

# IT ALL STARTS WITH JESUS

Philippians 2: 5-11; Mark 15: 25-39

If there's one thing people of other faiths have trouble understanding about Christianity, it's this: we say we believe in one God. But we also believe that God is three. How can God be one and three? Isn't this a contradiction? Isn't this bad math? Isn't this lunatic logic? As one friend from another faith once asked me: Why does Christianity have to complicate God? Why not keep it simple? I get it. We're monotheists, like Jews and Muslims. That means we believe in one God. But then we declare that our one God has three ways of being, which makes it seem like there are three gods. First there's God above, creator, sustainer and father/mother. Pick your metaphor. The scriptures provide many. Then there's Jesus who is God with us and among us, human and all. And then, there's the Holy Spirit, the invisible energy and presence of God flowing in, through and around us like the air we breathe.

And certainly, the three-ness of God makes sense at the experiential level. As Christians, we experience the world as a creation of God. We pray to God as mother, father, Lord. But we also identify with the human Jesus and the stories about him show us in powerful ways how God's love lives itself out in concrete, embodied ways in a world of conflict, vulnerability and need. And then there's the Holy Spirit who is spirit and energy rather than some physical person, moving within us not just above and around us.

But is it necessary – this 'doctrine' of the Trinity? Is there something essential it's trying to communicate? There is. And it all starts with Jesus. Before Jesus, God was not complicated. God was in heaven. God was invisible. Words to describe God included steadfast love, righteous, almighty, sovereign, shepherd, mother/father. But then comes Jesus the human. He talks, breathes and bleeds like a human and more. He talks, breathes and preaches like a prophet. So what's wrong if we simply leave it at that? Jesus the prophet like Moses or Mohammad? That's how Jews and Muslims already think of Jesus. Jesus the prophet, a powerful teacher and preacher, martyred for his struggle for justice, in solidarity with all those marginalized and oppressed because of race and class, killed by corrupt authorities and a ruthless empire. Jesus the prophet, preacher, teacher, reformer and revolutionary martyr.

But why, then, insist that Jesus is also equal to God and even God in some way? That's what the apostle Paul is saying in our New Testament reading. He's writing to the Christians in Philippi, and he's repeating words of what is probably an ancient hymn the earliest Christians sang. It all starts in heaven where God is. Jesus is there from the beginning. But then comes this descent into earth. The biblical word is '*kenosis*', an emptying. It's an emptying of all the privilege people imagine God to have. This God in Jesus wants to enter a world of vulnerability. Why? Because the world is a place of pain, suffering and injustice. This God is a God who wants to bring the world back to wholeness, and the only way to do that is to enter the world and become like us and share all of it, even the worst of it. If God is love, then God must carry and absorb in an embodied way the burden, pain and injustice.

And so, this hymn tells of Jesus coming down from heaven into the world and becoming human. And not just any human, but one who is born into extra vulnerability - as a poor peasant, like a slave. And not only that. To really share the worst of it, Jesus not only dies like any human, but dies the cruelest kind of death which combines maximum physical pain, mental anguish and spiritual abandonment. And in case the hymn doesn't make it clear enough, our gospel account really spells it out. "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me" are the only words quoted on Jesus' lips from the cross in our earliest gospel. Why. Because the pain and

suffering that are worst is not that of a martyr who dies confessing her faith and believing in her blessedness. No. The worst kind of dying is the kind when you feel all alone and you question it all, even the presence of God.

So, what difference does it make if we see Jesus not just as a prophet but also as God coming to be where we are, even in our darkest places?

Let me tell a story. It's a story told by Elie Wiesel the Jewish writer. Wiesel survived the concentration camps. He witnessed his father die there. He was only a teenager. What he witnessed there so traumatized him that it took him ten years after liberation to even begin to talk about any of it. His first book about the holocaust is a little book called: *Night*. It's a devastating book. Wiesel grew up in a highly religious family. But what he witnessed in the camps killed his faith in God.

He writes about how horrific it was to see people beaten, tortured, humiliated and then, killed in the worst possible ways imaginable. He writes about his first night at the camp, for example. Let me quote him directly: "Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreathes of smoke beneath a silent blue sky. Never shall I forget the flames which consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered God and my soul and turned my dreams into dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never."

Wiesel also tells of another day, a day when all prisoners were forced to watch as a child was being hanged, a child with the face of a 'sad angel' as he says. As Wiesel stood there watching, he heard someone behind him groan: 'Where is God? Where is He? Where can he be now? And a voice inside Wiesel, he says, answered: Where is God? Here he is – God has been hanged here, on these gallows.'" Now for Wiesel, God hanged on those gallows is God having died in his soul. His faith had been a faith in a God in heaven who's supposed to save God's children by lifting them out of the hell they fall into. If you have power, you use it to get people out of trouble. If you fail, you might as well not exist.

But here's the thing. Wiesel was being interviewed by another writer – Francois Mauriac. Mauriac was a Christian and one who had encouraged Wiesel to write about his experiences. Mauriac recounts the interview and how as a Christian he felt so deeply for Wiesel. Let me quote Mauriac: "And I, who believe that God is love, what answer could I give my young questioner, whose dark eyes still held the reflection of that angelic sadness which had appeared one day upon the face of the hanged child? What did I say to him? Did I speak of that other Jew, his brother, who may have resembled him – the Crucified? Did I affirm that the stumbling block to his faith was the cornerstone of mine... that **the conformity between the cross and human suffering was in my eyes the key to that impenetrable mystery** whereon the faith of his childhood had perished?"

In other words, where for Wiesel, the hanging of a child not rescued by God was the murder of his faith in God, for Mauriac, Jesus on the cross also being God on the cross makes God present in and with that hanged child. God has not abandoned the child. God is there, hanged with the child. Unless God shares our pain in all it's embodied forms, God is not worth believing in. God is not some big rescue machine coming down from the sky. If you still have such beliefs and can hold on to them, good for you.

But the alternative is not then God as weak and impotent just hanging on a cross with all those crucified in injustice and suffering. No. **True liberation, true freedom, true resurrection can only happen from within our pain and suffering when we are befriended by a power that stands beside us and works from within us. Whether we rise up to new life after we die, or whether we rise up to new life as we are transformed from within our pain and suffering here and now, the power of divine love doesn't resurrect by physical and coercive force, but by stirring our hearts and minds from within our situation.** That's what Jesus aimed to achieve as he enacted the transformation of God among people. And that's what the earliest Christians experienced and embodied in their lives as they faced persecution themselves. God was among them as the crucified/resurrected one and as the Spirit of resurrection working in and through them.

Of course, Mauriac didn't say all this to Wiesel. All he could do was embrace him and weep with him... If love is truly embodied on a cross it prefers to reveal itself in tears rather than words... But after the tears, words, too, have power to heal. **As human beings we have a profound need to understand and articulate why we believe so that we can be empowered to face our crosses and move through them into becoming higher selves.** Whether it is children in concentration camps, or whether it is another black man today murdered in broad daylight, or a young black and indigenous young woman in a health crisis falling to her death from an apartment balcony in Toronto... **God has to come to be where we are if God is going to be a healing and resurrecting agent in our lives. That's the way our Christian faith understands salvation.** And that's why we need God and Jesus and then the love energy we call the Holy Spirit to move through us in the face of all the negative energy in and around us. God empowers us from within to rise up for justice, to rise up and repent of our complicity in racism, to rise up and stand as allies and friends, listening and learning. The same cross that is God's solidarity with the victims is also the place where we experience divine forgiveness and energy for new life.

May you and I keep meeting this God again and again as we journey through this time... And may we embody the presence of such a God in our presence with others, always choosing to be present in silence before we start talking, present in tears before we start trying to cheer them up, present in the ways others need our help and support rather than what we assume and think they need...

Let us pray: God above, God beside and among us, God within us... Meet us in this time of our lives in all your three-fold way of being present, alive and active: as healing, saving and transforming energy. Make yourself known to us in our pain, in our anger at injustice, in our guilt and complicity, in our pain, vulnerability, abuse and isolation... May your love heal us and through us bring healing into a world in ever greater need of it... Amen.