

As a young man at university, I met and developed a friendship with the late Reg Nicholson, Archdeacon of Waikato and Vicar of St Aidan's Claudelands. When, many years later, I graduated with my diploma in theology, my mother presented me with Reg's latest publication which Reg had autographed for me. The book is titled *Secrets of the Three-Legged Stool*, and it contains 27 chapters of short reflections on how the number three applies to aspects of our Christian faith and practice. In the book's first chapter, Reg quotes an Australian writer and preacher, Dr F W Boreham, who notes: "... the element of three-ness is the hallmark of divine manufacture. Everything that God has said, and everything that God has done, and everything that God has made has that distinctive and distinguishing element about it. A Triune God necessarily scatters tri-unity everywhere."¹

I think that Boreham's absolutes – his *everythings* – might be overstating the case a bit, but it does prompt me to reflect on another "three-ness" to which we should pay attention. As we read the Gospels we find that Jesus lived out his life in three relationships which we might summarise as Up, In, and Out.² "Up" – the relationship with God the Father; "In" – with Jesus' chosen followers; "Out" – with the hurting world around him. A couple of weeks ago, we heard a portion of Jesus' great prayer found in John 17, and the burden of that prayer too can be summarised under those three headings:

- The "Up" relationship: "Father, glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. ... I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began."³
- The "In" relationship: "I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. ... I gave them the words you gave me ... I pray for them. Holy Father,

¹ F W Boreham, cited (but source details not recorded) in Nicholson, *Secrets*, p.7

² The principle is set out in detail in Mike Breen, *Building a Discipling Culture*, pp.67 ff

³ John 17:1a, 4-5

protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me.... For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.”⁴

- And the “Out” relationship (while Jesus is here praying for all believers, his concern is clearly for the world): “May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”⁵

If we seek to model our lives on Jesus, then we too need to attend to all three relationship dimensions and to keep them in appropriate balance.

- “The source of Jesus’ fruitfulness was in his “Up” relationship with the Father. Jesus did what he saw the Father doing. Jesus also introduced his disciples to this very personal relationship with God, calling us into the same kind of intimacy with the Father that he himself has always known. We are to live out the reality of that relationship always.”⁶
- Just as Jesus lived in close relationship with his chosen followers, so too we need deep, intimate, trusted and truthful relationships with fellow believers. For us, the “In” dimension refers to the Church. And just as Jesus’ relationships spanned a spectrum – from a shallower relationship with the many, to the close intimacy of life lived with the twelve apostles, and especially with Peter, James, and John – so too we will have a range of relationships of varying depth.⁷
- And finally the “Out” dimension: just as Jesus reached out to the hurting world, so too we need to be out in the community expressing the love of God in word and action.⁸

The “Up” dimension naturally makes us think of worship and prayer, and this is entirely appropriate. However, it is important that we have regard also to *who* it is we engage with in worship and prayer, and how we regard the one we worship and pray to. The three-ness of Up, In, and Out won’t save us or do any good if our “Up” relationship is misdirected or if we misunderstand the one to whom our worship is directed.

⁴ John 17: 6, 8, 9, 11b, 19.

⁵ John 17:21b

⁶ Breen, *Building*, p.68

⁷ Breen, *Building*, pp.77-78

⁸ Breen, *Building*, pp.80-83

My friend Reg came to some prominence as a relatively young priest in the late 1960s when he tackled the claim allegedly made by Lloyd Geering that the bodily resurrection of Jesus is not an historical fact. Reg appeared in a couple of televised debates with Geering, and wrote a book titled *Empty Tomb or Empty Faith?*.⁹ Of course the resurrection wasn't the only issue – Geering made many controversial claims in his lectures and writings of that time. In the book *God in the New World*, to which Reg was responding, Geering famously made the following statement, which I think is quite apt to my points today:

By God-talk we are pointing to the deepest reality we can encounter, to that which concerns us ultimately. But we do not know what that is. The God that is known is an idol. The God who can be defined is no God.¹⁰

I think there is an important truth in this statement of Geering's. We have to acknowledge that if God truly is *God* in a meaningful sense, if God has made us and all that is, if God is completely divine and holy, ... then there is profound mystery about God and we cannot hope to fully define and describe God. The risk on Trinity Sunday is that we get carried away trying to fully define and describe the mystery of God the Holy Trinity, and end up treating the Trinity as an object, a thing.

While in this absolute sense I think there is some truth to Geering's statement, and an appropriate caution as a result, the point his statement does not recognise is the point to which the Up, In and Out teaching directs us: that this is all about *relationships*.

As fully and intimately as I know Christine, I would not pretend to define her – and to try to do so would be to objectify her. But that is not the same as saying I don't *know* her. And I know her as she reveals herself to me in relationship. The same is true of God: as Jesus said in his great prayer, "Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they *know* you, the only

⁹ Reg Nicholson, *Empty Tomb or Empty Faith?: The Geering Debate*, G W Moore, 1968.

¹⁰ Lloyd Geering, *God in the New World*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1968; quoted in *Wrestling with God: The Story of My Life*, Lloyd Geering, Imprint Academic, 2006, accessed online at www.google.co.nz/books

true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. ... I have *revealed* you to those whom you gave me out of the world.¹¹

Okay, so Geering may be right that we cannot adequately *define* God. But Jesus tells us that we can *know* God, not least because Jesus himself reveals God. Jesus uses the language of relationship, of intimacy, of love.

In 1990, Bette Midler had a major hit with a song written by Julie Gold, called *From a Distance*. Though hugely popular, the song's lyrics have occasioned a great deal of debate.¹² The chorus states "God is watching us ... from a distance". And the problem is that this chorus implies a God who is remote and uncaring ... or perhaps a God who is for now keeping an eye on things and will one day dramatically come and sort it out – a menacing "I'm watching you!". I'm not sure which is worse.

And what kind of view of God we have matters. It matters if we are to have hope; and it matters as it informs how we should act now.

Julie Gold's lyrics hint at the world's need for something, for someone, because all is not well:

From a distance
We all have enough
And no one is in need.
And there are no guns,
No bombs, and no disease;
No hungry mouths to feed.
From a distance
You look like my friend
Even though we are at war.
From a distance
I just cannot comprehend
What all this fighting's for.¹³

Julie Gold's words remind us that there is deep brokenness in the world.

¹¹ John 17:1b-3, 6a

¹² See for example, Steve Stockman, "From a Distance"; and the discussion on <https://www.lyricinterpretations.com/bette-midler/from-a-distance> (viewed 10 June 2022)

¹³ *From a Distance* lyrics © Wing And Wheel Music, Julie Gold Music 1985, accessed via www.google.com/search (Viewed 10 June 2022)

Gold apparently has said that she believes in a good and close God, and that the song is about the difference between how things appear and how they really are.¹⁴ Unfortunately I find that particular explanation still leaves the whole matter open to interpretation: it is not clear whether it is the view from a distance that sees things as they really are, or the up close view; and the “God is watching us from a distance” chorus still leaves us without an answer to the problems of the world.

But then perhaps like Paul we might suddenly wake up and get a completely new perspective. In the first few verses of Romans 5 we have something of the sense of standing in a world that suddenly makes sense, because we are sure of our rightful place in it. Our place is the one that has been won for us by Christ. Romans presents us with the almost unbearable relief of knowing that we are reconciled to God, and this has to be the rock on which we stand, whatever happens in the world and in life. Paul wants us to feel the seismic shift in our whole perception of the world, now that we are brought back into relationship with God, and Paul wants that to colour everything that happens to us. To live in Christ is to live in tune with the world, so that everything that happens, good and bad, deepens our understanding of who we are in relation to God. But, Paul tells us, we have rather more than a system for recognising the purpose of God. We have the living presence of God’s Holy Spirit, given to us so that we can feel God’s love for the world.¹⁵

There is one part where I think Julie Gold’s lyrics do point to something true and important:

From a distance
We are instruments
Marching in a common band
Playing songs of hope,
Playing songs of peace:
They are the songs of every man.

¹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/From_a_Distance#Interpretation (Viewed 10 June 2022)

¹⁵ This paragraph comes from Williams, *Lectionary Reflections*, p.77 with some minor adaptation.

For me the idea of being “instruments marching in a common band” hints at the “In” dimension that we should have: our relationship with one another as the Church.

But it is an “In” that is not for its own sake, and it is an “In” that is not directed from within itself. The new reality won for us by the work of Christ, the reality to which the work of God has been directed from the beginning, is one that is strongly triune in its nature: while we can describe it in three separate parts, we have to resolutely hold the three parts together because without that relationship they lose their direction and purpose. Up, In, and Out have to be seen together. Up, In, and Out aren’t just an arbitrary formula; nor are they merely descriptive of the life Jesus lived and modelled for us. Up, In, and Out reflect the very purpose of God and the way that God is at work in and for the world – certainly not “from a distance”, certainly not uncaring and uninvolved.

One way of summarising all the words of Jesus from the parts of John’s Gospel that we’ve been reading over the past few weeks is that he has been describing Up, In and Out and how they are interconnected in the relationships we are formed and called for:

- Up – the nature of God, which we summarise as Holy Trinity, and which Jesus described in words such as “All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you.”¹⁶
- In – the church, *us*, gathered into the relationship God enjoys within God’s-self, working with one another in unity-in-diversity, being the vehicle for God’s ongoing work. Jesus says, “I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one. ... As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.”¹⁷
- Out – the world, the people to whom we are sent in order that they may know the love of God, which, as from the very beginning, remains the goal. Jesus says, “I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one – I in them and you in me – so that they may be brought to

¹⁶ John 16:15

¹⁷ John 17:11, 18

complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”¹⁸

Up, In, and Out – Trinity, Church, World – and connecting them all is the purpose of God: that all would be brought into the embrace of the love God has within God’s self.

A theologian and minister, Meda Stamper, sums it up very well in her commentary on today’s Gospel reading:

This text moves from Jesus through the Spirit to us and from Jesus back to the one who sent him (Jesus—us—Spirit—us—Spirit—Jesus—Spirit—us—Father—Jesus—Spirit—us) and paints a picture of the eternal love flowing from the one who sends, to the sent one, to the Spirit who dwells in us in abiding love and makes us love-bearers for, in, and with God—sent out ourselves into the world to bear witness to it with our love. The loving circle of God—the Father, the Son-Word, and the Spirit-breath—draws us into itself and moves us out into the world with it.¹⁹

It may not be quite right that “a Triune God scatters tri-unity everywhere”, but the Triune God has made us for the “three-ness” of Up-In-Out relationships so that “the loving circle of God ... draws us into itself and moves us out into the world with it.”

Sources:

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¹⁸ John 17:22-23

¹⁹ Meda Stamper, “Commentary”

- Meda Stamper, “Commentary on John 16:12-15”, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/the-holy-trinity-3/commentary-on-john-1612-15-5>
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