**Indescribable God**

Last week I spoke on the awesomeness of God. I want to talk more today on the magnitude of God.

I want us to think of how we describe God. How we see God determines our worship, our service, our obedience and our respect for him.

I intend to\his year to talk a lot about our heart and attitudes towards God

We return today to Moses encountering the burning bush, through which God spoke.

 Exodus 3:13–15 13 *Moses said to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” 14 God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’ ” 15 God also said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you’: This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.*

What kind of name is that? The pre-Christian Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament called the Septuagint — translates it as “I am the Existing One.” But the Hebrew may also be translated “I will be what/who I will be.” God is telling Moses not to try to pin him down to one specific identity; he is so much greater than any name that we can define him by.

God may be declaring “My nature cannot be declared in words, cannot be conceived of by human thought. I exist in such sort that my whole inscrutable nature is implied in my existence. I exist, as nothing else does—necessarily, eternally, really. If I am to give myself a name expressive of my nature, so far as language can be, let me be called “I AM.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Whoa! Get your head around that.

If you were to ask five people at random, “How do you picture God?” you would receive five very different answers. Do a Google image search and you mostly get an old man with a magnificent beard sitting on a throne on a cloud. Is that God? I do not think so.

God is far too complex to fit into human language. His personality is too diverse to capture in a painting. His intricacy of character far surpasses ours.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The preacher and author Leslie Weatherhead famously said: There is something almost ludicrous about sitting down at a desk and writing the word “God” at the top of a sheet of foolscap paper and then being presumptuous enough to add anything else. [[3]](#footnote-3)

No word or image of God is ever an adequate expression of our understanding of God. Not even the traditionally preferred biblical images of God, such as Father, Saviour, Lord, Creator or Spirit can claim to be adequate.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Think of our term Father for God. Julian of Norwich points out that “As truly as God is our father, so truly is God our mother. The Bible is full of both feminine and masculine imagery for God.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Evagrius, the 4th century monk, warned, “Never define the divine.” Definitions are only appropriate to created beings. No one names God but God. [[6]](#footnote-6)

But we like to name things. We name things in order to control them or have authority over them. We want our illness to have a name because when it is named, we have a measure of control over it. We name our children and our pets as a way of saying this is mine.

Genesis 2:*19 Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. 20 So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals.*

By naming the animals, Adam exercised his God-given role as steward of the earth (Genesis 1:28). Name them, claim them.

We try to do the same with God.

Language is an agent of control. But in our attempt to articulate the mystery of God, words also inevitably limit. [[7]](#footnote-7)

We want to determine the extent of God and want to have a formula for God and want to be able to put him in a box of our making.

“We make God small. We minimise the Divine Presence with our small minds, limited vision, codes and canons.” [Edwina Gateley][[8]](#footnote-8)

Beldon Lane writing on desert experiences with God wrote that God cannot be had if this means laying hold of God by way of concept, language, or experience. God is a desert, ultimately beyond human comprehension. [[9]](#footnote-9)

Some years ago, I undertook some SOZO training and one of the exercises was to ask the person we were with to describe where God/Jesus/holy spirit was in relation to you. Some said he was in the room by the door, or closer by, or on his/her shoulder. My impression was of a whiteness surrounding me (actually a white blob)– unable to be defined as a figure but giving me a feeling of being loved and embraced. For me, that whiteness surrounding me was God. Indescribable. My fellow students asked what they could do with that description, because they expected me to provide a picture of a human presence for them to work with. But for me that is what God was then and is now – indescribable and a mystery, not far away but encompassing me, wrapping me, surrounding me, loving me.

I have heard God referred ti as the infinite intimate God – close but unknown and being comfortable in that tension.

So how are we to know God if our small minds cannot comprehend God. My impression of whiteness surrounding me was the closest I could get.

The Swiss theologian Emil Brunner tells us that the better we know God, the more we know and feel that His mystery is unfathomable[[10]](#footnote-10)

Let me repeat that comment from Leslie Weatherhead that I said earlier:

There is something almost ludicrous about sitting down at a desk and writing the word “God” at the top of a sheet of foolscap paper and then being presumptuous enough to add anything else. (Leslie Weatherhead)[[11]](#footnote-11)

God remains hidden from the arrogant gaze of our investigating mind which seeks to capture him and secure permanent possession of him in an act of knowledge that gives power over him. It is in fact absurd and impossible to try and grasp God as an object which can be seized and comprehended by our minds. The knowledge of which we are capable is simply knowledge about him.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The North African Bishop from the 4th century, Augustine argued, “If you have understood, then this is not God. If you were able to understand, then you understood something else instead of God. If you were able to understand even partially, then you have deceived yourself with your own thoughts.” [[13]](#footnote-13)

I had a t shirt way back when the Parachute Music Festival was in Totara Springs and it read “If God is small enough for you to understand, he is not big to be worshipped.” (Evelyn Underhill quote)

Iraneus, the 2nd century bishop tells us that God is above all earthly names, and therefore inexpressible. He said:

* As regards His grandeur, we cannot know God, for it is impossible to measure the Father.
* As regards His grandeur, He is unknown to all who have been made by Him, for no one has ever scaled the heights of God, neither the ancients nor the men of today.
* As regards His grandeur and indescribable glory, ‘no one shall see God and live’ (Ex. 33:20), for the Father is incomprehensible[[14]](#footnote-14)

We can more easily say what God is not rather than what he is.”[[15]](#footnote-15) God is what we are not.

* we are limited in power, He is omnipotent,
* We are limited to time and place, He is omnipresent,
* we change like the wind, He is immutable,
* we only know in part, he is omniscient,
* we are not kind and caring all the time, He is omnibenevolent,
* we are finite, He is infinite.

He is the “other”, he is what we are not.

We could add that he is wise and we are not, he is just and we are not, he is merciful and we are not, he is gracious and we are not, he is love/loving and we are not, he is holy and we are not, he is glorious and we are not.

We describe God as something we are not and give him attributes opposite to what we have. But in all this we are describing what he is like and not who he is.

NZ Baptist pastor and theologian, the late Mike Riddell wrote that when we think of a friend or lover, we don’t objectify them by coming up with a list of their attributes. Rather we encounter them in all the mystery of their personhood.[[16]](#footnote-16) So it is with God.

God is ineffable, which means too great or extreme to be expressed or described in words and not to be uttered: "the ineffable Hebrew name that gentiles write as Jehovah”.

He is wholly intellect, wholly spirit, wholly mind, wholly thought, wholly reason, wholly hearing, wholly seeing, wholly light, and the whole source of creation and all that is good. That is how men of religion and piety speak of God. But He is above all these properties too and therefore indescribable.[[17]](#footnote-17)

The God of the Bible is supreme, the only true God, eternal and self-existent, omnipotent, omniscient and immutable, and indescribably holy.[[18]](#footnote-18)

So how can we possibly describe God?

We are like the blind trying to describe an elephant by feel. And then wasting time arguing with another blind man about what the elephant is like.

The parable is this: The first person, whose hand landed on the trunk, said, "This being is like a thick snake". For another one whose hand reached its ear, it seemed like a kind of fan. As for another person, whose hand was upon its leg, said, the elephant is a pillar like a tree-trunk. The blind person who placed his hand upon its side said the elephant, "is a wall". Another who felt its tail, described it as a rope. The last felt its tusk, stating the elephant is that which is hard, smooth and like a spear.

The moral of the parable is that we humans tend to claim absolute truth based on our limited, subjective experience as we ignore other people's limited, subjective experiences which may be equally true.

There is little doubt that when we see the Lord in all his glory, we will realize just how limited and distorted our picture of him was. But, for now, we will continue as best we can to grasp his glory and majesty. And we will try to extend grace to our fellow blind explorers as we try to understand God.

1 Corinthians 13:12 *For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.*

So how can we get the best picture of God now? We need to turn and face Jesus.

God is, in a word, Christlike. Jesus presents God with skin on whom we can take or leave, love or ignore. In this visible, scaled down model we can discern God’s features more clearly.[[19]](#footnote-19)

We look to Jesus who said:

John 14:7 *If you had known Me, you would know My Father as well. From now on you do know Him and have seen Him." If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.” If you had really known me, you would know who my Father is.*

See me, see my father. Even to the extent that Jesus claimed the name of God for himself.

In John 8:58, Jesus applied the phrase to himself in so doing, he claimed to be God and risked being stoned for blasphemy: *“Very truly I tell you,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I am!” At this, they picked up stones to stone him.”*

Jesus affirmed His superiority over the prophets and Abraham. Abraham came into being; but when he was born, Jesus was already existing. I Am is a title of Deity; the Jews’ response (v. 59) showed they understood it that way. [[20]](#footnote-20)

Jesus was claiming to be the Lord God of Moses, the Great I Am, the eternal and self-existent God incarnate. The religious leaders knew exactly what Jesus was saying, but they did not believe him. In fact, they thought what he said was blasphemy; so they tried to stone him. But what Jesus said is true: He himself is the one “who is, and who was, and who is to come” (Rev. 1:8).[[21]](#footnote-21)

Jesus is not just a transcendent representation of God, but is a full human being—God incarnate.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Look to Jesus, see God.

Our response to our realisation that we cannot know God fully is to fall on our knees and worship him.

Moses, Miriam and the people of Israel immediately after crossing the Red Sea, and seeing the pursuing army drown sang a new song to God in Exodus 15 extolling who he was and what he had done Exodus 15:1ff

v.11 *Who among the gods is like you, Lord? Who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?*

Chris Tomlin in his song Indescribable also extols God for who he is. Let’s listen. Song along if you know it.

YouTube: Indescribable by Chris Tomlin

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lpLqAUJcUbo

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3. Scott Walker *Where the Rivers Flow* 136 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Neil Darragh “All Earth is Telling the Glory of God” *The God Book* 98 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Richard Foster *Money Sex and Power* xii [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Belden C. Lane *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* 77 | Loc. 1687-89 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Lane 67 | Loc. 1456 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Cathy Harrison “Outside the Square” *Tui Motu* May 2012 19 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Lane 12 | Loc. 289-91 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
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11. Walker 136 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Thomas Merton *Contemplative prayer* 82 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Lane 68 | Loc. 1458-59 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *The Scandal of the Incarnation: Irenaeus Against the Heresies* (J. Saward, trans.; p. 43). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Henry Chadwick *Augustine* 52 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Mike Riddell *With Every Breath* Highlight Loc. 631-32 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
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