

As I mentioned in the Leaflet, one of the courses I'm taking at Sewanee this year is called 'Rachel's Tears and Hannah's Hopes' – it's a paper looking at pastoral liturgies related to childbearing, child loss, adoption and infertility. One of the books I've been reading has chapters written by female theologians and pastors who have also experienced miscarriage and infertility. I was deeply struck by one of these writings, and it's come back to me again as I reflect on the God who we worship as the Holy Trinity.

Serene Jones describes her vigil accompanying a friend who is miscarrying a baby not long after having suffered her own miscarriage. She writes:

"her body, my body, we were graves. No, we weren't the dying. We would live to see another day, for sure. But that day would be a haunted one for we also weren't simply in the world of the living, either. This site of the death we were grieving wasn't some car accident on the interstate or the cancer ward at the hospital...This death site was inside us, deep in us. It was in a place even unknown to our own eyes, in a cavern from which we had believed a future would spring forth but from which only loss had issued..."

How does one find hope when death is inside you, deep in your viscera, a part of your being, and yet you are not dead?

...It was then that I saw it...For centuries, the great theological minds of Christianity have struggled with a seemingly unanswerable question, an ancient quandary of faith. What happens in the Trinity when, on the cross, the Son of God dies?

...The whole of the Trinity, we are told, takes death into itself. Jesus doesn't die outside of God but in God, deep in the viscera of that holy tripartite union. Because the union is full, no part of God remains untouched by this death. It seeps into the corner of the whole body of persons. If this is true, then, yes, God becomes quite literally the site of dying. The Trinity is a grave, a dank tomb of death.

...There, on the cross, the Trinity is ruptured, hemorrhaged, a blood flow that will not stop. And in its wake, pieces of humanity's enfleshed hope lie scattered across space and time...The God who bears this death inside does not die, but lives to grieve another day. God is bereft of life and yet alive.

This is the God who came to me in that dark descending vision, the God I supposedly could not fathom...I came to feel God anew, wrapped in her embrace."¹

¹ Serene Jones, 'Rupture' in *Hope Deferred, Heart-Healing Reflections on Reproductive Loss*, ed. Nadine Pence Frantz and Mary T. Stimming.

Sometimes it takes an awful experience for us to learn some of the deepest truths about God.

It is difficult to talk about the Holy Trinity. We find ourselves stretching for abstract language, philosophical concepts to talk about the unity and distinct personhood of a 'being' who isn't even 'a' being but is being itself, – Spirit, and yet also incorporating the risen life of Christ – who is the blueprint for all creation and yet lived a fully human life. We throw around language like 'hypostasis' and 'perichoresis' – to try to name this mystery that's beyond us, that we mortals stuck in space and time simply don't have the thought forms to understand.

But then something happens, and we realise that the best way to comprehend the reality of God is through our experience. God graciously comes to us in different ways at different times. In nature, as we stare awestruck at a star-filled sky or the crashing waves of the ocean, or a myriad of tiny, intricate insects on a tree trunk, our hearts are moved to worship God as Creator. In our lonely nights, when we feel unaccompanied and unloved, maybe we need our brother Jesus, the human one, to come and sit down next to us and pray alongside us as we unburden our hearts. Or maybe, as we wrestle with a community in conflict, or struggle with a change process that has become hopelessly stuck, we might call on the Holy Spirit to breathe new life, break down, heal and rebuild.

All of these examples are us calling on God, of course. God is one. God the Source of all being is Jesus the Christ who is also the Holy Spirit. But we take hold of God's mercy and transformation through these different 'faces' of God acting in this world - sometimes as Creator, sometimes as the Christ - eternal Word and Risen Human, sometimes as wellspring, fire and Spirit.

So to return to where I started, we don't approach this unfathomable mystery with only lovely imagery and beautiful metaphors. God is all goodness, truth and beauty, yes. But what Serene Jones has picked up on in her vision of "death within God" is that our worst human experiences of rupture, horror, death and grief are also shared by God – they are part of who God always is, and who God is for us. In choosing to dwell with us in flesh, and to die among us in pain and terror, God took into God's own life something that could never otherwise have touched God's glorious immortality. The eternal God, in taking skin, also accepted death and grief as part of God's life.

This means that we can pray with confidence in our most awful moments, trusting that we will be held by the God who has suffered, and that – just as God took our reality into God's self, so God shares God's whole and healing life with us. Our God is 'acquainted with grief': the child abandoned to death, the father bereaved of his child, and the mother who lived on when death happened inside her womb. This same God breathes God's own life into us, indwelling and inspiring us, giving us life that we can't bring into being for ourselves, and enfolding us within God's heart.

We are going to take some time for silence now, and in the silence I'm going to read the words of our next song, a meditation on the Holy Trinity by Brian Wren. I invite you to see what stands out or shimmers for you as you listen, and let that word or image become a prayer to God in the silence.

God is One, unique and holy, endless dance of love and light,
only source of mind and body, star-cloud, atom, day and night:
everything that is or could be tells God's anguish and delight.

God is Oneness-by-Communion: never distant or alone,
at the heart of all belonging: loyal friendship, loving home,
common mind and shared agreement, common loaf and sung Shalom.

Through the pain that loving Wisdom could foresee, but not forestall,
God is One, though torn and anguished in the Christ's forsaken call,
One through death and resurrection, One in Spirit, One for all.