

God's Presence in Relationship



Describing God is not always easy, and especially when we think of God's presence in a loving relationship with us. We may choose to abandon such a challenge, or restrict God to being only as a judge or friend. Jeremy Taylor, an English Anglican cleric and writer in the 17th century, suggests other possibilities. Taylor was chaplain to King Charles 1 and Archbishop Laud (both later executed), imprisoned briefly during England's civil war, chaplain to a noble family in Wales and a Bishop in Ireland. In his book "Holy Living", written in 1650 as a guide for Anglicans, he explains God's relationship with us by using practical images from daily life.

He wrote, "we may imagine God to be as the air and the sea, and we are all enclosed in his circle, wrapped up in the lap of his infinite nature; or as infants in the wombs of their pregnant mothers: and we can no more be removed from the presence of God than from our own being."*

What can these words written nearly 400 years ago in the United Kingdom say to us in Australia today? We may find Taylor's images too intimate, absurd or disturbing for us to accept, but first let us briefly examine them to see if they could relate to our lives.

We note that Taylor demonstrates God's presence as being very close to us. We might prefer to recognize God's presence as not so close, in kind words and acts of other people, or in the beauty of nature, and these places are indeed where we can find God.

To think of God as the air, perhaps as the fresh air in the photo of Crescent

Head in this leaflet, that we delight to breathe in and out to keep us alive. Wherever we are, we require air for life. We need air as we need God. This image emphasizes that God is surrounding us and sustaining our life wherever we are. Alternatively, we could think of polluted air such as that which is damaging life on earth. By breathing in such air we are sharing the life of a sick planet and need to do something to heal it.

In Australia we live on an island, larger than any Pacific Island or the UK. We are encompassed by the sea which enables cool breezes to blow on hot days and make living near the coast more pleasant. If we enter the sea it can support us as we swim, or carry us to other places in boats or ships. When we float, we can feel surrounded by the sea as we do with the air. The shadow side of this is that some coastlines are disappearing as Climate Change causes sea levels to rise.

God as Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, can be thought of as a circle in which God's love, the Holy Spirit, moves continually between the Father and the Son. Taylor imagines us as being enclosed in this love, and becoming part of the continual giving and receiving of God's love. This experience is not just for us alone, but to be shared with others so that they too may know something of being in God's love.

Our relationship with God deepens with Taylor's next image of us being, "wrapped up in the lap of his infinite nature". We know how children like to be cuddled, and feel protected in the lap of their loving parents. Also, we may remember how we have felt when we have embraced on our lap a small child, or even an animal, and surrounded it with our body and arms. Do these acts of love and care relate to how we experience God's love for us?

The final image is a feminine one, which affirms for us that God contains both male and female genders, and every combination of them. God is presented as a pregnant woman with each of us as the precious child in her womb. This may be a challenging concept, but one which reminds us that God is ultimately our Creator who loves us deeply. A child in the womb of its mother is completely reliant on its mother for its life and growth, and receives the DNA of its parents. Is this illustrating how we are formed in the image of God, and when baptised become members of the body of Christ? Can we believe that we come

from God, are held by God and return to God when we die? We are in truth at home and belong in God's love—whether we feel it or not.

The last statement in the quotation from Taylor sums up our relationship with God in its full profoundness. We are so at one with God that “removed from the presence of God” we would no longer exist. This suggests that oneness with God is a very close relationship where God's love for us is continually giving us life in our innermost being.

Regardless of what happens to us in our lives, and there will always be suffering and joy intermingled as it was for Jesus, we can be assured that God's Spirit is with us and in us. God's loving presence offers us a deep peace that we as Christians, and also as humans, are called to accept and share with others in today's situations of violence, war, pain, fear, depression, challenge and joy. These contexts are similar to those Taylor experienced in his life in the 17th Century, and out of which he wrote “Holy Living”.

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*(Quote taken from p. 85 of “Treasures New & Old: Three Centuries of Anglican Thought & Spirituality”, 2022, by Anthony Miller.)