

## 2. Can we really know what God is like?

Living where we do we seem to get more than our fair share of spiders in the house, especially during summer. Sometimes they are large and obvious, conspicuously making their webs in the corners of rooms and windows. At other times you can be in a room for hours before noticing them. Even if you were to check and clean a room quite carefully, it would be hard to be sure that there wasn't still a spider left in it somewhere.

Now, if we can't even be sure of our answer to the question: 'Is there a spider in the room?', it would seem wise not to discount the possibility of God existing outside of our present state of knowledge.

It's like the story told of four blind brothers who were given the task of describing an elephant - an animal which they'd never encountered before. The first felt its tail and declared it to be like a rope. The second felt its body and described it as being like a wall. The third, who felt its trunk, disagreed again saying it was like a snake. While the fourth who had felt its leg thought they'd all got it wrong because it was more like a tree.

That just illustrates for us what it's like to try to describe something that's beyond our ability to know, something outside our experience. And the huge God-shaped questions leave us way out of our depth. A little acquaintance with what the Bible says even might seem to lead to a confusing variety of impressions of God. If there's one thing we need to learn it's this: we can't resolve this issue on our own - no more than a toddler can understand the answers to its repeated question: why?

Not only are we asking about something that's beyond us when we ask: 'Can we really know what God is like?', but in addition we've all got some kind of bias that goes against our better judgement. Let me illustrate what I mean. I remember once having an old car once which I'd patched up. When it came time for it to go in for its test of roadworthiness I was really hoping it would get a pass certificate. I was hoping against my better judgement, since the car probably wasn't all that safe. I was biased against accepting any view of the test inspector which was in conflict with my own self-interest - and anything that was going to cost me money to have it repaired properly was against my self-interest, or so I thought. In the same way, it's just as easy for us to be biased against accepting a view of God if it conflicts with our own self-interest. We may not always want a God who's fair - especially if we're conscious of our own shortcomings. That's just one possible bias against discovering the truth.

It's easy to be biased and it's easy to be cynical: one preacher visiting a school assembly to talk to the kids about God invited some questions afterwards. One lad near the back of the hall smirked as he asked: 'You ever seen God, mister?' The speaker paused for a moment, then said: 'No, but if I'd been around 2,000 years ago, I could have!'

Jesus Christ did claim to be God. You might object and say "Jesus never actually said the words: 'I am God'." That's true, but imagine you're out driving one day and your car breaks down. You call George's Garage. Half an hour later a breakdown truck pulls up in front of you with George's Garage written over the cab. The mechanic's overalls and the bill you have to sign both say the same: George's Garage. Very soon the car's fixed, but when you arrive home someone says to you 'but did you ask the bloke if he was from George's Garage?' Well, no you hadn't, but everything about the man - in the circumstances - totally convinced you.

That's like the way in which Jesus effectively claimed to be God. What He did, and everything about Him speaks for itself. What He did wasn't done in a corner. The works which were His credentials were very public. People said at the time that no one could do the things Jesus did unless He came from God. As one of His followers, Peter, could summarize: 'Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know' (Acts 2:22). That last point is important : Peter could say to a hostile audience 'as you yourselves know'. Even they couldn't dispute the facts. Whereas legends like that of King Arthur were built up over centuries, Peter was talking to Christ's disbelieving contemporaries.

Jesus came to make God known to us. It was up to God to open the communication. It's because, in Jesus, God came as man, that we really can come to know God - something that's otherwise beyond our ability. And you could say the kind of character Jesus displayed - in even loving His enemies, for example - is all that we could ever wish God to be like.

His was the most attractive human life ever, the ultimate. Faced with that - coupled with His astounding claims - we must make a stark choice and say either He was in fact exactly who He claimed to be, or he was bad or mad because he was a deceiver.

Born a Jew, Jesus endorsed fully the commandment: 'You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only shall you serve' (Luke 4:8). But, yet, at times, for example after healing the blind man in John chapter 9, Jesus allowed people to worship Him (v.38). Put these two facts together and what else can you make of them, but that Jesus was, in fact, claiming to be God?

On another occasion Jesus caused quite a stir by publicly saying to someone: 'Your sins are forgiven' (Mark 2:9). The Jewish religious authorities who were within earshot were shocked and they protested; 'Who can forgive sins but God alone?' Now if someone sins against my neighbour, it's not appropriate for me to grant forgiveness for I'm not the offended party. But the Jews knew from their book of psalms (Ps.51:4) that all sin is ultimately against God. To them, by claiming to forgive a man's past sins, Jesus was unmistakably claiming to be God.

What's more, He was showing us what God is like: He's forgiving. But it was while hanging on the cross on the hill of Calvary, outside Jerusalem, at the end of His life 2,000 years ago that Jesus said: 'Father forgive them for they don't know what they are doing'. This forgiveness was very costly. The story's told of how during the Korean war American forces enlisted all the extra help they could muster to recapture their strategic position on Triangle hill. After a successful mission, a few marines walked over to where one of their number was standing with tears rolling down his cheeks. He motioned to the corpse of a US army major lying at his feet. 'He didn't have to be here', he said, 'He didn't belong on this hill'. Jesus Christ didn't have to be here, He most certainly didn't belong on Skull hill among the criminals there. But He was there! History and the Bible tell us so. And He died for our sins, the Bible adds.