

In Search of God

Preparation for the Meeting

Personal Reflection

Part of being human is to be always searching for happiness – for what may be good or true or beautiful for us.

The name we give to that dream of ultimate happiness or goodness or beauty is 'God'. Your own search for 'God' has brought you to where you are now, reading these words.

As part of the searching, spend some time reflecting on these questions.

1. Can you recall something that was a real help to you in your search for God? Perhaps a particular event ... a conversation ... a book ... a person ... a thought that struck you. Remember it. Remember what a difference it made to you.
2. Part of the Catholic belief is that God is always present and lovingly active in our lives, whether we're aware of it or not. Do you think God was present in the times you remembered in the previous reflection? Where do you think God is present in your life now? What do you think God is calling you to, right now?



God speaks to me

You may use one of these readings for several days; you may choose a different one each day.

Open your heart to the Spirit of God. Read. Listen. Pray.

1. Psalm 8.
A song in praise of God the Creator.
2. Psalm 13.
A confident appeal to God.
3. Psalm 19:1-6.
"The heavens declare the glory of God."
4. Psalm 103.
God is love and compassion.

Praying

- Find a place, and make some time when you can be still. Relax and gently follow your breathing for a little while. Become still. Let your thoughts return to one of the times when you felt you'd 'found' God in your life. Talk to God in your heart about that time, and what it meant to you. Say "thank you, God" as often as you like.
- If you find yourself thinking about some of the others in your group, you might imagine yourself placing them in God's loving hands, and say "God bless" You can do this as often as you like. Don't forget to put yourself there, too. "God bless me".



Searching for God

For anyone starting out on a journey of faith, God is the end of the road, the goal of the search. But God is also the starting point, because faith itself is a gift of God. So too, the restlessness which leads a man or woman to take the first steps towards faith, or to reinforce the initial faith which has already been given, is also God's gift. From whatever perspective we view things it is God who is both the source and the goal of all our searching and striving.

In the world today there are many professed believers in God who are not Christian. Believers include Jews, Moslems, Hindus, and many who would disclaim any affiliation with any particular religious movement.

And in fact, it is possible to come to belief in God, and arrive at some knowledge of God, just by using our natural intelligence, our own natural powers of reasoning. (We believe, of course, that even human intelligence is a divine gift.)

The Evidence Around Us

There is the evidence of the beauty and order and harmony of the world around us: the greatness of the universe, of which our planet earth is relatively such a tiny part; the power of the sun, the beauty of the moon, the magnificence of a star-studded sky on a clear night, the beauty of a beach in the moonlight; the regular ebb and flow of the tide, the surge of a rolling surf; the constant pattern by which the seasons follow one upon the other, the way night follows day; the variety and colour of the trees and flowers; the existence of so

many species of animals, birds and fish; and especially, the wonder of human life.

So many young couples have looked into the eyes of their new-born first child, and thought: how can anyone not believe that there is a God? There are, then, many strong reasons which appeal to our human minds and hearts, to argue that there must be some supreme intelligence behind it all.

The only alternative is that all this wonderfully creative work happened by chance. The story is told of two scientists who were admiring a perfectly constructed model of the whole solar system. One asked the other: "Who made it?" The other, knowing that his colleague was a professed non-believer, replied: "Nobody made it. It just happened." The former did not appreciate being made fun of, and said as much. To which the believer responded: "If you cannot accept that this model happened by chance, how can you accept that no intelligent being was responsible for the real thing?"

An Alternative: Atheism

A believer will argue that it is much easier to believe in God than not. The Bible has harsh words for non-believers. The Psalmist states "*Only the fool says in his heart: 'There is no God'*" (Ps 14:1). And St. Paul, writing to the Romans, says that the pagans are "*without excuse*" for failing to recognize the existence of a Creator from the wonderful things which God has made. "*Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse*" (Rom 1:2).





One might well ask how many real atheists there are in the world. Certainly there are many practical atheists, that is, people who choose to live as though God does not exist, who prefer not to think about it. There are also many who would sincerely classify themselves as agnostics — people who suspend belief because they are unable to decide one way or the other from the apparently conflicting evidence which they find confronting them.

But how numerous are the convinced theoretical atheists? Out of the 1914-1918 war came the saying, “There are no atheists in the foxholes (or trenches).” A humorous story is also told about an official of the old Communist USSR (Russia). He reported enthusiastically to his superior that the latest survey in his region showed a decline in the number of people professing belief in God. The commissar fervently replied: “Thank God for that!”

The Problem of Evil

Admittedly there are problems about the argument for the existence of God from the beauty of creation, and the order and harmony in nature. For not all creation is beautiful and harmonious. There is also an ugliness and a wildness and a savagery in nature — earthquakes, famines, floods, storms and tempests, drought. There is also all too often an ugliness in the affairs of human beings, in the way they treat one another — wars, persecutions, racism, and various other forms of injustice, exploitation and oppression.

Therefore the question which inevitably arises is this: if there exists a God who is good and loving and merciful, how could such a God permit evil and injustice and suffering? How can we reconcile the existence of a good and loving and merciful God with the evil and injustice and suffering that are so much a part of a world created by God?

In one area of human tragedies, the question is not so difficult to answer. The plain fact is that most of the evil is man-made. It is the tragic result of our abuse of that freedom which is one of God’s greatest gifts to us. For God to prevent such evil would necessitate the withdrawal of that gift of freedom, and this would in effect

mean taking away our human nature.

In creating us as intelligent, free beings, God knew that we would abuse our intelligence and freedom, and this is what has constantly been the case throughout the whole history of the human race. We cannot therefore hold God responsible for all the evil in the world, the evil which is the result of human sin.

“Acts of God”

But the problem is not so easy to answer in the case of the misery and suffering caused by phenomena which are not made by humans, such as earthquakes, floods, droughts and other natural disasters — what are popularly called “acts of God”.

People often become bewildered and angry when confronted with tragedies for which there seems no natural explanation or moral justification. At such times, there is the natural tendency to blame God for apparent cruelty or lack of concern. We find this reaction often expressed in the pages of the Bible, especially the Old Testament. The Book of Job is the fullest biblical treatment of the problem of suffering. It is the story of an innocent man who gradually loses everything. Chapters 39 to 42 of this book give us a powerful presentation of this problem. Although he does not understand, Job grows into a peaceful acceptance and serenity, so that in spite of his misfortune he can still say “*Blessed be the name of the Lord*”.

Several of the Psalms too depict the innocent righteous sufferer complaining to God about the misfortune that afflicts him and the people of Israel as a whole. But again these prayers always end with an expression of trust and confidence in the goodness and wise providence of God.

Like Job and the psalmists, we have to humbly acknowledge that there are mysteries in the world which our finite minds are unable to comprehend. Our human horizons are limited, and we can see only a restricted area of the total reality. The infinite mind of God sees the whole picture, while we can see only a tiny piece of the canvas. How particular disasters



and tragedies fit into God's overall plan we often cannot hope to grasp.

The Experience of Jesus

To appeal to the experience of Jesus at this point is to anticipate a little, but it needs to be said here that the Christian is in a much better position to understand and to accept the problem of suffering in the world. Jesus renounced a life of comfort and security, but instead *"emptied himself, taking the form of a servant"*, and *"humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross"* (Phil 2:7-8). He freely came *"not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"* (Matt 20:28).

As with Job and the Psalmist, there was the natural human reaction on Jesus' part, too, to the suffering that his mission involved. He prayed to his Father on the night before his death: *"if it be possible, don't ask me to go through with this"* (Mark 14:36). In the midst of his suffering on the cross, he cried out in anguish: *"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"* (Mark 15:34). But even in his agony of fear he signified his acceptance of God's will (Mark 14:36), and among his last words on the cross was a prayer that expressed his serenity: *"Father, into your hands I commend my spirit"* (Luke 23:46).

The Christian can find in Jesus a companion in the midst of the most severe sufferings, for his cross was very much a part of our suffering world. The author of the letter to the Hebrews emphasises the identification of Jesus with us when he refers to him as one who is able *"to sympathise with our weaknesses"*, because he was *"in every respect, tempted as we are, yet without sinning"* (4:15); moreover, *"he learned obedience through what he suffered"* (5:10). The suffering of Jesus was life-giving and productive of great good for humanity. By reflecting on his experience, we can begin to see that suffering can have a rich and positive value.

Although there are mysteries we cannot hope to fathom in this life, and questions we cannot answer, we need to look at all the evidence — good as well as evil, joy as well as

suffering. The human mind can discover God's goodness in the beauty of the world created for our benefit and enjoyment, and in God's gifts of life and love. Suffering is only part of the human experience, but even the pain, suffering and evil that are part of the fabric of our lives can speak to us of God. There is a strange mixture of joy and sadness in our experience, in which we can sometimes glimpse a life-giving pattern. At times, suffering is a prelude to real happiness. Overall, the problems and difficulties associated with human existence are not enough to outweigh all the evidence for the existence of a good and loving God.

Images of God

Throughout human history people have formed different images of God. God has not always been seen as a personal being, but sometimes as one or other of the impersonal forces of nature. People have worshipped the sun, thunder, and lightning as their gods. They have fashioned for themselves their own gods, idols of gold and silver and bronze which they have worshipped. At times in history, they have imagined the existence of a whole host of gods, often in conflict with one another. And still today, there are those who can go no further than speak of some higher power.

Even when people came to the point of believing in a personal god or gods, their ideas were many and varied. Sometimes they conceived their gods as angry, vindictive masters, whom they felt they had to placate and appease by the offering of sacrifices, even human sacrifices. At other times they thought of the gods as superior beings who regarded humans as mere playthings to have sport with, gods who acted capriciously and according to their whims.

Only rarely could they conceive of a god or gods who were really interested or cared about the welfare of mere individual mortals. This is true of some "believers" in God today. They see God as a kind of divine watchmaker, who set the world in motion in the beginning but now sits idly by, just letting things take their course. We can imagine this picture of a god sitting in the grandstand, watching the



game of human history unfold, but taking no active part or even any active interest in the affairs and foibles of people. Could there be any more monstrous conception than this, of a do-nothing, detached god? Surely it would be more logical to deny the existence of any higher power, than to accept the existence of such a deity.

The one true God

Into this confused variety of beliefs about gods in ancient times came a religion which stood out like a beacon light in the darkness, the religion of the people of Israel, the religion of that people with whom we share that part of the Bible we call the Old Testament.

Here we find a concept of God that far surpassed any other in the world of that time. The Jews believed and Christians share this belief, that God's self-revelation to them was as one God only, a personal God, a God who asked to be identified as Yahweh, a God who loved them and wanted to be loved by them in return. A God who chose them: "*You shall be my people, and I will be your God*" (Ezek 36:28). God wanted their love and obedience and service, but also their happiness and prosperity.

In a later chapter, we shall be taking a closer look at the Bible, the Word of God. As we become more familiar with the Scriptures, we will come to appreciate more the depth and tenderness of God's love for us — God's own people. God's relationship is sometimes described in terms of a relationship between father and son, at other times, between bridegroom and bride.

Without this revelation on God's part, we could never have come to know the extent of God's love for us.

The Christian Insight

But in the Christian view, even this lofty teaching of the Old Testament was only a pale shadow of what was to come, when God the Father would choose to send His own Son into the world as a human being, as one of us. Then the Word was made flesh (John 1:14).

By seeing the works and hearing the words of the man Jesus, we gain an insight into the character of God that was otherwise unknown and unknowable — God's love, compassion and mercy, God's care and concern for individuals, especially the poor, the sick, the weak, the outcasts, those whom Jesus called God's "little ones".

By our own reasoning and intellectual capabilities, we can know something of the power and love and goodness of God. By getting to know Jesus Christ, we experience God's love and mercy in a way we otherwise would never even suspect. His whole life was the love of God in action. As we look at the cross of Christ, we see God's love revealed in all its clarity.

Deepening the Reflection

God speaks to me

Read through the text of next Sunday's Gospel, stopping to dwell on words or images that strike you.

Reflect on what these Gospel words are saying to your life, here and now.

A prayer from our rich Tradition

God be in my head
and in my understanding.
God be in mine eyes
and in my looking.
God be in my mouth
and in my speaking.
God be in my heart
and in my thinking.
God be at mine end
and my departing.

(Sarum Primer, 1527)

References from the Catechism

Nos 27-49