

Today I am going to start this talk with a quote from an eminent British scientist who went by the name J. S. Haldane. Haldane was an eminent scientist who was noted for his pithy comments. Here is what he said about the universe:-

*“... my own suspicion is that the Universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we can suppose”.*

I think he was right in saying that.

I'm going to take that quote, modify it slightly and apply it to God.

*“... my own suspicion is that God is not only more mysterious than we suppose, but more mysterious than we can suppose”.*

Why do we say that God is mysterious? Well, a famous theologian called Thomas Torrance once gave a lecture in which he drew a box on the blackboard. “Suppose” he said, “that this box represents the entire universe”.

He then put an X outside of the box and said “suppose this is God”. He then continued “You can investigate the universe in its entirety and you will not find God, since he is outside of it”.

So you can't find out about God by investigating the universe because he isn't in it. He is outside of it. Mysterious indeed.

Torrance also said “You could investigate the universe down to its smallest components and eventually find out after your long quest that at its very basis you have discovered nothing. For the Universe is made out of nothing. Because that is what God made it from. From Nothing.”

Some think that if you drill down to the lowest level and can explain that lowest level that you have somehow explained the universe and reality. This is known as reductionism. Everything can be reduced to the simplest building blocks. Do that and you have understood everything. However many point out that this is nonsense.

*Torrance also said “You could investigate the universe down to its smallest components and eventually find out after your long quest that at its very basis you have discovered everything reduces to nothing. For the Universe is made out of nothing. Because that is what God made it from. From Nothing.”*

So we could search the whole universe and drill down to its smallest components and still not find God.

In his thesis “A Scientific Theology” a professor of Theology at Oxford University called Alister McGrath discusses reality. He points out that the flaws of reductionism – of delving ever more deeply into smaller and smaller components – right on down into the sub-atomic layer with its quarks, bosons and leptons and quantum theory – and then thinking that you had discovered the whole truth about the universe isn’t sensible. Indeed what has been found is elegant, it is simple. But it also becomes more mysterious and less understandable the deeper you delve. It brings further questions and becomes ever more baffling.

So the further and smaller we go the stranger it all becomes and the less we actually understand.

McGrath then points out that trying to understand reality by investigating at smaller and smaller levels is in fact a very blinkered approach. For in fact reality is layered. In others words you can only really understand reality as existing in layers.

Let me explain what he meant by that.

You can understand the sub atomic world and quantum mechanics with one set of disciplines and equations but if you come up a level and look at chemistry and organic chemistry you have a new set of disciplines and equations and mounting complexities.

Come up another level and you have microbiology with its own disciplines concepts and even more emerging complexity. As you come up a layer at a time new complexities and relationships and disciplines emerge. For example at the smallest level you have physics equations and wave mechanics but if you are looking at what is happening within a cell those equations are of no use to you at all. You have processes, activities and complexities where those equations are of no use at all. They are of no use to you at all.

So frankly we should be very wary of trying to understand the universe through reductionism. It gives us no idea really of the total complexity of reality.

As limited humans we have to understand that the reality in which we live is layered and each layer brings new levels of complexity and relationships and new disciplines to understand it.

As we go higher we have human bodies, the brain, the mind - again all with more and more complexity. Then we have human activities such as economics and law and so forth. As our view broadens we find a reality of ever increasing complexity and difficulty that can only ever be understood by looking at each layer in turn and using the specialised disciplines that are needed for each layer.

McGrath then proposes another layer on top of all those other layers. McGrath proposes we can extend our layered view of reality by adding another non-physical layer on top of the other layers. By this he means a metaphysical layer which is where theologians operate with their own disciplines and processes. McGrath proposes that this is the layer of reality where we find God.

And just as each layer needs its own disciplines and processes to understand it so too the metaphysical layer is no different. It too needs its own disciplines and processes to understand it.

And there we have a problem. This layer cannot be investigated physically because it is not physical. It can only be known through what it reveals of itself to us. It then needs the special disciplines and processes of the theologians to understand what has been revealed. Or to put it another way it can only be known through what God reveals of Himself to us.

So then let's turn to the upper layer to see what God has revealed about himself. Again it's no use trying to use the disciplines and approaches of lower layers to this layer for they are not of much use to us here.

But humans being humans, we will always try to figure things out by ignoring what has been revealed and by using our own reasoning. Now the Greeks had very definite ideas about God and their ideas influenced the whole ancient world. They influenced Christianity and they influenced Islam. We can see many Greek ideas of God as being remote and unapproachable firmly embedded in the Koran for example.

You see the Greeks were very fond of thinking deeply about things. In their view the earth was a fallen, corrupted entity. Corrupted by matter.

But above the earth were spheres holding the moon, the sun, the planets, the stars. As you moved outwards things became purer and purer and more and more perfect. Eventually you would reach the sphere where God dwelt. That sphere was one of utter purity and perfection. God was unmoveable and unchangeable. After all as God had no imperfections He would not need to change. In fact they reduced God to total immobility. After all if where you were dwelling was perfect why would you want to move anywhere else.

What you certainly wouldn't want to do as God was to get involved with the earth which they viewed as fallen and corrupted by matter. And most certainly as God you wouldn't want to get involved with man, the lowest and most corrupted entity of all. To the Greek philosophers God was utterly remote, totally unmoving and uninvolved and completely unapproachable. (As an aside I sometimes think that if I was that Greek God I would have died of utter boredom).

As Christians however we don't rely on Greek philosophers to understand God. For it is here that we turn to the Bible to find out what we can about God. For as Christians we believe that in the Bible we find God revealing himself to man .

And here we hit another problem. Because we are so limited and only have the physical world to understand things by we find a lot of analogies in the Bible to try and help us understand about God. God is a Rock. God is my high tower. The Lord is my shepherd. Well God isn't a Shepherd, he isn't a Tower and He isn't a Rock. But some of the physical attributes of those things begin to show us what God is like.

He is unmoveable in his resolve just like a rock. He is a safe place for us to be like a high tower, he takes a personal interest in us just like a shepherd with his sheep.

But in the fullest revelation of God that we find in the New Testament we find ourselves trying to reach for analogies to explain something we did not expect and for which we do not even have the vocabulary to describe.

Why is that, well because what we find revealed is not at all what we might have expected. We find it in statements in the New Testament and we find it in our experience of dealing with God.

So let's turn to the source where God reveals himself – the Bible. What is God actually like. We find the God of the Bible is completely different to all that Greek reasoning about God.

The Bible says that matter is not corrupt. It describes the Creation as “good”. Most importantly it tells us the God of the Bible wants to be involved with man. He can be approached. He has made a way not only for us to approach him but also to become intimately involved in sharing with Him. It tells us God is love. It tells us he is unchangeable but what it means by that is that his love and mercy is unchangeable.

The biggest surprise of all is that the God of the Bible is described as Father, as Son and as Holy Spirit. Christians know this as the trinity.

Now this talk is not about proving the doctrine of the trinity. We know the doctrine per se does not occur in the New Testament. But what does occur is multiple inferences that point to it. The doctrine of the trinity is merely an attempt to put formally into words what is implied by the Bible.

*Here's a quote from a book discussing the trinity:-*

*The foundations of the doctrine of the Trinity are to be found in the pervasive pattern of divine activity to which the New Testament bears witness. . . There is the closest of connections between the Father, Son, and Spirit in the New Testament writings. Time after time, New Testament passages link together these three elements as part of a greater whole. The totality of God's saving presence and power can only, it would seem, be expressed by involving all three elements.*

There are 58 scriptures often given to show how the triune nature of God is inferred by the scriptures. Unfortunately we don't have time to go through them all today. (Incidentally, if anyone has a problem with this doctrine I suggest you talk to Richard about it not me).

The scriptures clearly state that God is Father, Son, Spirit. They also insist that God is One. Christians explain this as three divine hypostases or “Persons” of Father, Son and Holy Spirit that make the One Being called God. These three divine “Persons” share perfect love, joy, unity, peace, and fellowship and have done so for all eternity.

The trouble is, this comes as a complete surprise and we can have a hard time believing it. It's as hard to get our heads around as it is for physics students to get their heads around quantum mechanics. It's beyond our experience to have three centres of consciousness that co-operatively form one Being. It's hard to understand and it's hard to find words to describe it.

We then want to know how that would work. But the Bible tells us very little about it. About all it tells us about the how is that the Son is the express image of the Father

*Heb\_1:3 Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high;*

Father and Son are the same except that the Son is begotten of the Father but the Father is not begotten of the Son.

*Joh\_3:18 He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.*

We are told the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son

*Joh 14:26 But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and remind you of everything that I have told you.*

So He originates from the father.

*Joh 15:26 "When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of Truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf.*

Then he comes to the Son who then sends him to us. In that way he comes from the Father and from the Son and dwells in us and when he does that the Father and the Son also dwell in us.

*Joh\_14:23 Jesus answered him, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word. Then my Father will love him, and we will go to him and make our home within him.*

*Eph\_2:22 You, too, are being built in him, along with the others, into a place for God's Spirit to dwell.*

And that's about all we are told about how it works. Not a lot really but I suppose it is better than nothing at all. It's certainly enough to let us understand what is going on.

And the reason that's important to know this is that when the Bible talks about us being "in Christ" it means that we get to take part in that divine kind of life. Just like Christ is the beloved of the Father, so we too, because we are "in him," are also the beloved of the Father. The Bible talks of God the Father and God the Son living in us when the Holy Spirit lives in us. As we already saw but it is worth repeating:-

*John\_14:23 Jesus answered him, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word. Then my Father will love him, and we will go to him and make our home within him.*

*Rom 8:14 For all who are led by God's Spirit are God's children.*

That means that we are included in the household of God. It means we're not an outsider or a stranger. We're not even a respected guest. We are His children.

But the whole point of God letting us know through the Scriptures that he is Father, Son and Spirit, and not just "God out there somewhere," and that He will come and live in us through His spirit is so that we'd know he really does love us and we really are his children.

As Christians we believe God created all humans in his image, and that he wants all people to share in the love shared by the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

As Christians we believe the Son became a human, the man Jesus Christ, to reconcile all humanity to God through his birth, life, death and resurrection and ascension into heaven.

As Christians we believe that in Christ, humanity is loved and accepted by the Father.

*John 3:17 Because God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.*

We believe that Jesus Christ has already paid for our sins, and there is no longer any debt to pay. The Father has already forgiven us, and he eagerly desires that we turn to him.

*Col 2:13 Even when you were dead because of your offenses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with him when he forgave us all of our offenses*

We cannot enjoy the blessing of his love if we don't believe he loves us. We cannot enjoy his forgiveness unless we believe he has forgiven us.

When we respond to the Spirit by turning to God, believing the good news, and follow Jesus, the Spirit leads us into the transformed life of the kingdom of God.

In conclusion, as Christians we do not believe God is unapproachable. We believe He created reality. Indeed we believe he is the sustainer of reality. As Creator of physical reality we believe he cannot be known through physical investigation but that we can know him through revelation. And that revelation of himself to us shows that he is love. That revelation also shows that God wants to share his life with us by dwelling in us through his spirit together with his son through whom we receive forgiveness which is what makes the whole thing possible.