

## **Food For Thought Article: "Jesus and His Relationships."**

### **Introduction:**

Although our systematic theology can teach us important lessons about the Being of God (his existence, names, attributes etc), about the Works of God (in creation, providence etc.), and about the Person and Work of Christ (his humiliation, exaltation, atonement for our sins etc.), it is vital that we recognise that revelation comes to us primarily in terms of our relationships, with God and with one another.

The Biblical covenants God has made involved personal relationships with Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus. Eternal life is also relational. Jesus, addressing his Father about his disciples, said, 'Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent' (Jn. 17:3).

So it is that Jesus calls us to know him, follow him, be with him and to grow in love for him and for one another.

Jesus' relationships are, in themselves, revelatory and incarnational, together with ours in the Church when we love one another. This is made clear when we compare and hold together these two verses, John 1:18 and 1 John 4:12.

'No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in the closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.' And, 'No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.'

God thus becomes visible in two ways. Firstly, he is seen in and through Jesus' relationship with the Father and secondly, he is seen when we love one another in the Church. Indeed, the New Testament metaphors for the Church are predominantly relational. The Church is presented as the Family of God, the Bride of Christ, and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit. All these are relationship based. Jesus' relationships are to be the model of our individual Christian lives and the life of our Churches.

God, it seems, has made us with a deep need to bond, both with him and with others ~ family, friends, work colleagues, members of our Church etc. Indeed, if we have no one to bond with, something else can become the focus of that need and turn into an addiction to money, drugs, pornography, shopping, exercise, eating, etc. Addictions thrive when connection and bonding are lost.

Relationships, therefore, are vital and can provide us with the greatest potential blessings in our lives. They can also pose the greatest challenges.

Recently, I asked one of the teenagers in our Church family, "What are your favourite subjects at school?" It was very interesting, as we discussed further, to notice that his favourite subjects were related to the quality of his relationship with the teacher of that subject. He said, "Some teachers hate me." Little wonder then that he didn't like the subjects they taught! On the other hand, most of us may be able to remember a special teacher, who was kind, took an interest in us, and in whose presence we enjoyed learning.

So, this article is about Jesus and his relationships: within the Trinity, with his disciples, with women, with his enemies, and with children. As we pattern our relationships on his, so they can become more meaningful, fulfilling, and incarnational.

### **Jesus and His Relationships Within the Trinity.**

The Christian faith depends ultimately on the Trinity. Alas, this wonderful and unique truth tends to get obscured in sterile debates about how one plus one plus one can equal one, and how Jesus can be both 100% God and 100% man.

However, it is the reality of God in Three persons, that enables us to hold together the transcendence of God and the immanence of God. Without the Trinity, God would be unknowable (as in Islam, Hinduism etc.). Without the Trinity there would have been no one to raise Jesus from the dead, so no resurrection. Without the Trinity there would be no one to empower us in our daily witness etc.

The Trinity itself is founded on the identity, equality, diversity and unity of God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each has an entirely separate identity yet each is equal in worth and value. There is diversity in that, for example, of the three Persons, it is God the Father who is overall, pre-eminent. And Jesus is the only member of the Trinity who now has a body. And within this diversity there is, at the same time, a perfect unity between all three Persons ~ they are One.

Hence the Church is to be a visible image of Trinitarian relationships modelling identity, equality, diversity, and unity. Anything else just isn't Church!

Here in Great Britain, apart from the many denominational divides, there are also many monoethnic Churches which have arisen e.g. Chinese Churches, Polish Churches, Asian congregations, Romanian Churches, African Churches etc.

Although it is perhaps understandable that ‘birds of a feather flock together,’ there can be a dangerous weakness in this approach. Separate identity may not be matched by a clear model of unity and harmony so that one aspect of the interpersonal relationships within the Trinity prevails to the exclusion of the others.

In the Trinity, the Father glorifies the Son and the Son glorifies the Father and submits to his will. The Holy Spirit glorifies Jesus. Jesus asks the Father to send the Holy Spirit to the disciples as the comforter – the paraclete. And God the Father is also the comforter (2 Cor. 1:3&4). Both Jesus and the Holy Spirit are sanctifiers and all three Persons are involved in creation. What a wonderful kaleidoscope of interdependent relationships!

In Paul’s letter to the Philippian church, we have the great and well-known Christological hymn (2:5-11). Again, we must notice that its context is firmly set within the relationships of the members of the church..... ‘In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus,’ writes Paul.

Whenever there are tensions and disagreements between even two people in a congregation, the message of the gospel (which is about humility, confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation) is severely compromised. Thus, Paul had to draw attention to this pressing problem in the relationship between Euodia and Syntyche (4:2&3). Selfish ambition and vain conceit were never part of relationships within the Trinity and have no place among those who claim to be ‘in Christ.’

Jesus made himself of no reputation and didn’t use his equality with God for his own advantage. Rather he chose to be a servant, humbling himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross.

### **Jesus and His Relationship with His Disciples.**

Jesus prayed all night before he chose his 12 disciples ~ they were a carefully selected group. But within the 12 he was closer to some than to others. So it is that within the relationships in our church congregations we are going to be closer to some people than with others. There are gradations of relationship.

Jesus seems to have had a special relationship with Peter, James, and John, singling them out to be with him on the Mount of Transfiguration and in the Garden of Gethsemane just before his crucifixion. And of these three, Jesus seems to have had a particularly close relationship with John ‘the disciple whom Jesus loved.’

Jesus also wanted diversity within the group, choosing, on the one hand, Simon the Zealot (a hothead wanting to drive the hated Romans out of Israel), and on the other hand, Matthew (a quisling, busy collecting taxes for the Roman occupiers). I wonder how those two got on together!

The fact that Jesus has chosen us is amazing! Why should he choose us? He gives us the answer: “I chose and appointed you so that you may go and bear fruit – fruit that will last...” (Jn. 15:16). Jesus then follows this with a command: ‘love each other.’ The previous Rector of our church was well known for his ‘typos’ in some of his communications and we will always remember his injunction that we were to ‘Love each other!’

Jesus chose us to be his friends, his servants, his slaves but, as Paul points out, very few were wise by human standards, very few were influencers, very few were of noble birth. Rather the people Jesus calls are often weak, lowly, despised individuals - foolish people in the world’s eyes (1 Cor. 1:26-29).

Jesus calls us to be ‘with him,’ to ‘follow him’ and to grow ‘towards him.’ This is a gradual process of revelation as we understand more of who he is.

### **Jesus and His Relationship with Women.**

Jesus’ relationship with women was so counter-cultural that I want to mention it separately here! Jesus was a single man, yet he had a wonderful understanding of women and a particularly close relationship with Mary his mother, with Mary and Martha who were sisters and lived at Bethany, and with Mary Magdalene.

Again, flowing from his Trinitarian experience of equality, he treated women with dignity. This enabled him to break down the cultural and religious taboos surrounding women and their place in society. This was costly for Jesus (because of the vilification, criticism and abuse he suffered from men as a result), but liberating and life-affirming for the women. Jesus exalted women.

He was willing to talk to the Samaritan women at the well. He was willing to honour the faith of the Syro-Phoenician Gentile woman in delivering her daughter from demon possession. Women were never ‘unclean’ in Jesus eyes as

he healed one woman's continuous, twelve-year, menstrual flow. It was a widow woman that Jesus drew attention to as a worthy example of a generous giver. It was a woman who had been crippled for eighteen years that Jesus healed on a Sabbath day.

What is equally amazing is that women were counted as equal disciples of Jesus and even helped to support the twelve men financially in their ministry! Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna are mentioned by name alongside 'many others' who were nameless (Lk. 8:1-3). They also travelled around with the men from village to village; this was unheard of.

And the thing that irked Martha the most, back in Bethany, was not that Mary on one occasion had left her to peel the potatoes, but that Mary was now sitting at Jesus feet, with the men, as one of Jesus' disciples. Normal Rabbis didn't have women pupils!! What would the neighbours think?!

And who can fail to be moved by Jesus' response to the woman (possibly Mary Magdalene) who anointed Jesus' feet with her expensive perfume and her tears and was set free from her sinful lifestyle by Jesus words and his acceptance of her (Lk. 7:36-50).

All of us have a primary need for non-sexual touching. But today, relationships often tend to begin with sexual touching and intercourse and if there is no initial and immediate sexual compatibility there is no more commitment to the relationship. This can leave people, especially women, with a deep sense of dissatisfaction, guilt, and shame.

It is worth pursuing this a bit more. Our Western cultures tend to be guilt-oriented whilst Middle Eastern and Asian cultures tend to be shame-oriented.

Guilt-oriented cultures have more of an emphasis on personal responsibility with conscience as an inner guide. There is an awareness of having done something wrong and feeling responsible for some offense caused, whether real or imagined, to someone else. In shame-oriented cultures, the perceived wrongdoer is constrained, and/or condemned, by their group, by those around them in their extended family, clan, tribe, community. There is the painful mindset of being wrong as a person. It's about how a person thinks they appear to others (and to themselves) without necessarily having done anything wrong. They may feel there is something inappropriate, dishonourable, or ridiculous about themselves and feel a sense of shame.

In the beginning, “Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame” (Gen. 2:25). Now, however, things have changed and we all have the need for the freedom of forgiveness which Jesus alone can provide. Guilt and shame are not burdens that God wants us to carry. In his relationships, Jesus always walked that precarious knife edge between, on the one hand, not condemning the sinner, yet not condoning sinful practices and lifestyles on the other.

It remains true, I believe, that if we could get rid of guilt and shame, many people in our communities would be healed.

This woman, who anointed Jesus with her expensive perfume, had many sins which needed to be forgiven. And because Jesus forgave her many sins, she loved him a lot. Whoever has been forgiven little loves little. But the person who has been forgiven the most, loves Jesus the most. The person who loves Jesus the most in your Church congregation will be the person who has been forgiven the most.

But perhaps the most significant relationship Jesus had with a woman was that with his mother. They appear to have had an interesting, but complex, relationship!

However, before Jesus was born, Mary knew that in choosing her to bear Jesus, God had exalted her humble state, done great things for her, and that all succeeding generations would call her blessed. What an honour for this teenager! (Lk. 1:48 & 49). What an honour for women in general who follow the Lord!

But then a dark shadow falls across this wonderful revelation when Simeon says to Mary, ‘[Your] child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.’ (Lk. 2:34 & 35)

There will be a cost for women who follow Jesus, as there will be for men.

Sometimes we read of occasions when Mary appears to want to control Jesus such as when she points out to him that the wine has run out at the wedding in Cana. Jesus indicates to her that his interests and concerns are very different from hers. “Why do you involve me?” or, “What is that to do with me?” Jesus replies. His mind, even at this happy event, appears to be focused on the ‘hour’ of his passion. Nevertheless, he accedes to her request, as she gives instructions to the servants to ‘Do whatever he tells you.’ (Jn. 2:1-5)

On another occasion, perhaps again with a sense of his mother (and brothers also) wanting to own, limit and corral Jesus within the boundaries of his family unit, Jesus responds expansively by proclaiming that whoever does the will of his Father in heaven is his brother and sister and mother. The Jesus family is huge, and cannot possibly be defined by, or contained within, a single nuclear family! (Mt. 12:46-50)

The model of Jesus' relationship with women stands in stark contrast to what many women experience today around the world. In many countries, women and girls continue to be subjugated, ostracised, objectified, and enslaved.

Here in the United Kingdom, the National Police Chief's Council (NPCC) has warned that violence against women and girls is a national emergency. 1 female in 12 has now experienced domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking, and this represents a 37% increase between 2018 and 2023. Another worrying trend is that victims and perpetrators are getting younger.

Men and boys need to be educated in what is acceptable and not acceptable in male-female relationships and have Jesus as their role model. Women need the caring support, recognition, and empowerment that Jesus gives.

### **Jesus and His Relationship with His Enemies.**

Jesus warned us that because of our relationship with him, some people would insult us, persecute us, and falsely say all kinds of evil against us. This, he said, we should regard as a blessing and rejoice because of it !! (Mt. 5:11&12)

Let's face it, some people are going to hate us, as they hated Jesus. They often do this out of ignorance, or envy, or fear, and because they find us and our message threatening.

Many Christians around the world are persecuted because Christianity is seen as a 'Western religion' which, if allowed to spread, could subvert national identity and stability.

So, what was Jesus' response to his enemies? Well, there were times when he was very confrontational. He described the Pharisees and teachers of the law as 'hypocrites,' 'blind guides,' 'whitewashed tombs,' 'snakes,' 'a brood of vipers,' and 'sons of hell' (Mt. chapter 23). Sometimes Jesus told very hard, direct parables that were aimed specifically against the chief priests and the Pharisees and they realised they were being singled out: 'When [they] heard Jesus'

parables, they knew he was talking about them. They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd...' (Mt. 21:45&46).

It appears that as we go through the Gospel accounts, Jesus responds with increasing intensity as a reaction to people's opposition, but then, at his trial and crucifixion, he goes quiet and submits himself, like a sheep ready to be slaughtered.

Before the Sanhedrin, the top Jewish court in Jerusalem, Jesus 'remained silent;' before Pilate, he 'made no reply'; and even though Herod 'plied him with many questions, Jesus gave him no reply.'

So, it seems that we need God's wisdom and discernment to know how to handle our enemies; whether to speak or whether to be silent; whether to confront or not confront.

There are some people I would not witness to because it would be like casting the pearls of the gospel before swine who could very easily turn on me! This is what Jesus warned us about when he said, 'Do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.' (Mt. 7:6)

There are times when we are called to follow Jesus' example, 'When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.' (1 Peter 2:23)

Most of my ministry has been based in 'respectable' England, but even here I have had my things stolen, we have had a brick thrown through our house window, and airgun pellets also fired through them. On one occasion, our car was daubed with obscene graffiti, and at other times I have been accused of stealing and not paying bills.

I realise this is as nothing compared with what many of our brothers and sisters face around the world today, yet, in a small measure, I can rejoice and be glad in these blessings.

### **Jesus and His Relationship with Children.**

Children were another precious group, alongside women, that Jesus welcomed and related to. Unfortunately, again, his disciples just didn't get it! Jesus was furious!



“People brought babies to Jesus, hoping he might touch them. When the disciples saw it, they shooed them off. Jesus called them back. ‘Let these children alone. Don’t get between them and me. These children are the kingdom’s pride and joy. Mark this: Unless you accept God’s kingdom in the simplicity of a child, you’ll never get in.’ ” (Lk.18:15-17 – The Message)

Babies are spiritual beings from the time they are conceived. In Psalm 139 verse 13 we read, ‘ For you [Lord] created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.’

Jeremiah was not only formed by God in the womb, he was called and set apart by God to be a prophet to the nations **before** he was born! (Jer. 1:5)

When Mary, who had just conceived Jesus, visited Elizabeth, who was 6 months pregnant with John, (neither woman having expected to be pregnant), the unborn John ‘leaped for joy’ in Elizabeth’s womb when he heard Mary’s voice (Lk. 1:39-45).

Therefore, since babies are equally significant as human beings from the time they are conceived, children can never be less important than anyone else in the Church. They do, however, need special nurturing. It’s very easy for adults to come between children and Jesus rather than helping them to come to Jesus and grow in him.

Children have a different spirituality from adults ~ different ways of being with God, different ways of talking about God, and different ways of relating to him.

Adults like to have all the answers and do all the talking. Adults like to have power and control. Adults like to think they are teaching children, but Jesus stands all this on its head. ‘No,’ he says, ‘you adults must learn from children and become like them, otherwise you will never enter the kingdom of God.’

Listen to this from a 6-year-old: ‘I believe in God’s love....if I had three wishes I would make nasty people into good people, rich people give some money to the poor people, and something for myself, but I’d share it with someone else.’

And this from a 10- year-old who had been thinking about how life originated and how it keeps going: ‘Perhaps we’ve got to ask the clouds. The clouds have been there, millions and millions of years.... and well, there must be somewhere, somehow..... like when flowers are made, where did the wind come from to blow all the petals off to make them fall on the floor and make more? (whispers) It’s puzzling.’ Or this from a 14-year-old who had been reading about Ananias

and Sapphira being killed for lying to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:1-11): ‘Flipping Eck! That’s Nazi.’

When we are with children and young people, we never know what they are going to come out with. And we very much need, as adults, to be in listening mode. We need to be letting go of our fears, of being inadequate, of not knowing the answer, the fear of being wrong, and we need to be open to the whole range of responses that children will bring ~ awe, unbelief, faith, insight, ridicule etc.

Children reveal things about our own spiritual health; we can learn from them how to become children of God.

Children can have such a simple and sincere faith and often ask God all kinds of questions! One girl asked God “What is your favourite animal?” And God replied, “The Eagle.” A young boy asked God, “What game would you play with me?” and God said, “Football – because it’s your favourite game.”

Tragically, in many of our societies today, we are exploiting children’s powerlessness, making decisions about their futures without consulting them, treating them as trophies, sexualising them, overwhelming them with consumerism and merchandise, all of which is contrary to Jesus’ kingdom values.

But children and young people, responding to God’s grace, can show us what God’s kingdom is really like and how, in humility and simplicity, we may, as adults, receive our inheritance and be adopted by God as his children.

### **Conclusion.**

Although Jesus was a ***metaphorical*** theologian in that he created meaning through metaphor, parable, dramatic action, storytelling, imagination etc., and although he was also a ***conceptual*** theologian in that he used ideas, reason, apologetics etc., I believe he was primarily a ***relational*** theologian. He taught theology through his relationships.

Consider again his relationship with women. As we have already noticed, Jesus’ male disciples had very carefully crafted and deeply ingrained cultural prejudices against women. But Jesus broke down this gender barrier by consistently talking to and welcoming women, both in private, and when with his disciples and in the presence of a crowd.

This was so revolutionary and memorable for the disciples that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, who wrote the four gospels, all drew attention to it constantly!

Jesus was particularly attractive to those who were on the margins of society, the 'tax collectors and sinners,' but the 'religious' and 'self-righteous' had a difficult relationship with him. They were suspicious and envious of him, even though Jesus wanted to have meaningful relationships with them also.

Let's pray that our own relationships will be revolutionary and revelatory, as well as demonstrating God's incarnational presence among us.

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George Irving – January 2025

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