What must God be like?

God has suffered at the hands of both the “God owners” and the “God deniers”. The former turned God into an idol, a projection of human fears and infantile desires. The latter, not unreasonably, said such a God does not exist. Many of the rest said, well it doesn’t really matter either way, since we are far too busy making ends meet and getting on with life to be concerned with issues of theology.

These caricatures of belief, unbelief and unknowingness are not altogether fanciful – as they also raise the issue of what the real God of the Hebrew-Christian Scriptures must be like. For the writer of Wisdom, Israel’s God is the only true God who cares for everything, is never unjust, always shows leniency and patience, and is endlessly forgiving of the repentant sinner. Moreover, we are told, such a God models the way of human virtue, a way at odds with values of an aggressive world.
St Paul in Romans tells us “God knows everything in our hearts” and that, despite our weakness, we can communicate with this God through the gift of the Spirit who prays for us. Such a God is both infinitely beyond human experience, power and knowledge – and yet more intimate to us than we are to ourselves. In a word, God is Life.

In Matthew, Jesus teaches the crowds with parables of the “kingdom of heaven”. The kingdom is compared to a man sewing wheat in the field, or a mustard seed growing into a tree, or the yeast a woman uses to make bread. Who, then, is the God of Jesus masked behind these parables?

First, such a God is present and active in the ordinary, every-day things of life – depicted in the title of Arundhati Roy’s novel, “The God of Small Things”. Second, this God, like the kingdom of heaven and gift of the Spirit, is “already present within you” (Lk 17:21; Rom 8:9). Third, God is not just another being among beings, let alone a human construct, but the very source of everything that is – for “in Him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

It is also true that God fully respects our freedom to choose between good and evil: human choices and actions have consequences. This is why Jesus explains the parable of the wheat and darnel in terms of future judgment. Nonetheless, we should not live our lives in fear of judgment since “love casts out fear” (I Jn 14:18). Rather, let us place our faith, hope and love in God who both understands our weakness and yet knows and loves us with boundless patience and infinite mercy.

What must God be like? God is neither a big daddy figure in the sky nor a vindictive judge. That God does not exist. The real God is in the heights of the universe, as in the hidden depths of our own selves, calling us into personal relationship and righteous action in the name of the kingdom.
"Hear this, foolish people, you have eyes but do not see," said the Prophet Jeremiah (5:21). Or as more popularly expressed: “There are none so blind as those that cannot see!” In neither case is it a question of physical blindness, but the blindness that lacks insight, and perhaps the courage, to see reality for what it truly is. This is the spiritual blindness of those who do not see the presence of God in creation, nor the hand of God at work in human history and in their own lives. This is a blindness which we all share whenever we give into despair or cynicism, thinking that God has deserted our world.
In today’s Gospel, Jesus provokes a new way of seeing through the healing of the blind man. There are various layers to this story. First, Jesus makes it clear, against accepted belief of the day, that physical disability has nothing whatsoever to do with guilt. Secondly, as the story unfolds, it becomes clear that Jesus’ ministry is not limited to physical healing. Rather, he seeks to cure people’s more devastating spiritual blindness. For this reason, he confronts the narrow-minded Pharisees: “Since you say, ‘we see,’ your guilt remains!”

A major part of the story tells of the blind man’s healing through various stages beginning with his physical cure and then his growth to full spiritual vision. First of all, he simply describes his healer as “a man called Jesus.” Next, he recognises Jesus as “a man from God” and a “prophet.” Finally, he gains fullness of insight and worships Jesus as “Lord.” This gradual awakening to the true identity of Jesus is the path of Christian faith, the journey we are all invited to travel. It is the path of Christian discipleship.

At the heart of Christian faith is the belief that Jesus reveals the fullness of God. The question we need to ask is why God has chosen us to be Christian when there are millions of others, often better people than us, who do not receive this revelation? There is something of an answer to this in the first reading from the Book of Samuel. When it is time to choose a king for the people, Samuel suggests one or other of Jesse’s older sons. The Lord replies that “God does not see as man sees” and chooses David, Jesse’s youngest, a poor shepherd boy nobody thinks has much talent, to be king.

Our challenge is to learn to see as God sees or, in Christian understanding, to see through the eyes of Jesus. For most of us, this is a life-long process of gradual awakening. May we, like the blind man in the Gospel story, learn that Jesus is truly “Lord” and “God” who invites us to be his disciples through celebration of the Eucharist and sacraments, by serving Christ in the poor and in loving our neighbour. May our eyes be opened to experience the divine presence in our lives and throughout all God’s creation.
Advent of Divine Mercy

Advent is a time of waiting in hope and expectation. We may hope for many things: to win the lottery; get a better-paid job; pass an examination; find the right person to marry; overcome an illness; heal a soured relationship. Perhaps though the Church’s celebration of Advent is more akin to the kind of excited joy in a child’s heart awaiting a forthcoming birthday party. Or the joy of expectant parents awaiting the birth of their first child.

For the Church, Advent is the season that prepares us for the celebration of a birth and a birthday: Jesus Christ on the “first Christmas”. However, this is not simply a celebration of an event that occurred some two thousand years ago. This first coming of Jesus Christ includes his birth, public life and ministry, his death and resurrection, as well as his continuing presence among us. This is what we celebrate in the Church’s liturgy, especially the Eucharist; it also at the heart of Christian mission which sees Christ present in every person, tribe, people and nation, as throughout the whole of creation.

Advent, then, is meant to awaken us to this reality that Jesus Christ, who was born in Bethlehem, grew up in Nazareth, ministered throughout Galilee, was crucified and rose from the dead in Jerusalem, and has ascended to the Father, continues now as “light of the world” in which we live today. In other words, this first coming of Jesus Christ is an ongoing event calling us ever and always to centre our lives on his teaching and example, and to recognise his living presence in our Church and world.

While all this is central to our Christian faith, we do well to think about
what the Scriptures call the second or final coming of Jesus Christ. Today’s readings reflect this emphasis on the return of Jesus Christ at the end of time when we are called to judgment. Remembering that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow” (Hebrews 13:8), we need to read his role as judge of the living and the dead in relation to his central message of the “Kingdom of God” yet to come and already present among you. Equally central to this message is the call to repentance and the offer of salvation.

We are not called to live our lives in fear and dread. Of all people, Christians should rather be full of joyful expectation in the knowledge that the one who comes to judge is also the one whose love for us and offer of salvation are so poignantly expressed in the figure of Christ on Calvary. Christians are no longer so narrow-sighted to think only they will be ‘saved’; rather they see their mission to the world to be Christ for others and to show that God’s divine mercy and forgiveness are offered to all. Or, in the words of Pope Francis: “The mercy of God is the mission of the Church”.

The Cost of Discipleship

“The Cost of Discipleship” is the title of a book by German Lutheran theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, published prior to the outbreak of World War II. This work is considered a modern Christian classic as well as being prophetic in relation to Bonhoeffer himself whose outspoken opposition to the horrors of the Nazi regime led to his imprisonment and hanging in the final months of the war. Costly discipleship indeed: he is surely rightly hailed as a modern martyr.
Our Church recognises other war-time martyrs such as Jewish convert / Carmelite nun Edith Stein and Polish Franciscan Maximillian Kolbe who were also executed by the Nazis. Closer to home there is PNG lay-catechist, Blessed Peter to Rot, executed by the Japanese in East New Britain. We may also think of Marist missionary, Peter Chanel, proto-martyr of Oceania. There is the more recent case of Oscar Romero, assassinated by a right-wing death squad in El Salvador in 1980. A similar fate awaited Australian Josephite, Irene McCormack, killed by left-wing Maoists in Peru in 1991.

We know the list of those who paid the ultimate price for their Christian faith is almost endless. Moreover, it is a list that begins with the prophets before Jesus, epitomised in Jesus himself who “came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45), and continues with the martyrdom of Christians throughout the ages. Not surprisingly, an early Christian saying declared: “the blood of martyrs is the seed of the church”.

In today’s world we know that many people, not only Christians, give their lives, literally and metaphorically, in service of others. Many are heroes; some saints and/or martyrs. We also know that people’s faith and beliefs may be, as in the case of terrorists of all kinds, deluded. In some ways, we are all caught in the cycle of violence, revenge and retribution that seems to define so much of our world. If the life, death and resurrection of Jesus mean anything, it has nothing whatsoever to do with the glorification of death in itself. Indeed, the opposite is true: Jesus comes to promote life in its fullness (Jn 10:10).

In today’s Gospel, Jesus makes it very clear he opposes every kind of violence—unlike James and John who are prepared to call down fire from heaven to burn up their enemies. Little wonder Jesus is short with them! Moreover, it leads to some of Jesus’ “hard sayings” about the cost of following him. The invitation is not to be taken lightly. If we are half-hearted in our following of Christ to Jerusalem, it would be better to stay home. On the other hand, if we say to Jesus that, yes, “I will follow you wherever you go”, then we need to be committed and pay the price to be what Pope Francis calls “missionary disciples”.

Questionable Justice?

In the famous Rembrandt painting of the Prodigal Son, the father’s two hands show different features: his left appears masculine and strong; the right is softer, almost feminine. We see little of the son’s face, but his kneeling before the father indicates genuine sorrow, repentance and plea for forgiveness. The father’s face shows the unconditional love and suffering of a parent whose ‘lost’ child has now ‘returned’. In the painting we also see the elder brother whose crossed arms display his disapproval.
It is difficult not to side with the elder brother whose feelings of jealousy and anger seem perfectly justified. After all, he has been the faithful son who stayed home, worked the farm and now feels overlooked, taken-for-granted. He is resenting the fact the big feast should be given in his honour! But, no, the celebration is for the younger brother whose life of debauchery brought nothing but disgrace to the family name. Surely the elder son is displaying righteous anger at this seeming lack of natural justice.

Jesus tells this parable in answer to the question: “Why does he welcome sinners and eat with them?” In other texts Jesus says things in plain-speak: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick; I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mk 2:17). In today’s parable, Jesus takes his emphasis on compassion for the sick and sinful a step further by questioning the hardness-of-heart of those who consider themselves ‘righteous’. This is why it is also called “the parable of the mistaken elder brother”. Only God is holy: the rest of us need to acknowledge our jealousies and failures to experience God’s forgiveness and mercy.

Let us take the story of Kim, a teenager, who leaves school against her parents’ wishes. Family arguments abound: words like “I hate you” fly around. Kim leaves home taking the family jewellery; she turns to prostitution and drugs as a way to survive on the streets. She then remembers her life as a young girl and wonders about her parents. Could they possibly still love her? Could she return home after all the grief she’s caused?

Kim returns home with tattoos and nose-ring. Her parents do not begin by questioning her appearance or choice to live on the streets. Their first move is to welcome her with hugs and kisses, to celebrate the return of their daughter. Meanwhile, elder ‘faithful’ daughter, Jade, begins to say nasty things to Kim. Then she remembers Jesus’ story of the Prodigal Son; she recalls her religion teacher saying something like “mercy is more profound than justice”. In contrast to the elder brother, Jade overturns her resentful feelings to join in the celebrations—after all, her lost sister has returned.

The two hands in the Rembrandt painting show that divine mercy and justice are joined in the single embrace of an all-loving, all-forgiving God. In the words of Pope Francis: “Let us become agents of this mercy”.