

**Who Was God Before Time Began?
(And Can We Trust Him)?
Ascension Day
24 May 2009**

Going down a supermarket aisle these days you might want to take your reading glasses – the products have so much to say about themselves. What they are made of, who made them, the used by date, and maybe a health warning or two. In a way we are responsible for all this labelling because we the consumers have become more and more interested in the issue of quality control as it affects our health – hence all this information about the background of what we buy.

After all this is the approach we use when somebody new comes into our life, and we think that the friendship might turn out to be significant. We ask ever so discretely about they're past, trying to find out who they were and what they were like before we met them.

The Ascension is in many ways a very forward-looking feast. We are celebrating the fact that as Jesus ascended into heaven to take his place at the right hand of the Father he took with him his human nature, not discarding it like an actor's costume. So now God has a human nature inserted into his being, a stupendous reality that the Church often states at Ascension tide, but never gets around to explaining. If we are going to try and do that we need to look backwards, and to ask who was God before time began?

Time seems like a very big deal to us – after all our planet has been around for about 4 to 5 billion years, and it is pretty young compared to the rest of the universe. But to God all of that planetary

history took place in the blinking of an eye. Time is a dimension, a reality that he created in order to give us a compassionate space in which to respond to his invitation to return to him in love, to accept his offer of salvation. God is patient, which is why there is lots of time, but one day it will be over and we will move to a new dimension in our relationship with God.

God made us in time out of nothing. But once there was no time, no universe, no us. So what was then? Recently I was staying in Dunedin with a priest friend of mine when he stopped at a petrol station to refuel his car. A grinning smart arse came over to him at the pump and asked, "What was there before God was?" To which my friend replied, "There wasn't anything before God, he always existed, that is what the word God means."

Just so – but what was God like then when we weren't around? This isn't an abstract question. It is asking, as we do of those products on the supermarket shelves, is he reliable, can we trust him, is there a continuity between who he was back then, and who he is now, and who he will be when we know him fully in the life of the world to come?

If we read deeply in the Scriptures, if we turn to wise theologians for help, a startling answer comes to hand. It is an answer tied up with this wonderful constellation of major feasts we are entering into now of Ascension, Pentecost, and the Holy Trinity.

To say that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit is to say that God is a subject, a personal reality that is repeated three times in three different ways. The second person of the Trinity, the Son, was sent into the world as a human being. He assumed a human nature, he modified his being to come among us in

the closest way he possibly could. But what was he like before he did that? Who was Jesus Christ, as he existed within the Trinity before the creation of the world and us, before he assumed a human nature? Was he different before he assumed a human nature?

The truth is that Jesus Christ built himself from the very beginning as it were in such a way as to be with us in the most effective way. God chose from before the foundation of the world to never be without the human race, to be with us come what may, to form a relationship of solidarity with us, what we call a covenant.

But in choosing to be in a relationship of such close association with us he had to address a major problem. Being God he anticipated and foreknew that after he had created the human race we would rebel against him and go our own disastrous way into the paths of self inflicted unhappiness and sin. But knowing that didn't put him off wanting to stick with us, to abide with us in even the roughest patches of our go it alone foolishness.

So in electing to be with us the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ constructed himself in such a way that he could deal effectively with the consequences of our sinful rebellion, and open up the way for our return to a God fulfilled happiness. He did this by making himself the God man Jesus Christ from the beginning, by assuming that particular human nature from before the foundation of the world, so that he has never been a kind of abstract Divine reality apart from us. He didn't later become someone else by assuming a human nature in Palestine at the point where BC became AD.

The union of these Divine and human natures, there from the beginning, enables him to be an insider to our experience in the most empathic way, to literally feel for us in the lowest abyss we sink to. He is not a lazy God who stands back from our sin and suffering in a detached and impassive way.

Which is where the cross comes in. He was prepared to cop the consequences of our rejection in the most painful way. He foreknew that the cost of closing with us would mean being nailed to a tree. He felt that rejection keenly. He was exposed for the first time to the true cost of the experience of death, that it feels as though we have been cut off from God, and abandoned by him. But because he was the God man Jesus Christ from before the foundation of the world he is able to draw that experience of God abandonment inside himself, and to draw its sting without such intense suffering overwhelming him, without it breaking in to the Divine being in an invasive way. The second person of the Trinity is built to deal with and to neutralise such intense suffering without it disrupting the inner being of God. In that way he was able to deal with the consequences of our sin, to absorb it in himself, without being overcome by it.

The Easter season now draws to a close as we celebrate the Ascension. Next weekend we will be giving close consideration to the Holy Spirit, the third repetition of the Divine being in that third different way. We will be considering how he completes the work of our salvation, how he is God's enlivened future coming to meet us. But this Sunday our business is to consider what it means to say that at his Ascension Jesus took his human nature into the Divine triune being.

I hope that it will be clear from what I have said before that Jesus Christ was never really without that human nature, that it was with him from the beginning. God is so in love with us that he became homiform, human like, from before time began because he was so keen for us to become like him. That meeting in the middle is what we call the process of salvation.

So what the Ascension did was to reveal what had always been true of God. It disclosed more of his essential nature. It tells us that he is an utterly trustworthy God who has had our best interests at heart right from the beginning. He has permitted us the privilege of freedom – even if that means that we would reject him and go our own way. He foresaw the terrible consequences for us of that misuse of our freedom, but chose to stick with us no matter what dark places we got ourselves into. And he structured himself in such a way that he had the capacity to come among us in such a manner as to get us out of this mess, even if it had deadly consequences for him.

And above all he has the situation in hand. So sure is his grasp of the human situation that the final outcome is not in any doubt, no matter what alarming situations are presently going on around us. Jesus Christ the God man is built for success as he goes about the process of rolling up human history – and what is more he always was. In the Ascension the veil has been drawn back. We see what God was from the beginning. He reveals a personal secret of his Divine being – and it is all good news for us.