

Nature Talks

by Helen Francis

The Coronavirus pandemic has made us all more aware of our own fragility. Feeling vulnerable, with more time to think than ever before, some of us have found ourselves considering the bigger, more spiritual questions of life, maybe even asking who or what God is, if there is a God.

During the lockdown, my 70-something neighbour and I chatted more regularly over the phone or the garden fence. She told me about her grandchildren dressing up as Santa Claus and Facetiming her to make

her smile. “Be good as if there was a real Santa”, she added wistfully. She had been thinking about the bigger, more spiritual questions too.

When it comes to notions of what we call God, Santa can sometimes be the image many have: a benign old man with white hair and a beard. This conversation with my neighbour reminded me of a statement the well-known atheist Richard Dawkins made about associating his disappointment in finding out that Santa wasn't real with his feelings about God's existence. Interestingly, Santa is a historical person called St

Nicholas, and he did go about giving presents, but was not the red-suited, plump, chimney-descending, sleigh-riding fellow we're all used to picturing.

Like Dawkins, coming to realise the non-existence of a much-loved benevolent character can make us sceptical about this God question. Certainly, it encouraged Dawkins' disbelief of other gods including Jesus, who is described as Emmanuel, meaning “God with us”. Ironically, like St Nicholas, scholars and historians do not dispute that Jesus existed, or that he was a good man and a great teacher. But is there any way of



knowing whether there really is a God of some sort out there?

Religious holy books have a lot to say about who God is, but I wonder if there is an even more obvious starting place. As a lover of the natural world, enjoying scenic walks, I have come to wonder whether God uses nature to talk about his existence. After all, as Creator you would expect his fingerprints to be all over it, wouldn't you? The symmetry and beauty, the symbiotic nature of cycles and systems leave me full of wonder.

No two snowflakes are the same. In the depths of the sea, where man is only just beginning to explore, creatures have lights. Many birds, fish, and mammals can navigate thousands of miles to return to their birthplace, somewhere they may have only been once before. I'm not into arguments about when

or how God created all this, but for me I can only see a benign, purposeful, intelligent, artistically beautiful mind behind it all.

Some people think science and God are at odds with each other. Sometimes this seems to be the case, but I have also noticed that so often science "discovers" God without meaning to. Recently I was reading a scientific study about the birthplace of life on earth. I was blown away by the scientists' explanation of how the fundamental building blocks of life, DNA and proteins, could have been produced from chemical reactions in clay and then preserved by the same clay.¹

So life may have actually started in clay? Why does this blow me away? Because in the first book of the Bible, Genesis, it suggests a similar birthplace for human life. The story goes like this:

"...and the Lord God formed man out of the dust [clay] of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul".² So maybe we should be seeing God in a white coat rather than on a white cloud?

Looking to discover more about who we are, and who God is, is a natural reaction to a crisis. For me, looking and listening to nature, whether you're on a walk or in a lab, is a good starting place in trying to discover God.

NOTES

¹ Cornell University. "Clay may have been birthplace of life on Earth, new study suggests." *Science Daily*, 5 November 2013. www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2013/11/131105132027.htm .

² Genesis 2:7.

