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For when it's all too much and confusing

Intimate Affinity: the simply way of knowing God

Over the years I have read much about getting to know God. I have published a book called *Meeting Emma* as an introduction to Christian Spirituality. It includes ideas from monks and mystics and much else. I am still reading spiritual literature, some of it very good. So many words and so many ideas. So many does and don'ts and interpretations. Is God that difficult to get in contact with? Of course not. During all the years of my Christian walk, and through all the reading and reflecting, I have practised dwelling in God's presence the simple way. Perhaps you can relate to what is following.

God is a word of just three letters. Short but most mysterious. We know that divine reality can only be partly understood. Much about it will remain hidden. Even so, the nature of God is known. For Jesus came to reveal it in full. What he said was unbelievable in its simplicity.

In Jewish tradition the most holy name for God is YHWH. This name represents 'Someone' so holy and beyond anything that can be imagined, that the name should not be verbalised. Different terms are used when addressing or mentioning the God of Israel. And Jesus added a most outrageous one. He invited his disciples to address God as 'Father'. Apostle Paul suggested the even more intimate name of Abba – Dad.

The first disciples may well have been shocked. From the unpronounceable name YHWH, and the holy names that could be spoken, God now was to be addressed as Father. It was beyond what would be acceptable in Israel. But Jesus was determined to bring the basic nature of divine reality within the scope of human understanding. In a way that was correct as well as simple. He taught God to be a Heavenly Father.

The term Father, being gender specific, has its problems. Gender is exclusive to creation and does not apply to divine reality. The neutral words used for God in Jewish tradition more suitably epitomise the heavenly realm. Tradition suggested there to be a distance between God and creation. But Jesus knew how much and immediately God is involved with everything on earth and caring for it. Only the most personal of names would reflect that. The name representing a parent.

Calling God 'Father' suggests an idea and not an image. For instance a picture, even just mentally, of God being an old man in the sky has no bearing on what of God is like. God cannot be depicted and Jesus never proposed it. Rather with 'Father', he introduced a common idea that best describes God's disposition. Good fathers *and* mothers reflect the nature of God. In Jewish

households the father had prominence and Jesus chose accordingly. Of course, he himself already had God as his Father. God is like a parent.

Earthly parents express their role in many ways. Some are great at it, most are okay and others simply bad. Childhood memories differ accordingly. In suggesting the idea of 'Father' Jesus knew to have selected a concept with relational complications. Memories of bad parenthood can be projected towards God and spiritually become a stumbling block. How may this be avoided?

The answer is simple. Think of what a father should *not* be like and accept that God is surely not like that at all. God's relationality is richer than that of the best of fathers. If parenthood has failed you, consider God to be the opposite. There is but one minor difficulty in fully enjoying divine parenthood. To enter the kingdom of God I must become like a child – once again.

The idea of childhood is also contained in the believer being born again. Every committed Christian is a child of God and should develop into maturity. But it may not happen. It is quite possible to keep the Father spiritually at a distance. Though hopefully when in need, God will be attentive when called upon. This kind of relationship is tainted by egocentricity. For such believers the Father remains a stranger and the simple way of knowing God a mystery. They never enter the joys of the true child.

We now arrive at the pivotal point. How do I, an adult, become childlike? Is it even possible? The key to success is an attitudinal one to which God will especially respond. A young child does not question the behaviour of the parent. Parenthood, whatever its nature, just happens to children. Likewise, before God I must leave all my questions behind, perhaps to be raised later. I must seek the divine relational dynamics of love and perfection for its own sake. This I can do. Being childlike before God is safe and a pleasure. It is also liberating.

The experience is spiritual, of course. I will not really feel to be once more a child. The idea of childlikeness helps in making the relationship with God work out as it should. I am invited into the embrace God's parenthood. That call arises from deep within my spirit. It may be ignored or not given the attention it deserves. If so, my life will be much the poorer for it. I best heed that call from the deep and take the first step. I should gratefully say: 'Yes!' A significant 'Yes' and knowing well that I have said so. Ever thereafter I say 'yes' more ordinarily every day.

'Yes', is all I need to say. All else will be superfluous. The way to God is simple and direct. The invitation says 'come'. When I do, a new reality responds from deep within my spirit. It says 'Yes' in return. I am a child of God *and I know it*. It is a gift of the Spirit confirmed by a faith within me that *just is*. Deeper than my thoughts and feelings. A still small voice.

This step in making spiritual childhood work properly can be taken at any time during a Christian walk. The key is to tell God you wish to say 'Yes' and then just do it. Perhaps you have done

something similar before and would like to renew the relationship. That is fine. Ideally, the 'Yes' is said once properly and is then lived out intentionally day after day. It is not hard to do and soon becomes a strength rather than a challenge.

The new reality within me is alive, well and truly. It is also elusive. Everyday awareness of it is subtle. Having doubts about it is possible. Busyness and troubles may subdue the sense of it. That is normal and need not be of concern. It all depends on what I *really* believe. Neither thoughts nor feelings change the reality of me being a child close to God. Whenever it doesn't seem that way, I yet know it to be so, and will act accordingly.

God *is* love. God is personal. That sums up the essential nature of a good parent and the reason for Jesus introducing the name 'Father'. Love is an idea with a broad spectrum. How I relate to it will be coloured by my experiences. Those may be good or bad, or a mixture of both. From God issues all that is good about love and in that I must trust. God cares about me. anchoress Julian of Norwich (1342-1423) understood there being no anger in God. And surely never towards a child who seeks God's presence, no matter what the situation. Rather, the Father invites towards intimacy.

Intimacy develops when love is reciprocated. It is a relational experience of a special kind. But how can I ever become intimate with someone who is invisible? Again, it is not a matter of feelings primarily though those may happen. The sense of intimacy with God relies on the subtle detection of it in my spirit. When I leave my questions behind, and my ego unattended to, then intimacy becomes discernible. The sense of it will be faint compared to what I experience with my wife (for I am no mystic) but similar. Intimacy unveils an affinity of being. Two persons together who are of like spirit.

The words intimate and affinity complete each other relationally. Being born again of the Holy Spirit makes likeness in spirit between God and the believer possible. It allows for the interweaving of intimacy and affinity. With God that is relationally unavoidable, unless I draw away from it. Love seeks to connect and when its own kind comes calling cannot but respond deeply. This reality sustains the life of a child of God who says 'yes' every day.

All this by the initiative of a good Father. Within me dwells a faith about my spiritual childhood that 'just is' and it remains. Its dynamics are stronger than anything the world can throw at me. At any time I can say hello to God and instantly sense a belonging. It may be just a quick mental prayer and I have cultivated a habit of doing this. It is all so utterly simple. Times of extended reflection are also part of my routine and particularly needed when life is overcrowding my spirit. I just sit and dwell on God without urgency. It are these reflections that restore some rest in my soul. Those times are precious. I will never take God's love for granted and always seek to grow in the nature and character of Jesus.

Sure, I have learned much from reading and writing. My church involvements have been helpful and troublesome at times. It is the usual story. But my 'real' Christian life exists apart from all of that. Less complicated and far more effective. Jesus revealed something of immense importance. That the 'Father' calls and enables the child toward *Intimate Affinity: the simple way of knowing God!*

If you have found this interesting please consider my books in which much more is explained about God and the reality of an authentic Christian perspective on life – the benefits that offers.

Thank you,

Michael