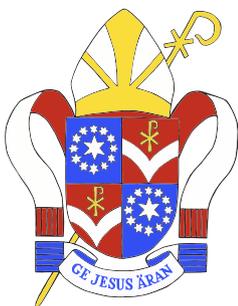


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# Our Father in heaven...

A letter in Advent from Bishop Åke Bonnier



Svenska kyrkan   
SKARA STIFT

Dear parishioner of the Diocese of Skara  
I write this "New Year's Letter" in connection with the start of the new church year, which every year begins on the First of Advent.

It is written in the spirit of contemplation over the possibility of relating deeper to God, who is both a Father and Creator.

"Do you believe in God?" I am sure you have heard that question several times, or made it to others. It is a question you can quickly answer with a Yes or a No, but, really, we ought, both when we ask the question and when we answer it, ask ourselves: What is meant by this? Who is this "God" I either believe in or don't believe in?

This letter is aimed at giving you material for your own thought processes, to contemplate either on your own or with others in the congregation.



Photo: Carla Karlsson

**OUR FATHER IN HEAVEN...** So begins the prayer known as the Lord's Prayer. Jesus himself taught it to his disciples. Perhaps he was inspired by a contemporary rabbinical prayer which contains similar formulations.

God is our father. Jesus likely used the Aramaic word *abba* which has the same qualities as word "daddy". Many in our time have reacted against the thought that God is our father. As if God was an old man on a cloud.

In classical painting, God has often been portrayed as an old, white-bearded man sitting on a throne with Christ on the Cross in his lap and with a dove hovering over them. Of course, this is a symbol of the Trinity, with the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. But unfortunately the white-bearded old fellow has become the manifestation of a God many distance themselves from and find themselves unable to believe in.

God as such is then perceived by non-believers as a kind of projection or at least yearning for a father



Painting i Näs kyrka. Photo: Catarina Tidström



figure. A yearning that finds its outlet in the form of a mysterious figure who doesn't actually exist. And that is true.

God does not exist. You and I exist. Trees and flowers exist; birds and fishes and animals in all their variety exist. Whatever has definition and limits exists. What we can touch or somehow experience with our senses exists in some sense. It has boundaries. It can be registered.

But God cannot be registered in that sense even if God acts. God does not exist. God *is*.

That means that God cannot be limited. God is always greater than our own limited ability to talk about God. And yet we speak of God and name God as the Father or the Creator.

**GOD IS THE FATHER.** What do we mean by that? This God who *is*, and whom we cannot capture with our definitions, wants a relation to us. God's essence is relation.

When Jesus used the word father, it might have been perceived as provocative. That God was the father of the people of Israel, was well-known, but when an individual used it, was it not a matter of putting big words into one's mouth?

Already in the beginning, before the dawn of time, God related. It is one of the principles of the Trinity. In the Old Testament there are texts that express God's relating. For example the creation stories in the first two chapters of Genesis.

God relates to the world and the world relates to God. The mythical texts in the nine chapters that follow in Genesis deal with betrayal, murder, destruc-

tion and rebirth and about continued difficulties and possibilities. Everything is about God and the World. God and his creation, and the relation is confirmed in the union with Noah and with the rainbow as the sign of the covenant. The relation was confirmed and deepened in the union with Abraham, that union which links all the Abrahamic religions. God is our common God even if we understand God in different ways.

The great story about the march out of Egypt in Exodus is also about relation and covenant. God loves his people, the chosen people who are chosen to live in accordance with God's 613 commandments. God wants his people's freedom and at the same time he wants a relation.

*You shall have no other gods before me.* (Exodus 20:3)

The Israelites thought there were other gods but they realised there was only one worth praying to and that was God. Why would the children of Israel, God's people, have but one God? Because it was God who was the liberator, God who wished for relation and wants relation.

*I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.* (Exodus 20:2)

When God chooses Israel, they are one people, held in bondage, held in oppression without identity or hope for the future. Indeed, they only become a people when God calls them and frees them. But at the same time as Israel achieves its identity, God achieves his identity in relation to mankind.

*Go, assemble the elders of Israel and say to them, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—appeared to me and said: I have watched over you and have seen what has been done to you in Egypt.* (Exodus 3:16)

God is therefore a God who reveals his identity



through historical events and in relation to the people and to the individual. One can therefore say that the relation to God is about a dialogue, a dialogue that continues and never ends and consequently never can be summarised and filed away.

God is in dialogue with mankind and is closely linked to his creation at every stage of history. God can be influenced and his relation to man is in constant change. All this is contained in the concept of the Father. God as Father is about the divine parent figure beyond gender.

The Father who is God is always greater but at the same time in constant dialogue with us. The focus of all this is Jesus himself where God's incarnation and Jesus's death and resurrection are the clearest manifestations of God's transgressive manner of relating and which reminds us that God is a god in relation, in dialogue. God is a god who lifts up the individual from hopelessness into the future in every single moment. God, our Father, calls you and me.

**GOD THE CREATOR** is an expression of rhythm, meaning and relation. God has somehow created the world as it is and as it will be. Science and religious conviction do not speak against one another but speak instead, in different ways, about the same thing. Creation is a continuously developing process where we, as individuals, are God's fellow creators and in this role have a responsibility to safeguard the environment and prevent climate change.

Cycles are a part of creation. Labour and rest, day and night, winter and spring, summer and autumn. The whole of creation is dependent on this. Man, as a part of God's continuous creation, has to relate to and live within these cycles.

The story of creation (Genesis 1:1-2:4) is therefore ultimately about man as dependent on divine cycles where the Sabbath is important for both rest but also for how everything relates, how the whole of existence is connected to God.

It is not possible to isolate God. Everything is divine as long as it is an expression of God's will to create.

*"God saw all that he had made, and it was very good."* (Genesis 1:31)

Through the process of creation, the Creator demonstrates the meaning of everything. The whole of creation is about relation. Every individual's deepest meaning is to live in relation to God the Creator, with fellow man and nature which is creation and with himself as a person in focus for God's love and with the given task to be God's partner for the sake of life.



Photo: Sven-Erik Falk

### WHAT ARE YOU THINKING?

These introductory thoughts are a contribution to the conversation in 2015-16 about God-the Father-the Creator.

- The word Father is used to describe God. Is the word a positive or negative word for you? What other images do you have of God?
- What constitutes a relationship? What meaning does the relation to God have to you?
- God is the Creator. What is Christianity's contribution to the conversation about environment and climate?

May our ongoing dialogue be a blessing and thereby contribute to a Happy new church year!

+ Åke Bonnier

*Bishop of Skara Diocese, Church of Sweden*