begetting, poured out into the Son who reveals this to us and draws us into God’s life of love, and the Spirit, that outpouring of love and life in the world, renewing the world, transforming it into life, wholeness, healing, goodness. The Trinity is not static. The action that the Trinity is, is creating, redeeming, sanctifying. The Trinity is not a description of ‘three men’ – although it is often portrayed as such in art and in the masculine language traditionally used. God, the Trinity, is pure event, known to us as love.

These are wonderful and real ways of talking about God. They are a far cry from ‘Uncle George’, and they remind us to treat image and metaphor as just that and never to think we have it all ‘wrapped up’! Let God be God.

Creating Spirit, healing, loving, freeing
In you we live and move and have our being

Kerry McCullough
Chaplain