



The Mystery of God: Introduction

What sort of God is our God? This question will be explored in a new series for 2019 by **Fr Wilfrid Harrington OP**. Fr Wilfrid is a world-renowned Scripture commentator and over this year he will take us on a journey into the mystery of God.

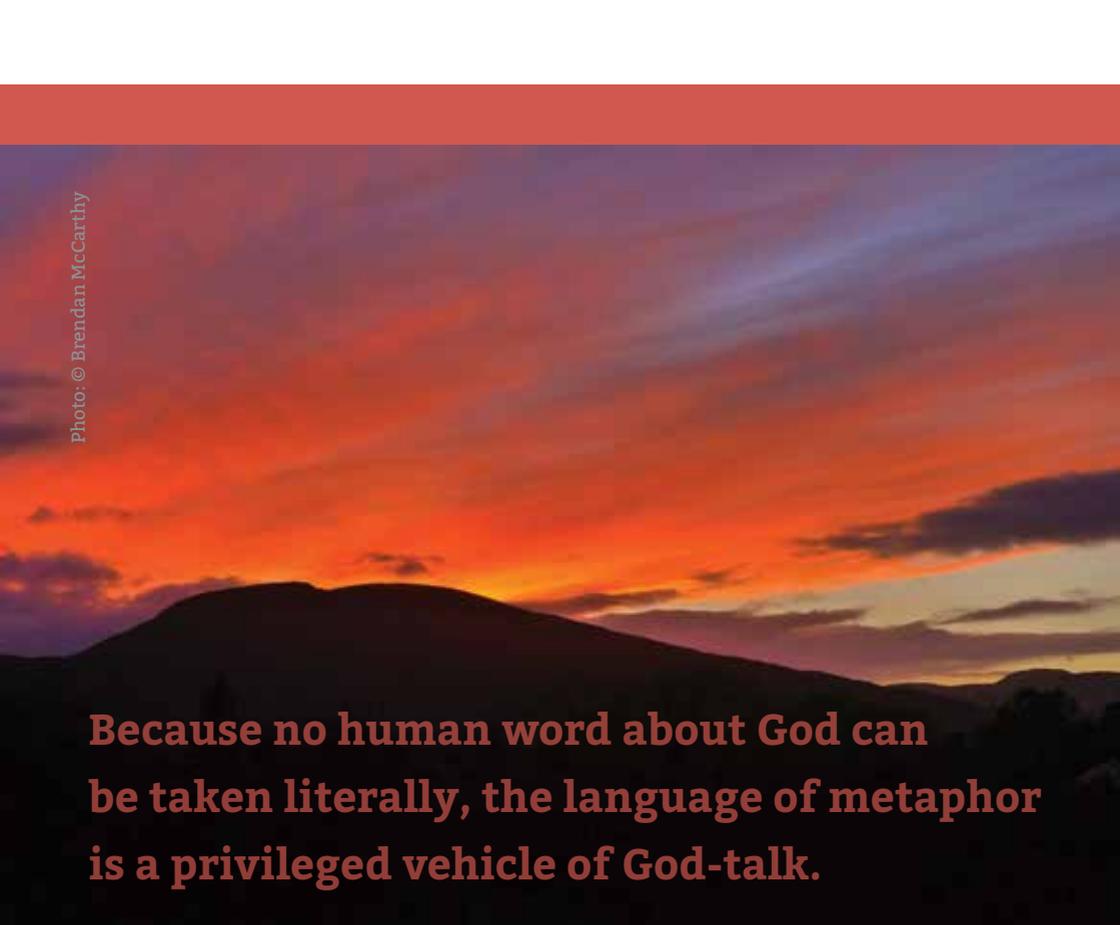
A matter of supreme importance for believers is our *image* of God. How we perceive God to be. Flawed or false images abound. The Old Testament, properly understood, points one in the right direction. The New Testament presents 'the image of the invisible God', Jesus Christ. In a series of monthly articles I will look to what Scripture tells us of God. First, we need to remind ourselves that this God, who is utterly real, remains for us mystery – a holy mystery.

'I believe in God'. We confidently make our profession of faith. But, do we pause to think what we might mean by 'God'? A pervasive image of God in our day is that of a monarch who dwells on high, rules the world and judges human conduct. 'He' is the most powerful individual in the whole of reality. At first sight this might seem acceptable. In truth, this concept of God produces a trivial image of God. This 'God' is an aloof and distant figure. He seems to have no impact on his creation. It is evident that such an image of God makes it difficult, if not impossible, to have a close relationship with God. There is lack of living faith in a presence that might be motivation and sustenance.

'You shall love the Lord your God'. My God must be lovable. Otherwise the God I worship is not the true God who loves me beyond measure for myself and as myself. And my life is immeasurably poorer.

Paradoxically, we begin to speak meaningfully of God only when we acknowledge that God is literally incomprehensible, that the reality of the living God is a mystery beyond all telling. God is mystery, a being wholly different from anything we know in our world. We speak of God in terms of the only personality we know: human personality. But, we must constantly remind ourselves that God is not human. We must be aware that no human word about God can be taken literally.

In technical terms, we speak of God *analogically*. The process works like this. One makes an affirmation: God is good. This must be immediately qualified: God is not good in the manner of creatures. The conclusion: God is source of all good. But, what is source of all good? In fact, our human understanding of God gives us only the faintest inkling of the good that is source of goodness. Similarly, our human understanding of love, even at its



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finest, can give us no real appreciation of divine love.

Because no human word about God can be taken literally, the language of metaphor is a privileged vehicle of God-talk. Metaphor is a figure of speech that takes the literal meaning of one known thing and extends it to shed light on something less accessible. The comparison of one term to the other is not to be taken literally but as a challenge to the imagination. An example is Jesus' word to the disciples: 'I will make

you fishers of people'. We grasp the meaning but we do not ask what, in real life, happens to the fish caught in a net! Metaphor points to a reality beyond the words. This is especially so in metaphors relating to God. So, God is parent. God is spouse of his people. God is shepherd of his flock. They all speak truth of God but only when we acknowledge the purpose of metaphor. To reduce a metaphor to 'plain speech' is to destroy the power of it. It is metaphor that makes biblical language so vibrant, so much more

inspiring than traditional theological jargon.

God is ever mystery. We know something of God, within the confines of human understanding. We cannot comprehend, that is, wholly grasp, God. If we cannot hope to comprehend God, we can, however, have experience of God through faith and in prayer. And we can speak of God and to God. God, strictly speaking, is, mystery. Yet this gracious God has made himself known – ‘for us and for our salvation’ – in the words of Scripture and, ultimately, in the Word-made-flesh, Jesus of Nazareth.

One would surely expect that the God we worship to be, very firmly, the God of the Bible. We may not fully appreciate the extent to which our traditional Christian image of God has been coloured by a concept of God that evolved within Greek philosophy. The Greek God is so wholly transcendent, so wholly above everything, that he cannot be immanent, that is, intimately present, in the world. God is immutable, beyond change. Entirely free of emotion. Our God-talk still carries much of this Greek thinking.

In contrast, the God of the Bible, the Hebrew God, is a vibrant God, geared to our humanness. The biblical writers indulged in anthropomorphism (speaking of God in human terms) and anthropopathism (attributing human emotions to God). Since the human could never be regarded as divine, there was no danger that this language would distort the difference between God and humanity. Besides, to picture God as human does not mean to think of God as human. The

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Hebrew God is wholly immersed in his world. The Hebrew God smiles indulgently on the wondrous richness, on the overwhelming beauty of his creation: ‘It is very good!’ And grieves over the suffering and the sin that mars its goodness. We will strive to see more of this God. 