

02. Sharing in Jesus' communion with God



Part One. God exists. God is Love.

I want now to look with you at Jesus of Nazareth, and ask with you: “Who is he?” To do so we need first to explore what we mean when we speak of God, for ultimately Jesus is defined by how he (and it is the same for us) relates to the Creating and Sustaining Presence that we call God.

In his address to the philosophers in Athens, Paul quotes from Epimenides, a sixth century BC philosopher in Crete: ‘In God we live and move and have our being’ (Acts 17:28).

The word 'God' refers to the Reality that is the ultimate cause of everything that exists. Nothing could exist without this sustaining Presence. Any words we use to speak of this Reality can at best point us towards it. God remains mysterious. We do not directly experience 'God'.

People have intuited the Presence of this mysterious Reality in nature: in a mountain shrouded in cloud, in a grove of trees, in a spring gushing from the earth, in the sun or moon, in thunder and lightning and in the night sky. When people worship these, they are giving expression to their sense that there is more to them than what appears. They sense the presence of 'God' in them.



There emerged in human consciousness an intuition that ultimately everything is inter-connected, that the spirit of the ocean and the spirit of the earth and the spirit of the sky are ultimately the one Spirit, the one Presence, the one Creator that accounts for the existence of everything and sustains everything in being. The notion of Monotheism was born.

It is, perhaps, rare to encounter a true monotheist. It is not enough to say 'I believe in one God'. True monotheism is certainly not found in people who say 'There is only one God and God is ours, not yours'. We know a monotheist by the fact that he/she treats everything as ultimately sacred.

We cannot expect to know God comprehensively. The best we can do is get to know God by getting to know the way God is revealed in the realities that we experience. When we encounter another's love, when a baby is born in the family, we learn so much more about God. To explore the Reality of God we need a profound humility. We need also to know that everyone has a contribution to make in this exploration.

The evolving universe continues to be chaotic, as matter struggles to go beyond what it is to find expression in ever more complex, but ever more unified, beings. It is the Presence that we call God that creates and sustains everything and that energises the random processes of an evolving universe.

A profoundly significant step happened with Jesus who knew and revealed God as love.

To love is to give your real self to another, to want what is best for them, to want them to 'live and live to the full' (John 10:10), to respect their freedom. It is not loving to seek to control them. Knowing that God is love, we must clear our heads of thinking that God controls what is happening in the universe. This is especially important if we want to pray the psalms with Jesus, because those responsible for composing the psalms were convinced that God does control everything. When, for example, Jerusalem was destroyed, they assumed that God decided that that should happen. Since they thought of God as just, they concluded that they must have done something wrong, and that God was punishing them, hoping they would learn the lesson.

This idea is still around because we have failed to listen to Jesus. We have failed to believe that God is as Jesus knew God to be: God is love. Let me ask you: if someone tries to control you, do you experience this as love? Please God people love us enough to be angry with us when we are behaving in ways that hurt others and hurt ourselves. However, something else is happening when others try to control us, when they set out to take away our freedom to choose. If God is indeed love we cannot think of God as controlling.

It is God that is holding everything in existence and drawing everything to give created existence to love. This has profound implications for every religion, for every church, for all of us. It is love that sustains the universe. It is love that holds everything together in harmony. When we try to control, our behaviour is incoherent, and the God we worship is a false God.

God respects our limited but real freedom. The world is as bad as it is because we use our freedom badly. The world is as beautiful as it is because we use our freedom in ways that are loving.

Jesus showed us what we human beings are capable of when we are fully open to the gift of God's creating and sustaining presence. He showed us how to welcome the divine Spirit and how to open ourselves to let the Spirit act in and through us. He does more. He shares with us his Spirit, his personal communion with God, his prayer. God is constantly loving, constantly inspiring, constantly offering forgiveness, so that people will live to the full and help others live to the full.

When terrible things happen we do not ask why God allowed it, for we take seriously the freedom of our evolving universe, and God's gift to us of our own limited but real human freedom, even to act badly. We ask, rather, where God is in what is happening. Look at Calvary. God's presence is not seen in those who are acting unjustly. If we want to see where God is on Calvary we must look for where we see love, and we see love most clearly when we focus on Jesus. And when we do that we witness his terrible suffering, the kind of suffering that we see too frequently in today's world.

Jesus is real. He is suffering. He feels abandoned. But he can still pray that those responsible will find forgiveness. He can still care for his mother. He can still reach out to a man that is being crucified with him. And he can still trust God and confide his life to God's care. It is love that radiates the divine. When we love we are in communion with the mysteriously present God. As the medieval song has it: "Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est (Where there is charity and love, there is God)."

To love is to give one's real self to another. Where there is love, there we experience the 'Presence', the 'Mystery', the "Sacred"; there we experience 'God'. The universe is an expression of the divine. It is love that radiates the divine. When we love we are in communion with the mysteriously present God, the Ultimate Reality that sustains in existence everything we experience.

Jesus showed us what we human beings are capable of when we are fully open to the gift of God's creating and sustaining presence. He showed us how to welcome the divine Spirit and how to open ourselves to let the Spirit act in and through us. He does more. He shares with us his Spirit, his personal communion with God, his prayer.

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Part Two. God and Jesus

The Gospel writers share memories, but also reflections on Jesus and the meaning Jesus gave to their lives.

When those who knew and came to love Jesus heard him speak and witnessed his healing love they came to see that his words and actions flowed from the special intimacy he had with God.

They recognised in Jesus something of their own yearning, something of their own consciousness of the presence to them of God.

The Gospel of John witnesses to the fact that misunderstanding the nature of the relationship between Jesus and God was already a factor in the debates of the last decade of the first century when the Gospel was composed.

Jews who did not accept Jesus as the promised Messiah were debating with the Jews who accepted Jesus as the Messiah. The debate was about how Jesus' followers understood the relationship between Jesus and God.

In John chapter 5 we find an account of Jesus' healing a man. Because the healing took place on the Sabbath we are told: 'The Jews started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the Sabbath' (John 5:16). We are then given Jesus' response: 'My Father is still working, and I also am working' (John 5:17).

The text continues: 'For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the Sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God' (John 5:18).

That this is not how John and his community understood Jesus' claim is clear from Jesus' response:

‘Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing’ (John 5:19-20).

It was from his intimate communion with God that Jesus experienced the call and the grace to share with others the revelation that he received from God.

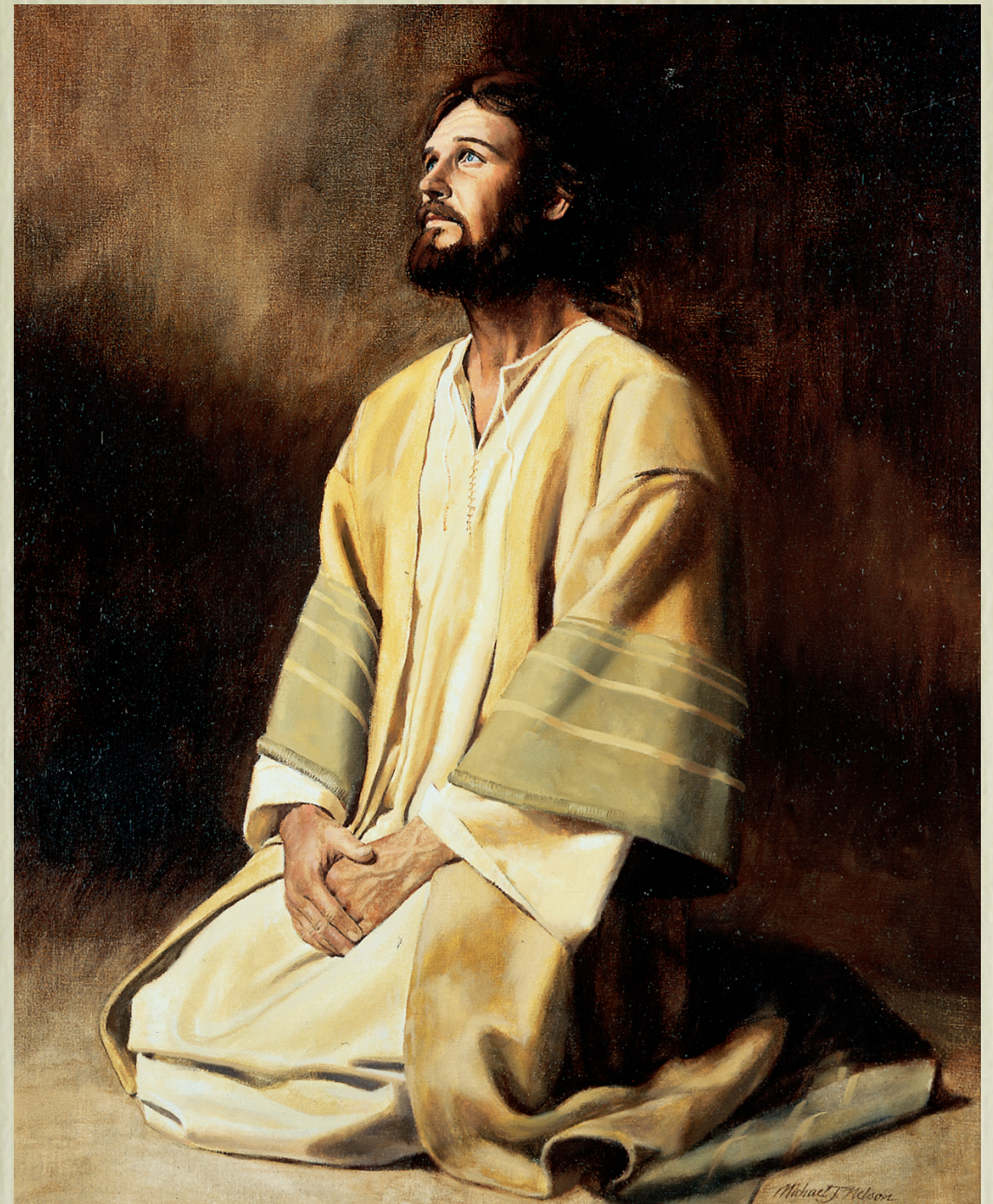
1. Jesus knows and reveals God

John 1:18

No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, who has made God known.

John 10:15,17

The Father knows me and I know the Father ... The Father loves me.



John 3:31-32

The one who comes from heaven testifies to what he has seen and heard.

John 6:46

The one who is from God has seen the Father.

John 7:29

I know him because I am from him and he sent me.

John 8:19

If you knew me you would know my Father also.

John 10:14-15

I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father.

John 10:30

The Father and I are one.

2. All Jesus' words and actions flow from this communion

John 14:10-11



Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak as from myself. It is the Father living in me who is doing this work.

You must believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; believe me on the evidence of what I am doing, if for no other reason.

‘Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work’ (John 4:34).

‘I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me’ (John 5:30).

‘The deeds that the Father has given me to complete, the very deeds that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me’ (John 5:36).

‘I do nothing on my own. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him’ (John 8:28-29).

‘It is the Father living in me who is doing this work’ (John 14:10).

‘Jesus cried aloud: “Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me” (John 12:44-45).

Part Three. Jesus' Divinity

When we speak of Jesus' divinity, we are speaking of his intimate communion with God. Everything he is, everything he says, everything he does, flows from this communion. Such was the intimacy of this communion that Jesus could say: **'The Father and I are one'** (John 10:30). Here again 'the Jews' misunderstood his claim.

'The Jews took up stones again to stone him. Jesus replied, "I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these are you going to stone me?" The Jews answered, "It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you, but for blasphemy, because you, though only a human being, are making yourself God" (John 10:31-33).

Jesus' disciples came to see him as the perfect human expression (the 'incarnation') of God.

After stating that the whole of creation is an expression of God's Self-giving Word, John tells us that God's eternal Word found perfect human expression in Jesus:

‘The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth ... From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace ... No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, who has made God known’ (John 1:14-18).



Jesus was never ‘making himself God’. His claim is to be ‘**God’s Son**’ (John 10:36). He enjoyed such intimate communion with God that he could say: ‘**The Father is in me and I am in the Father**’ (John 10:38; see also John 14:11).

The Spirit of God filled his heart, his prayer, his life, and he revealed God in the love that flowed from this communion, a love that gave authority to his words, and healing and liberating power to his relationships.

Jesus' disciples were astonished at Jesus' intimacy with God, and at the extraordinary love that poured out from Jesus' heart and brought healing to so many.

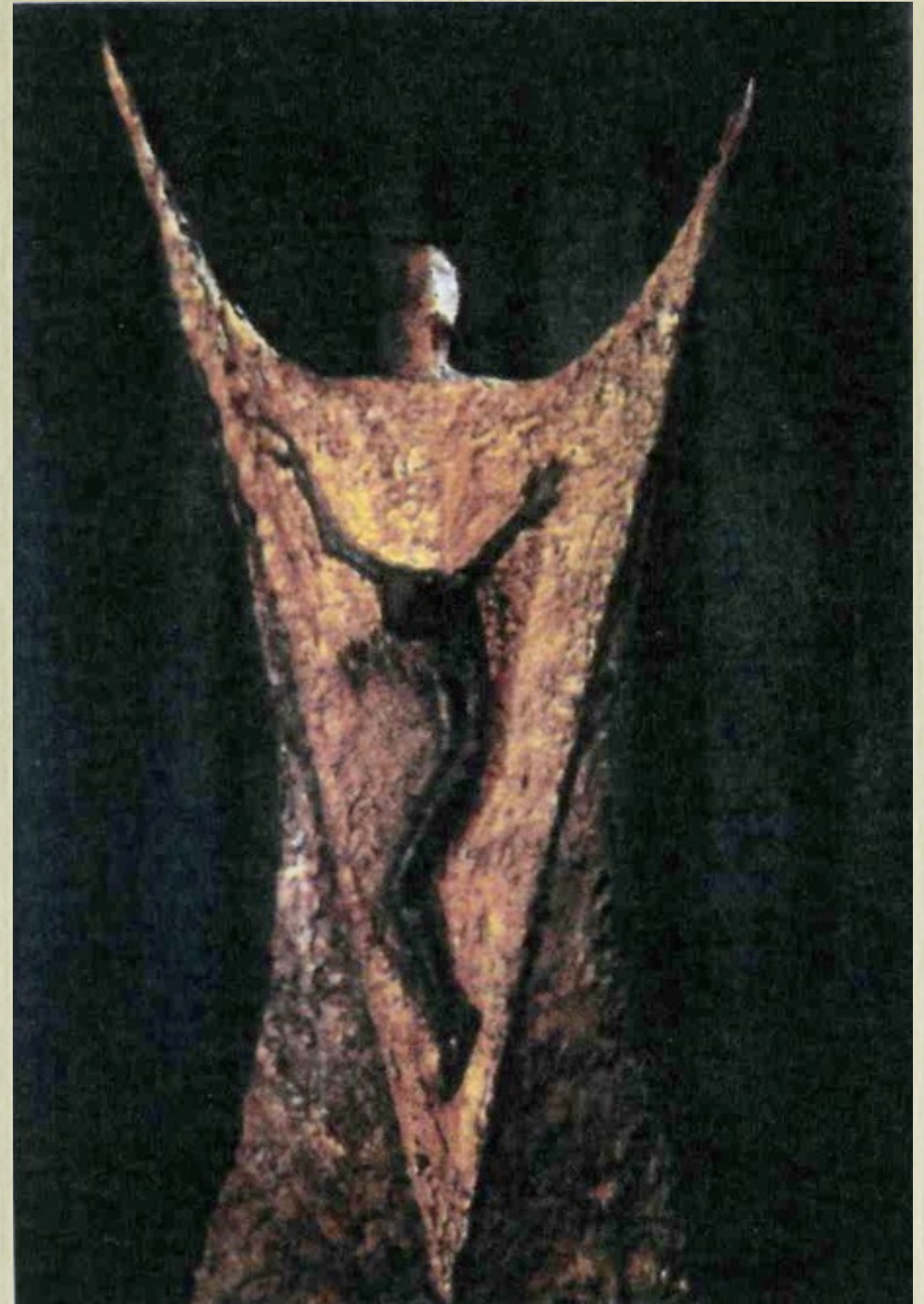
They knew that this healing came from God through 'Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders and signs that God did through him' (Acts 2:22).

Paul writes: 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself' (2 Corinthians 5:19).

'God our Saviour poured out on us the Holy Spirit through Jesus the Messiah our Saviour' (Titus 3:6).

It was their experiences of the crucified Jesus as raised by God to life and mysteriously present among them that alerted them to a more profound dimension of Jesus' communion with God.

They came to see that in raising Jesus to life, 'God has made this crucified Jesus both Lord (Κύριος) and Messiah (χριστός)' (Acts 2:36).



The Greek Κύριος translates the Hebrew Adonay, which was the word sounded when יהוה (YHWH) was found in the Hebrew text. It is the 'Name' (HaShem) revealed by God to Moses in the scene of the burning bush (see Exodus 3:15).

In calling Jesus 'Κύριος' (Kyrios) Paul is witnessing to a Christian practice that goes right back to the beginnings of the Christian movement. Christian Jews never wavered from strict monotheism, but their experience of Jesus during his life and after his resurrection meant that their understanding of God expanded to include Jesus.

Part Four. The Christian teaching of the Blessed Trinity

The authors of the New Testament were not philosophers and they show no interest in attempting to explore the inner, necessarily mysterious, nature of God's Being.

They speak of 'God'.

They speak of God's 'Word': the expression of God's will to create – to share God's Self, God's Being with creatures. It is this divine Word that finds perfect human expression in the man Jesus (John 1:14).

They speak of God's 'Spirit', when referring to the ways in which God's power and God's action are revealed in the world. John declares that in Jesus God 'gives the Spirit without reserve' (John 3:34).

The writers of the New Testament were fully aware that no words can comprehend God's Being. But their awareness of the special communion between Jesus and God finds expression in the Trinitarian Father, Son and Spirit.

‘Father’ picks up Jesus’ intimacy in speaking of God.

‘Son’ speaks of Jesus in this intimate communion.

‘Spirit’ speaks of the love that flowed between God and Jesus.



It is this 'Trinity' that Matthew has in mind in the conclusion of his Gospel, when the Risen and Exalted Jesus commissions his disciples:

'Go and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (Matthew 28:19).

It is expressed also in the traditional prayers:

'Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit'

'In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit'.

The 'Trinity' of God, Jesus and the Spirit alerts us to the truth that we can understand creation only when we acknowledge the relationship of every creature to God who holds everything in existence, and God's Holy Spirit that energises everything and draws everything to find itself in participating in the Being of God. It does more: it opens the way to see God differently.

While never wavering from monotheism, and while knowing that we humans cannot comprehend God, we came to think of God as a Communion of Love. The words 'Father', 'Son' and 'Spirit' are perhaps best kept for the 'Trinity' as revealed by Jesus.

If we attempt to speak of the inner nature of God words like 'Self-bestowing Source', 'Word' and 'Love-Communion' seem more appropriate. God is the Self-bestowing Source of everything that exists. God is the Word that is the perfect expression of this Source. God is the Love-Communion of the divine Source and the divine Word.

None of this claims to define God, but, thanks to Jesus, we know that God is Love-Communion, and that everything that exists does so because of God's Self-gift. As John says: God's '**Word is towards God**' (John 1:1). There is a kind of gravity, the gravity of grace, drawing everything into communion with God.

God's 'Let it be' (Genesis 1:3) flows from this divine communion, so that every created being participates in this love, this divine 'Spirit', and is drawn into this divine Love-Communion.

Christian monotheism is beautifully enriched by Christian teaching of the Trinity: a 'Trinity' understood firstly as God, Jesus and the Spirit of Love that flowed between them; a 'Trinity' understood secondly as daring to speak of God as the Origin of all, as the divine Word, and as the divine Spirit.

Transcending creation, God is Love-Communion, and it is this Communion that is expressed in, and is experienced by, the cosmos: our amazing home and everything that makes up our universe. Christian faith opens us to welcome God's gift of God's Self in love, in the threefold giving that is the gift of the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5), the gift of the Divine Word made flesh and dwelling amongst us (John 1:14), the gift of union with the Origin of all, who is Originating Love (1 John 4:8,16).

Part Five. The New Testament and early Christian writings

The New Testament uses the word 'God' nearly twelve hundred times. The reference is to the One Jesus addressed as '**God**' and '**Father**' (John 20:17). However, it was not long before the Christian community embraced the practice of including Jesus when they spoke of 'God'.

We find this in a letter written in the opening years of the second century to the Christian community in Ephesus by Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch: 'Our God, even Jesus the Christ, was borne in the womb by Mary according to the dispensation of God, of the seed of David and of the Holy Ghost' (Ephesians 18). And in his letter to the Christian community in Rome he writes: 'Suffer me to copy the passion of my God' (Romans, 6).

It is possible that an example of this practice is found in the Prologue to John's Gospel, composed in the last decade of the first century.

Some early manuscripts read: 'No one has ever seen God. **It is the only Son**, who is in the bosom of the Father, who has made God known' (John 1:18).

Other manuscripts include the word 'God' and read: '**It is God the only Son**'.

The early Christian practice of calling Jesus 'God' witnesses to the fact that they were not content to admire the human Jesus, while failing to see him as the revelation of God: failing to listen to or watch God being revealed in and through him. The essence of Christianity is that in listening to Jesus and watching him, and in experiencing something of the intimacy of his prayer-communion, we are truly being drawn into communion with God.

When we Christians say that Jesus is God, or say that Mary is the mother of God, this is a shorthand way of drawing attention to the truths opened up in that last few slides. Jesus is not another God. He is fully human, but in such an extraordinary purity that it is God, the one God in whom Jesus and Christians believe, who is revealed in and through him.

Christians speak of Jesus as having two natures.

Human nature

Divine Nature What Jesus was saying and doing was revealing God as God is revealed in a human being. He invites everyone to share this nature with him. He wants us to share the intimate communion that he has with God, so that we, too, will speak God's words and be instruments to each other of God's life-giving love.

Jesus' followers were amazed at the purity and beauty of Jesus' love. Because of Jesus' teaching and actions, they came to see that God, the one God who is the source of all and who holds everything and everyone in existence, is Self-bestowing Love and that the human Jesus was totally caught up in this divine love.

It was God who healed through Jesus. It was God who loved through Jesus. It was God who forgave through Jesus. Jesus and the God he called 'Father' were one in a complete communion. It is their mutual love that is spoken of as 'The Holy Spirit'.

It was God's will that Jesus share this Spirit of love with his disciples, and ultimately with every person on earth.

Paul ends his Second Letter to the Christian community in Corinth with the prayer: ‘The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you’ (2 Corinthians 13:13-14).

It was largely their experience of sharing in this love that explains the growth of Christian communities and that attracted people to find in the Christian community a way of life that satisfied their search for meaning.

Christianity preserves the Transcendence of the One God. We also believe that this One God is constantly active in history, and Jesus helps us to see and feel what this loving presence and action is like.

He enables us to find human words to direct us to better ways of thinking of God. He is a constant corrective to our tendency to misunderstand God by imposing on God our limited concepts and habits of thinking.