

CHURCH OF ENGLAND BIRMINGHAM

WAY OF DISCIPLESHIP: BEING WITH GOD

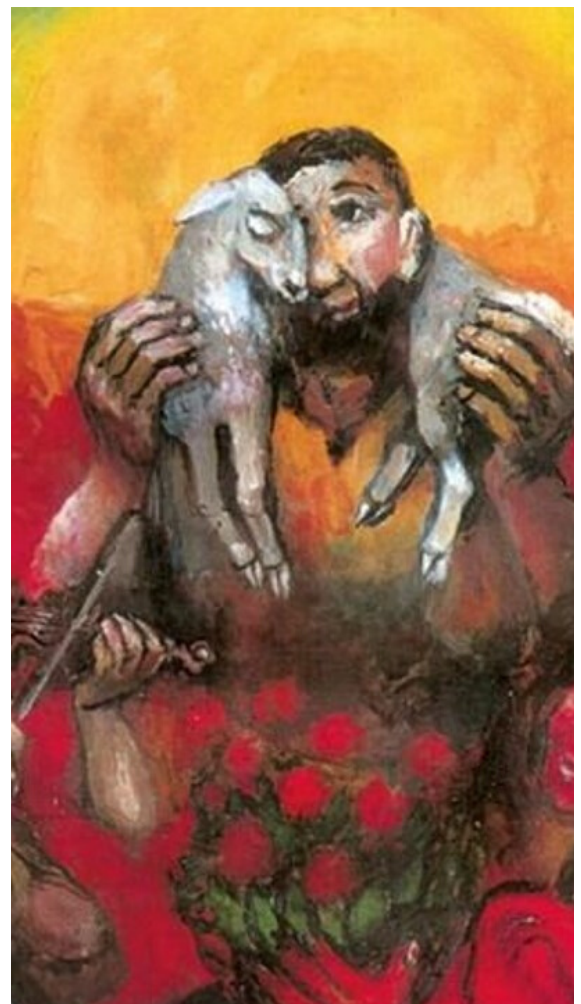


Session 2: Discipleship and God

Contents



What is at the heart of a disciple's relationship with God?
Who loves first?
What is God's love like?
What kind of relationship does God want with me?
Why do we love God?
How is this love relationship mostly described in the Bible?
How does this shape who I am as a disciple?
Can I really know God? How is that possible? Isn't God beyond us?
How much can we know?
How does this help me to be a disciple?
Why is my "picture of God" so important?
Why is God "Father, Son, Spirit"?
Where is the Trinity in Jesus' life and the New Testament?
Where did the word "Trinity" come from and what does it protect us from?
How does the Trinity help me be a disciple today?
Why do we call God "Father"?
What kind of father?
What will help me experience God's love?



What is at the heart of a disciple's relationship with God?

The greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God, with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and then to love your neighbour as yourself.

So before we say anything else about God or ourselves we start here: it's about love.

Note that lots of people believe in God. But the way of discipleship is to grow in being loved by God, and in loving God.

God has made you for the kind of relationship that St Augustine described, when he wrote,

“*You have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.*”



Who loves first?

Augustine also wrote: “You were with me, and I was not with you...You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness. ...

I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours.”

John wrote, “We love because He first loved us.” 1 John 4:19. So before we can begin to love God, we need to begin to experience the depths of His love.

If you think about it, how would we know about love in the first place if God didn't reveal it?



What is God's love like?



While there are many things we can say to describe God, the most defining statement about God is in 1 John 4: God IS love.

In other words, love is not something God chooses to do. He is love itself – He cannot do anything else except love. God puts aside everything else about Him – His complete power, His complete knowledge, His Lordship – compared to loving His creation, including us.

His love always shapes everything else. His love can be defined as self-giving love – love which will always give to others at cost to Himself, even if they don't receive or want it.

For Christians, as we shall see, the supreme way we know and see this love reaching out to us is through the self-giving coming as a human, death and resurrection of Jesus.

God's love is revealed more and more through the story of the Bible. For example, in the book of Hosea, God reveals His self-giving love with these words,

"When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. But the more they were called, the more they went away from me. It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realize it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them....

My people are determined to turn from me....How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?...

“

My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused.”



What kind of relationship does God want with me?



If God IS love above all else, the kind of relationship He offers us will be

Personal.

Throughout the Bible numerous people are recorded as “walking with God.” Jesus told His disciples that there would, “realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.

Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them.”

Honest.

In Genesis 3, God is pained by the idea that Adam and Eve are hiding from Him. He asks them, “Where are you?” We can feel ashamed and think we have to “hide from God” – that He won’t love us as we are. But, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote,

“You can hide nothing from God. The mask you wear before people will do you no good before Him. He wants to see you as you are, He wants to be gracious to you. You do not have to go on lying to yourself and your brothers, as if you were without sin; you can dare to be a sinner. Thank God for that; He loves the sinner but He hates sin...”

Secure.

Because God loves us, we can be completely secure, whatever happens. For example, in John we read,

“Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist.”

In other words, Jesus was able to live out His calling to serve and go to the cross, because He was secure in the love of God His Father.

Julian of Norwich was a medieval Christian who had a vision of the security of God’s love. She wrote,

“And in this he showed me a little thing, the quantity of a hazel nut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed. And it was as round as any ball. I looked upon it with the eye of my understanding, and thought, ‘What may this be?’ And it was answered generally thus, ‘It is all that is made.’

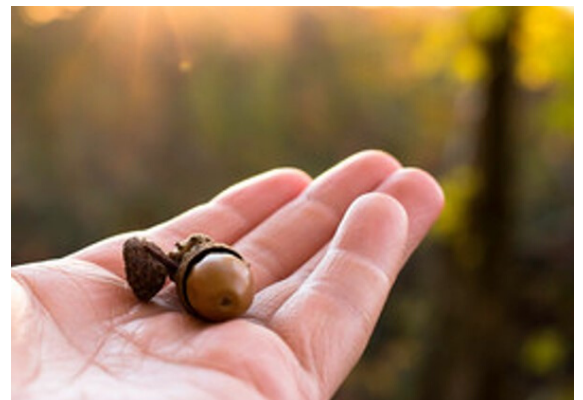
I marvelled how it might last, for I thought it might suddenly have fallen to nothing for littleness. And I was answered in my understanding:

It lasts and ever shall, for God loves it. And so have all things their beginning by the love of God....In this little thing I saw three properties.

“

*The first is that God made it.
The second that God loves it.*

And the third, that God keeps it.”



Transforming.

When we know God's love it will begin to change us. This is because the way of discipleship is not just knowing about God's love – it's a deeper kind of knowing – like when Adam knew (yada) – Eve, and she conceived.

If we are not willing to begin to love God, we will have no chance of understanding Him.

Growing in knowing God's love is less about understanding ideas, and more about touching Him. We can't split Truth about God from life itself.

One writer puts it like this, "It's not enough to claim to know the truth as if it can be contained in a mere idea. If I want to claim something to be true in the religious sense particularly then it must have changed my life, or my life itself will be communicating that I don't really believe it to be true."

As theologian David Tracy says, "There is never an authentic disclosure of truth which is not also transformative."

Why do we love God?

Very simply – because He is God, and God is love. The more we can love God for who He is, rather than how He answers our prayers or what He does, the more we will be genuinely loving Him.

St Bernard put it like this:

"The reason for our loving God is God. God is the initiator of our love and its final goal. He is himself the occasion of human love; he gives us the power to love, and brings our desire to its consummation.

God is loveable in himself, and gives himself to us as the object of our love. He desires that our love for him should bring us happiness, and not be arid and barren....



“

...His love for us opens up inside us the way to love, and is the reward of our own reaching out in love. How gently he leads us in love's way, how generously he returns the love we give, how sweet he is to those who wait for him!”

*Bernard Of Clairvaux
(1090–1153)*



How is this love relationship mostly described in the Bible?



One of the greatest themes throughout the Bible is the word Covenant which describes the love-relationship God invites us into.

Throughout the Old Testament, God makes covenants again and again – with Noah, with Abraham, with David. Each covenant is God taking the initiative to restore the love relationship with His people.

In a covenant, God offers Himself completely in love to His people, in a way that nothing can break, and He invites them to offer themselves to Him. “You will be my people, and I will be your God.” Even when people turn away from Him, God keeps His covenant with them.

This defines the relationship He wants with us. It is the deepest relationship of self-giving love, and God always initiates it with us. It's like a marriage (in which people say to each other, “All that I am I give to you, and all that I have I share with you.”) In fact, as we read the Bible we find that we are called “God’s Bride”.

As the Bible progresses, there is a pattern. God makes a covenant with His people and gives reminders of the relationship through, for example, temple worship...the people break it...God restores it...until eventually He promises through a prophet, Jeremiah,

“The days are coming when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel.. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them...This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time...

“

I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbour, or say to one another, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest...” (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

When Jesus came, He lived fully in this covenant relationship with God, and invites disciples into exactly the same relationship: “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.” (John 14:23)

This loving covenant relationship was revealed fully and achieved by Jesus’s death and rising again. God’s commitment to us is forever – it is written in the blood of Jesus. As we share in the “Covenant” meal that Jesus gave, we are reminded of this - the bread and the wine help us remember who He is, and who we are.



How does this shape who I am as a disciple?



Because your identity is defined by the covenant God makes with you through Christ. You are a child of God, “born again” into a new family, given a new name and a new identity.

The New Testament teaches that when we are baptized we embrace our new identity. Jesus connects us to God and defines who we are. We share his Name: “Christ-ian”, and everything He has is ours.

This means God – our Covenant partner – wants to give us everything He gave Jesus.

Because your motive for loving God is defined by this covenant.

The New Covenant means that God's code of behaviour for his people—“the Law”—is now written in our hearts. Now we are free to love AND obey God because this is truly a reflection of who we are. We choose to obey because this is the most consistent way of expressing our identity.

“

Obedience is always an act of love. It is so important that things always start with our covenant identity.

If we try and approach God only through obeying Him, rather than recognising who we are, we will fall into the trap of the Pharisees whom Jesus encountered.

We will try and “prove” our identity by what we do, and become anxious, driven and insecure before God. We won't be disciples who are loving God.



Can I really *know* God?

How is that possible?

Isn't God beyond us?



We have started with the importance of loving God above all things.

But it's important to ask, as human beings, how much we can really understand or know God, or how we can really say anything about God at all.

From the beginning, God is a God of covenant love. Yet when Moses approached the burning bush in the desert (Exodus 3) and asked to know God's name he got two replies: "God said to Moses, "I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I am has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.'"

God is reminding Moses of the covenants He made. But He is also refusing to give His name. The meaning of his name is best translated as *I will be there as I will be there*. In other words, you can only come so far, know so much about Him – He refuses to be tied down by any human idea.

Far from being a problem, this is something which helps us approach God as God. As St Aquinas said, "a comprehended God is no God at all." CS Lewis put it this way, "...my idea of God is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it himself."

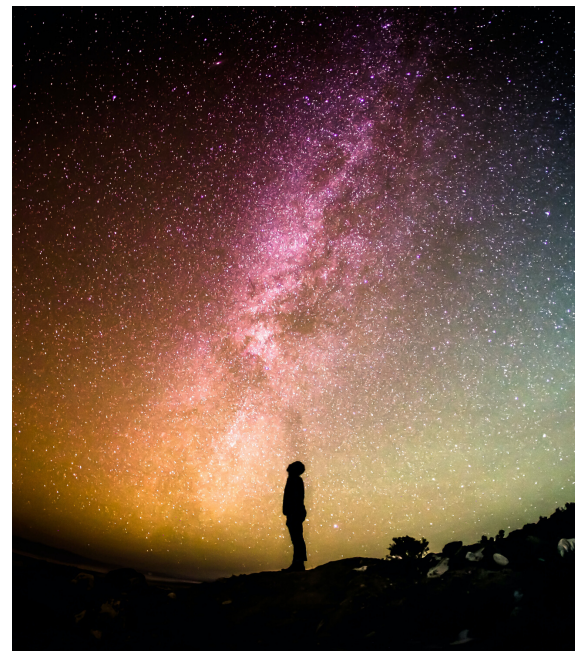
That is why in Scripture God is often revealed as spirit and fire—things that cannot be contained or easily approached.

For everything we say about God, there will always be more to be said. It is most helpful to see our knowledge of God about trying to point in the right direction, rather than giving a final answer. We can say, "The truth is in this direction, and not that way."

“

Paul put it like this, "For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known."

This is why we say we believe in God, and have faith, rather than knowledge which comes from complete proof. So, perhaps a better question to ask is...



How *much* can we know?



We can discover aspects of God's character in various ways:

By looking at creation – what does the way the world and universe works reveal?

By examining ourselves – what do our longings for beauty, truth, justice and meaning point towards?

By looking at the way God is revealed and acted in Scripture.

And ultimately by looking at Christ, who is the "image of the invisible God."

Over time, we have come to see that, even without the whole picture, there are aspects of God's being and character that we can know to be true.

Some of these things (attributes) describe God's powers and some His personality. Or to put it another way, some reflect His greatness, and others His goodness.

And while some describe who God is, some can only describe who He is not (such as, for example, saying He does not change).

There is a handout available describing some of God's attributes in more detail. As we have said, God's defining attribute is self-giving, covenant love.

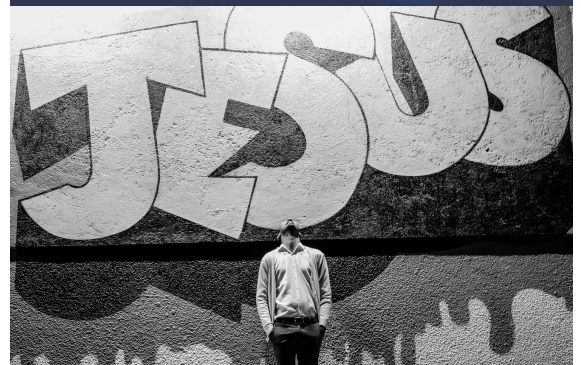
But a further list might include this definition:

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"God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth."
(Westminster Shorter Catechism)

There is an excellent eight minute video introduction into how we can talk about God (you will need your thinking caps on!)

And there is a ten session course you can do online on different aspects of God.



How does this help me to be a disciple?



It stops you making God in your own image.

The act of “making gods in your own image” i.e. that you can humanly understand, is seen as dangerous in the Bible, and is known as idolatry. It is making gods too small, too human, too much about what we need.

Not only are idols dangerous because they are a poor reflection, and rejection of God, but those who worship and base their lives on them gradually get changed into slaves, becoming like the thing they worship.

It helps you to keep wondering at and exploring God.

Augustine said, “If you understand, it is not God. God is ever greater, always bigger, than anything we think we know of him.”

Another writer puts it like this, “God introduces us into this mystery, but not in such a way that it simply stops being mysterious. It cannot be exhausted by being revealed;....Every aspect of God’s mystery that he gives us to understand is surrounded by mystery and opens into greater mystery.” The wonder of God is there is always more to be explored!

It gives you the right balance in your relationship with Him.

Solomon wrote in his Proverbs:

“

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.”

This fear isn’t because we can’t trust in God’s love or goodness, but it’s the kind of awe and deep respect we have for a being who is, “beyond my utmost heights and more inward to me than my inmost depths.” (Augustine).

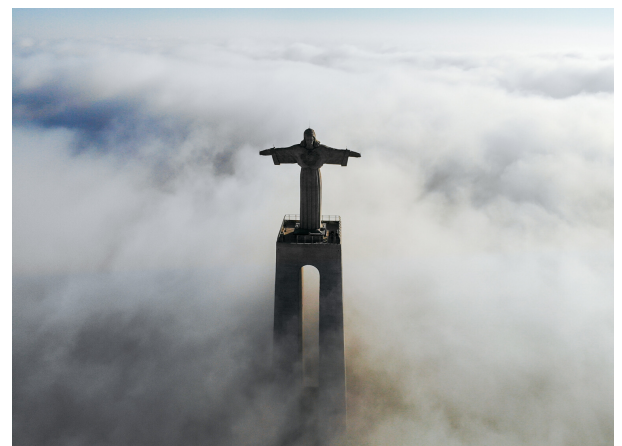
We are drawn towards God’s wonder, but we cannot fathom Him. Ecclesiastes 3:11 puts it like this: “He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.”

God is both holy and completely unapproachable – filling us with awe and wonder – and completely within and around us, closer to us than we can understand.

We call these qualities God being *transcendent* (above everything and mysterious) and *immanent* (within and alongside us, available at all times).

He holds the whole universe and knows every atom. We tremble before Him AND draw close to Him in intimate love.

(There is a one-page handout on God’s otherness and intimacy. There is also a six minute video and nine page handout about God’s holiness which shows how completely different God is, but how His holiness brings new life:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I9vn5UvsHvM>)





There are times in our lives as disciples when we need to remember the fear of the Lord.

There are times when we need to draw close to His intimate love.

Both are true, and both are needed.

Different churches emphasise different approaches to God. Some are very aware of His transcendence in the way they worship and live. Others reflect the closeness of God's love.

It's good to experience both in being with God. This balance is actually in the first words of the Lord's Prayer. We call God, "Our Father", a description of trust and love, and then say, "Hallowed be your name."

In other words, this God who is not "tame" has a name which should be honoured and respected. (There is a five page handout about this).

It gives you humility with others.

As a disciple you will find yourself disagreeing with other disciples, and wanting to pray, worship and act in different ways.

For example, there are over 25,000 Christian denominations!

Understanding that there is always more to be discovered should enable us to listen and learn from each other with humility.



Why is my “picture of God” so important?

While we are always aware that we cannot possibly know everything, or even much, about God, what we do know makes all the difference.

The writer A W Tozer puts it like this,

“

“What comes into our mind when we think about God is the most important thing about us... Were we able to extract from any person a complete answer to the question, “What comes into your mind when you think about God?” we might predict with certainty the spiritual future of that person.”

There are many false directions and ideas about what God is like that can lead us away from the relationship of covenant love we are made for and towards a destructive fear. Many people, even Christians, either subconsciously, or consciously, might believe that:

God punishes and blesses us according to our actions – this both leads to us feeling unable to please Him all the time and/or raises questions about those who suffer for no reason.

God punishes us eternally for a single sin – this makes God worse than a human parent.

God only loves us according to our behaviour – this leads us to believe that God is not generous, and does not genuinely delight in us.

Why is God “Father, Son, Spirit”?



Early Christians came to experience and understand God in three main ways – as Father, Son and Holy Spirit – three distinct persons in one.

This understanding is not set out in the Bible as a teaching – the word Trinity is not used – but its reality can be seen through both the Old and New Testaments – God is three-in-one from the beginning.

Jewish people would pray the Shema morning and evening, at the end of each day and at the time of death, saying “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is One Lord.” (Deuteronomy 6: 4)

But God is also described with various names and as distinct persons:

The Word of God. God’s “Word” exists separately from God, but comes from God, speaking life, guidance, and salvation into being. (e.g. Isaiah 55:10-11). The Word creates.

The Spirit of God. Right at the beginning of Genesis (1:2) the Spirit hovers over creation – God’s presence and power. The Spirit comes upon people at various times and in various ways. The Spirit empowers.

Wisdom (especially in Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes) who is described as a female figure, alongside God but dependent on him (e.g. Proverbs 9:1-6) and who acts in the world.



Where is the Trinity in Jesus' life and the New Testament?



With Jesus, his followers came to understand that God was doing something that was both new – a New Covenant which completed all the promises God had made His people through Jesus – and continuous with what had gone before.

They already had categories for understanding God but began to see Him in new ways.

Father: The God Jesus taught His disciples that the God He knew as “Father” was the God of Israel, and He related personally to Him as a distinct being.

Son: Jesus, who was fully human, also acted in ways that only the God of Israel could do – healing, and offering forgiveness of sins. His followers used ways of describing Him that were divine – the glory of God, or the wisdom of God. John described Jesus as being “with God”, but also said He “was God” – one, but also distinct.

Spirit: The Spirit was the presence through which people could be born again, whom Jesus promised to send, and who came at Pentecost. The Spirit is the person through whom the love of the Father and Son can be known.



The three persons already described could be known and understood in the life of Jesus, sometimes clearly active in one event, and sometimes in different ways.

For example, at the one event of Jesus' baptism (Mark 1:9-11), the Spirit comes down on Jesus, and the voice of the Father describes Him as my “beloved Son.”

Romans chapter 8 is full of the language of Father, Son, Spirit. “For those who are led by the **Spirit of God** are the children of God....And by him we cry, “Abba, **Father**.”... Now if we are children, then we are heirs— heirs of God and co-heirs with **Christ**.”

Paul's letter to the Ephesians (1:3-14) describes God in a few sentences as, “**The Father** who chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.” The one who, “predestined us for adoption to sonship through **Jesus Christ**... (aiming) to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.” And that, “When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised **Holy Spirit**.”

2 Corinthians ends with these words,

“

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

Where did the word “Trinity” come from and what does it protect us from?



Loving God as Father, Son and Spirit was a lived reality, in the ways that people worshipped, prayed, baptized, and knew God before it became a teaching.

The teaching evolved over a few centuries, and has provided a strong and reliable way of speaking of God - not as a way of “tying God down” or controlling God (who is an eternal mystery), but as a way of protecting us from some of those false and damaging pictures of God, or ways that we can “make Him in our own image” as an idol:

It protects us against thinking God has multiple or split personalities:

The Trinity does not mean that God sometimes shows himself to us as Father, sometimes as Son, and sometimes as Spirit. He is all three at the same time.

It protects us from only knowing God in smaller reduced ways:

Such as believing that God could only be separate and distant from us, or could only be within us, or could only be a “divine human being”. The Trinity helps us to hold all these things together.



“

One document says that the Trinity,

affirms that God in his own divine self really is such that God can share himself with his creation.

God is not only the utterly other, who infinitely transcends creation;

God can also be deeply and intimately present within creation, as the Spirit,

and God can also be one of us, a genuinely human person, as Jesus Christ the Son.

Therefore God can and does open his own life for his creation to share.

How does the Trinity help me be a disciple today?



The Trinity means God is a relationship of love. In the Trinity, God gives and receives within God's very being.

That is why we began with the truth that God IS love. God is always in relationship – never solitary. As Mike Lloyd puts it,

"This is the fundamental fact of all that is. You can divide up a molecule. You can split an atom. But you can never divide up the love that the Father has for the Son, and the Son for the Spirit, and the Spirit for the Father, and the Father for the Spirit, and the Son for the Father, and the Spirit for the Son. That is the surest thing that is. We stand on holy ground and the view from here is stunning."

Rublev's icon is an ancient and famous picture of the love that flows within God's very being. You can watch a four minute video unpacking that here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SUMKfNjKU-8>

When looking at it, the writer Henri Nouwen said,

"Notice the movement from the Father towards the Son and the movement of both Son and Spirit towards the Father. There is a circle of love where all relate to one another. Draw an imaginary line from the tree through the Son to the little opening in front of the table. Draw another line linking the heads of the three figures.

“

You now have a cross as well as the circle: the cross becomes the means by which the world can be drawn up into the everlasting circle of the love of God.”

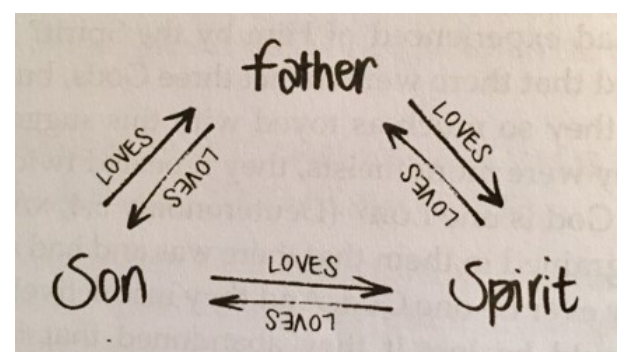
The Trinity means God invites us into this relationship of love.

God's self-giving love does not run out and is not exclusive. In the icon, this is shown by the fact that there is a fourth place at the table, for you, the viewer.

The nature of God's love is that God can share his life even with those created beings, ourselves, who are alienated from God and opposed to God.

Through the Son and Spirit, God enters our reality of evil, suffering and mortality, shares our pain, carries that pain for us and restores us, walks with us in our human everyday struggles and shapes our lives so that we can know the Father as the source and goal of our being.

"The point isn't to understand. The point is to know and be known by this God so that we can participate in his love."



Why do we call God “Father”?



An early Christian saint called Cyprian wrote this, “Those who have been born again and restored to God through grace say “Father” at the beginning of all prayer because they are already beginning to be his sons and daughters. None of us would presume to do this had not Christ himself taught us to pray in this way.”

Jewish people knew that God is neither male nor female, but spirit without body or gender, but they understood God to have the loving qualities of a parent.

Psalms 103 says, “As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him.” Isaiah 49:15 “Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!”

But Jesus lived and taught that we should, through Him, know God as Father. This was entirely new.

The most important relationships we have are our relationship with Jesus as Lord and our relationship with God as our father.

A term of intimacy and trust, but also holding a sense of obedience. The word Abba shows that Jesus knew God as intimately involved in His life, and not distant.

The writer CFD Moule says, “The intimate word conveys not a casual sort of familiarity but the deepest, most trustful reverence.”

For some people calling God Father might be difficult for various reasons, and we need to be sensitive. But, rather than abandoning the word, the writer James Smith offers some helpful advice,

“...when Jesus describes God as his father we have to let him define what fatherhood means. Barth is helpful here: it is not that there is first of all human fatherhood and then a so-called divine fatherhood, but just the reverse; true and proper fatherhood resides in God and from this fatherhood what we know as fatherhood among us men is derived. The solution is not to abandon the term father but to let Jesus define it.”

What kind of father?

When Jesus addressed God, he used the word “Abba”. Later on, Paul writes in Romans that we cry out to God, “Abba, Father” when we pray. A helpful translation is, “Dear Father.”



What will help me experience God's love?



As we journey through the Way of Discipleship the aim is to form us as people who can grow into Being with God in our daily lives and experiencing His love. Two final thoughts can reassure us.

We hide from God - He doesn't hide from us.

While there are things that can get in the way of us experiencing God, and there can be times in our lives when God seems more distant, God is always wanting us to know Him.

At the beginning of the Bible, it is human beings who hide from God – not the other way round. The writer Balthazar said that Scriptures show:

“When people seek God, God is long before in search of people, and like the woman looking for her lost coin, God turns the house of man upside down. People may hunt for God like one pursuing a deer with bloodhounds through fire and water, against lance and pike, but God's hunt for people is even wilder.”

God is always present - we need the eyes to see Him.

In Genesis 28: 13-16 Jacob has a dream at night in which God promises him the land. He wakes up and thinks, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it.” God is above all things, but also within all things.

One writer, Barbara Taylor Brown, says how this transformed her experience,

“I could no longer see myself or the least detail of my life in the same way again. When the service was over that day I walked out of it into a God-enchanted world, where I could not wait to find further clues to heaven on earth. Every leaf, every ant, every shiny rock called out to me- begging to be watched, to be listened to, to be handled and examined.

“

I became a detective of divinity, collecting evidence of God's genius and admiring the tracks left for me to follow: locusts shedding their hard bodies for soft, new winged ones; prickly pods of milkweed spilling silky white hair; lightning spinning webs of cold fire in the sky, as intricate as the veins in my own wrist. My friend taught me to believe that these were all words in the language of God.”

