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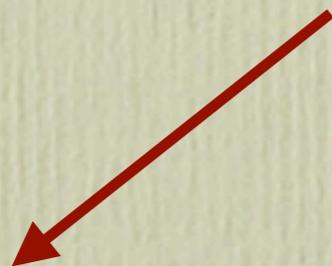
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01. We are journeying through inspired expressions
of religious experience

Part I



2 Timothy 3:16-17

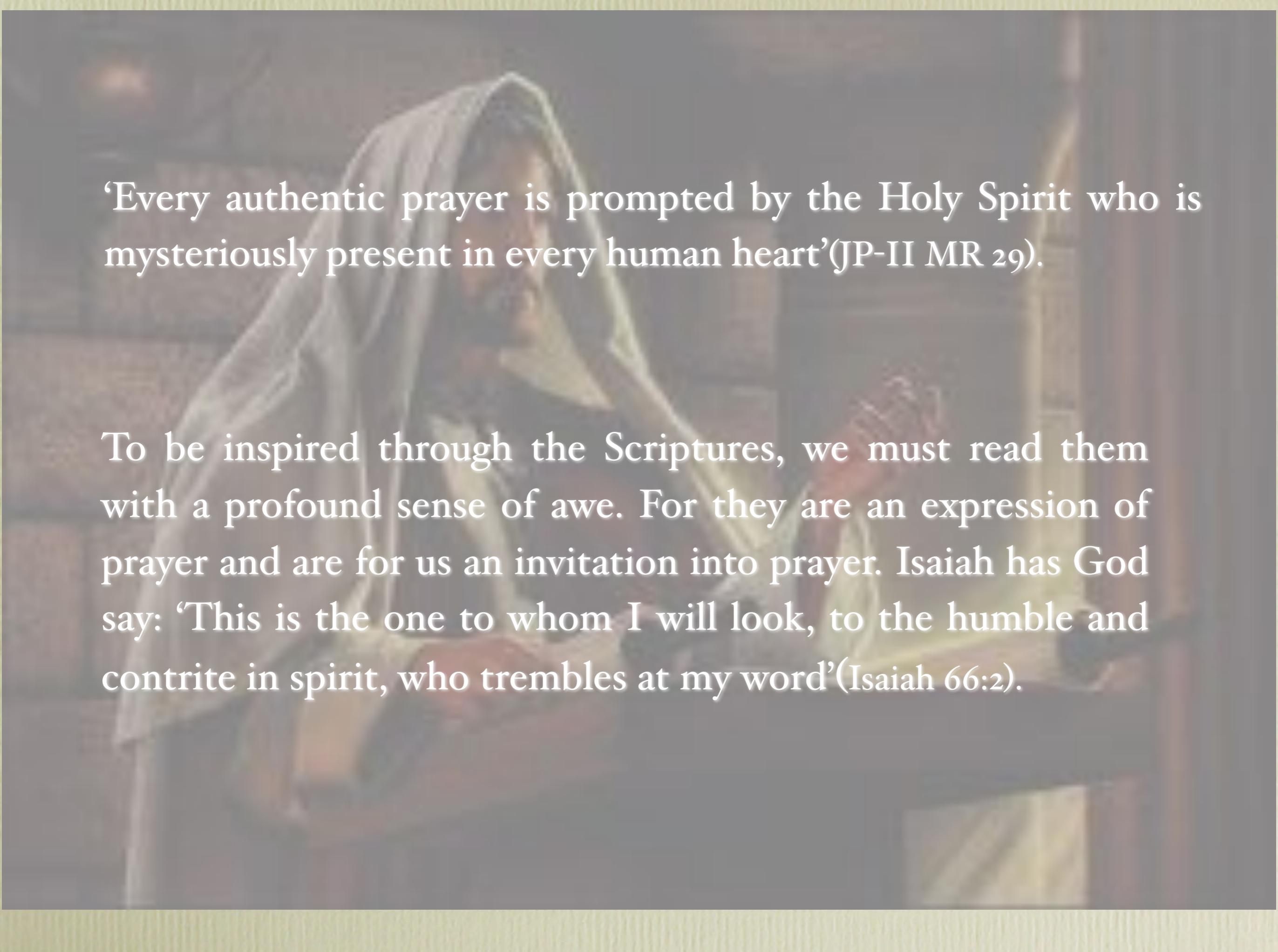
‘All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.’

1. Clearly the Scriptures are human compositions and the people who composed them did not escape the limits of the human condition. Their comprehension of reality was necessarily limited. They, and those who preserved and revered their writings, did not escape the cultural oversights that conditioned their understanding. A standout example is the judgment of the kings of Israel and Judah that we find in the Books of Samuel and Kings. If these had been written by members of Israel instead of Judah, the writing would have been very different.

2. Looking back, we can see that their conception of God was faulty. They had many beautiful things to say about God, but they were slow to embrace monotheism. They assumed that their enemies were God's enemies. For the most part they took it for granted that success was a sign of divine approval, while failure (including sickness) was a divine punishment. This was because they understood God as controlling everything that happened.

As we read this literature, we should read it with the mind and heart of Jesus. Not infrequently we will hear him say: 'You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times ... but I say to you'(see Matthew 5:21-48).

3. While not side-stepping any of the above, the assertion that “all Scripture is inspired by God” is saying that there is more to this literature than limited human beings offering their limited, and often enough biased, views of what was happening in the history of the people of Israel. Those who composed the writings, and those who preserved and revered them, believed that God was not a distant object to be discovered, but a God who was present in their history drawing them into communion with God and with each other as a people specially chosen. They did not always get it right, but the Scriptures often reveal amazingly rich insights into God and so into the communion with God and with each other for which the human heart longs. When we are reminded that the Scriptures are inspired, we are being alerted to be on the lookout for these insights, so that our hearts, too, might experience this communion.

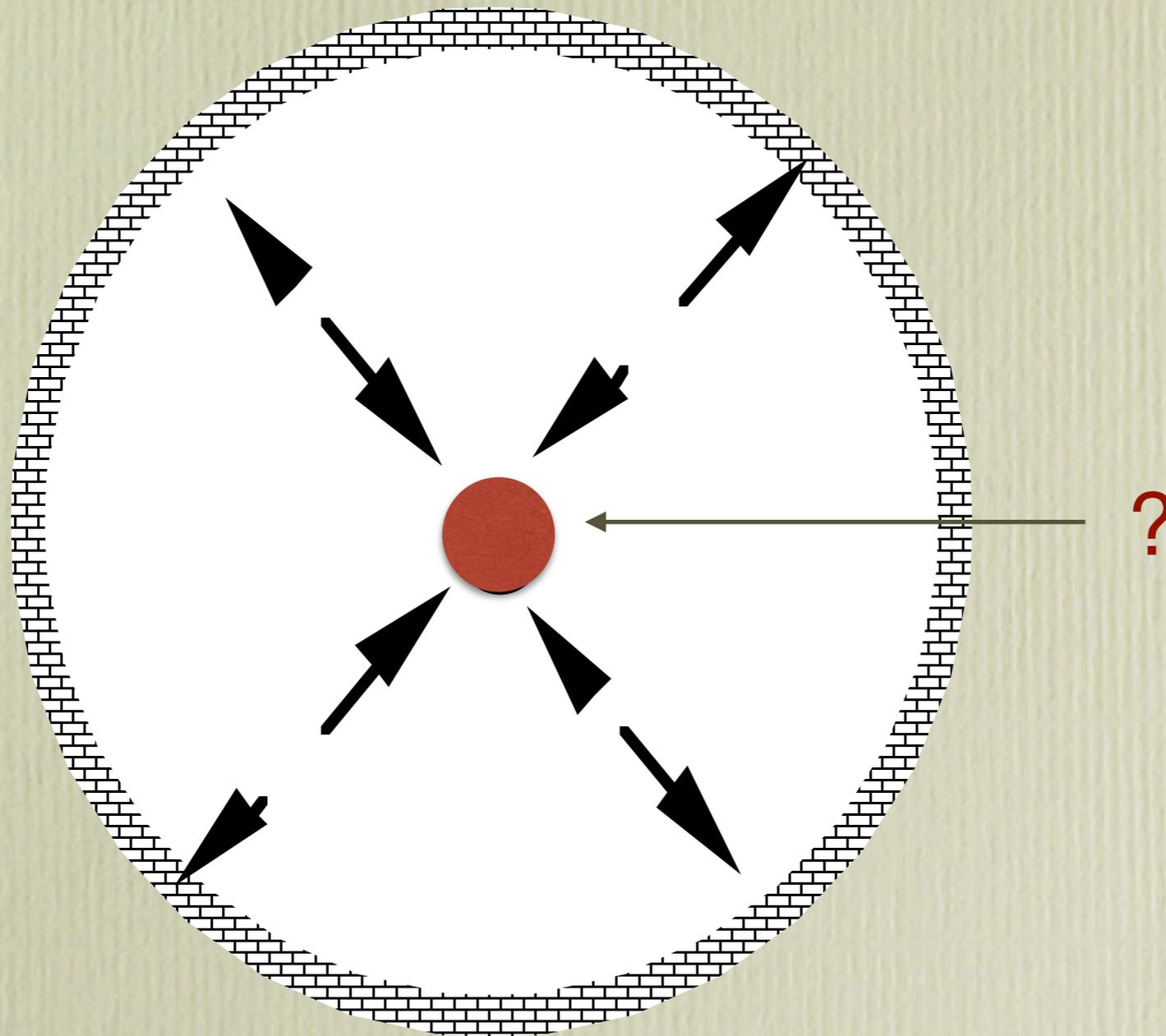
A man with a beard, wearing a white robe, is shown in a prayerful posture with his hands raised. He is standing in front of a stone wall. The image is dimly lit, creating a solemn and contemplative atmosphere.

‘Every authentic prayer is prompted by the Holy Spirit who is mysteriously present in every human heart’(JP-II MR 29).

To be inspired through the Scriptures, we must read them with a profound sense of awe. For they are an expression of prayer and are for us an invitation into prayer. Isaiah has God say: ‘This is the one to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit, who trembles at my word’(Isaiah 66:2).

Religious Experience

Religion Re + ligare To bind back



God Sanskrit **Ghu** ('called' 'calling') + **To** ('The one')



God

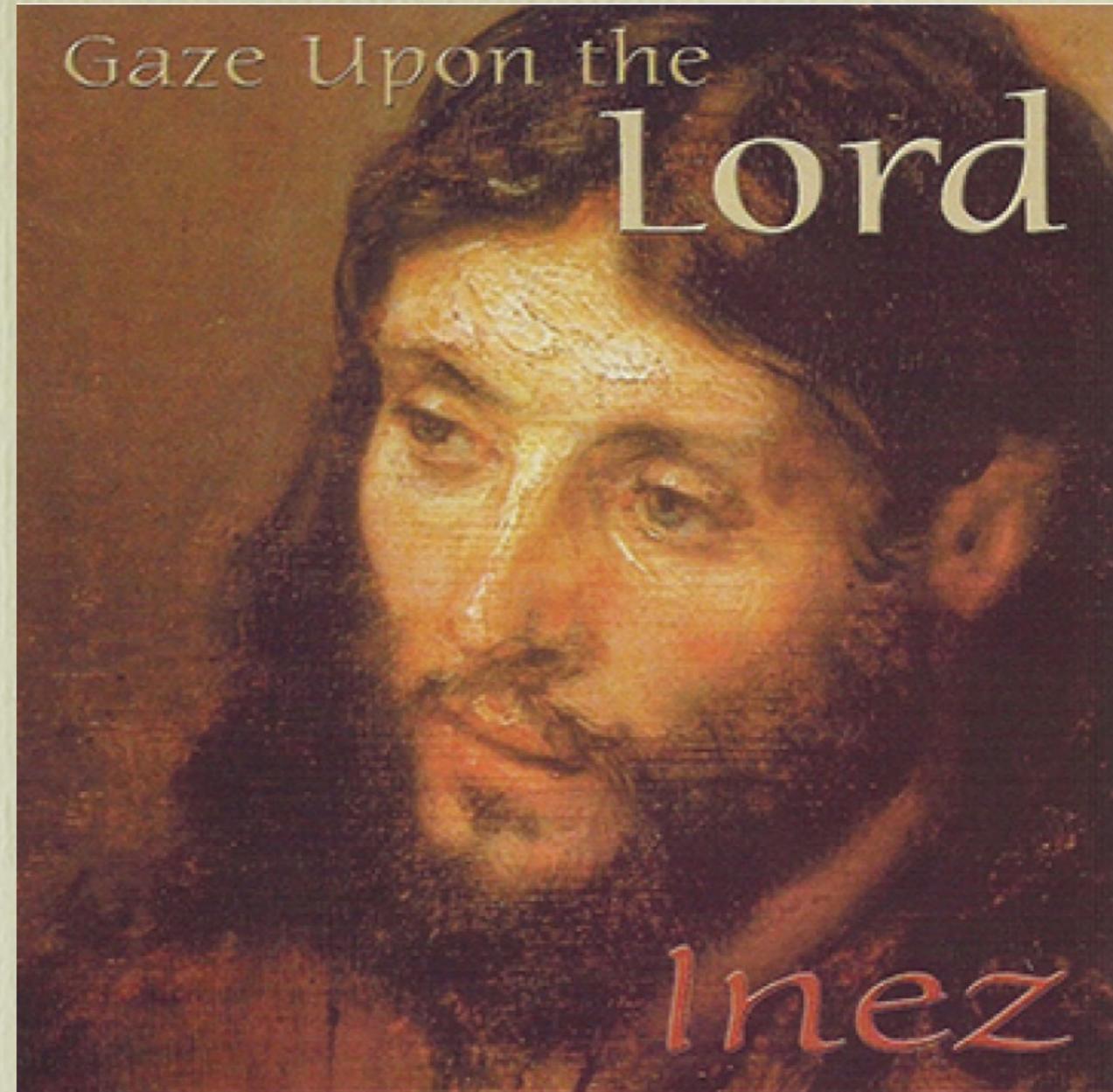
‘The Heart and the Beyond of Everything’(Teilhard de Chardin)

The images and ideas that are conjured up for us by the word 'God' are influenced, and perhaps for some entirely determined, by significant people who introduced us to the word. This is especially so when we experience these people as living in a world we would like to be part of.

If I say that I believe in God, my statement is almost entirely unclear if I do not go on to say what I mean by 'God'.

For myself, when I join the community in declaring "I believe in God' my intention is to encourage myself and others to continue to allow myself to be drawn into an ever deeper communion with the God revealed by Jesus of Nazareth.

There are objective elements to this. It includes a commitment to get to know Jesus better, to listen to his words and watch his way of relating to people, but especially to God, for it was this communion that was at the heart of everything Jesus said and did.



Of course, I can be helped by wonderful people in the past and today whose example encourages and enlightens.

Some people have associated 'God' with a grove of trees; others with a spring, or a mountain, or the moon. Others with a foundational event in their history that formed them into a people: the Exodus from Egypt. What a wonderful gift it has been to us to come to the realisation that there is only one 'God': that the sacred presence experienced in the grove is the same presence experienced in the spring, and in the words that come to us through special people whose words touch our hearts and confirm and challenge our faith. Everything is connected. Everything is held in existence by one and the same presence, one and the same 'God'.

However, wonderful as all this is, it is secondary, for 'God' cannot be another 'object' to be understood. Relating to 'God' is fundamentally and necessarily a 'subjective' experience.

Relating to Jesus I want to share in his experience of 'God'. When I pause to enjoy communing with nature, I sense a sacred presence that draws me to the heart of nature, and at the same time mysteriously 'beyond' what I am seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling and touching. I find myself, to some degree, at home with 'God'.

This is especially so when I am privileged to be in love with another person. To 'believe', as the word itself tells us, is to 'be' in 'love'. The word 'God' speaks of the sense of the sacred, the loving mystery into which I am drawn.

Jesus drew people into this experience, an experience that was already happening in the core of their being, but they did not dare to believe it till he encouraged them by the example of his love. For Jesus 'God' is the source of all he is. 'God' is self-giving love. No wonder Jesus was open to everyone. No wonder he believed in people. He knew that 'God' loved him, and so he knew that 'God' loves everyone, and unconditionally. We don't have to change our lives to be loved by 'God'. Of course we want to change our lives, for we want to 'live and live to the full'. But this is not a pre-requisite for being loved by 'God'. Quite the contrary, it is God's love, if we would only believe in and welcome it, that offers us the grace to change.

If by the word 'God' we mean the 'God' that Jesus experienced, we have to stop turning 'God' into an object for investigation. We have to make space in our lives to reflect on what we really long for and experience. We will find that it is communion with 'God', which is to say communion with the sacred mystery that is at the heart of everything and everyone. 'God' is what we all share, and we all belong to each other. We are one with the cosmos. Everything is a radiance of 'God'. Jesus knew this. Any 'God' who is less than this is not yet truly the 'God' who holds us in existence. Every creature yearns for communion with this 'God'.

Saint Augustine (354-430)

Confessions 1.1

‘You have made us for yourself, O God,
and our heart is restless till we rest in You.’

Confessions 10.27

Late have I loved you, O Beauty so ancient and so new.
Late have I loved you!

For you were within me and I outside;
and I sought you outside.

In my ugliness I fell upon the lovely things you have made.

You were with me but I was not with you.

I was kept from you by those things,

Yet had they not been in you,

they would not have been at all.

1. You called and cried to me and broke open my deafness.
2. You sent forth your beams and shone upon me
and chased away my blindness.
3. You breathed fragrance upon me,
and I drew in my breath and now pant for you.
4. I tasted you and now hunger and thirst for you.
5. You touched me and I have burned for your peace.'

Augustine Tract 18.10.1 on John

‘Return to the heart!

Why are you running away from yourself?

Why are you getting lost, outside yourself,
entering on deserted ways?

You are wandering aimlessly. Come back!

To where? To the Lord! It can be done quickly!

Return immediately to your heart!

Exiled from your own self you wander outside.

You fail to know yourself,

you who want to know the source of your existence.

Come back! Return to the heart ...

See there what you can learn about God,

for the image of God is there. In your heart dwells Christ.

In your heart you are being renewed after God’s image.’