

Easter 2018 – Images of God

Friday

This weekend I am hoping we can spend some time looking at our images of God. ‘Image’, not just in a visual sense, but as ‘the way we think about God’, ‘the sort of God we hold’.

All language for God is metaphor, because God cannot be captured by any straight-line language. Metaphor is what allows us insight into God from a whole lot of different angles (*perhaps relating to the OT understanding that to look directly at God would kill you, as it is just too much for us*). Metaphor is not just poetic decoration: it is essential for expressing mystery.

Metaphor is good and wonderful while it is metaphor, but often it becomes description. *What’s the difference?* Metaphor holds both an ‘is’ and an ‘is not’, and its power in part is the imaginative leap between the two. *For example, if I say ‘My son is a cuddly bear’,* it works as a metaphor because it highlights how he is like a bear cub - romping and affectionate and snugly – while we all know he is in fact a boy, with much more to him than these features. Metaphor becomes description when we equate two things as precise equals: when I start feeding my son only fish and berries, pull him out of school and make him spend winter sleeping in a cave. Often in church we have forgotten that our language for God is *metaphor* and made it *description*, losing sight of the ‘is not’ and the imaginative leap. Then our metaphor becomes an idol. Our image of God is just that – *OUR image* – it is not God.

Sallie McFague: *‘patriarchal imperialist triumphalist’ metaphors for God are not only ‘irrelevant and idolatrous’* but are in fact moving us towards the destruction of life on earth, as they create humans willing to wreak ecological devastation or nuclear destruction.

Who we think God is shapes the people we become. Hence, people with a warlike God become warlike. People with a compassionate God become compassionate. People with an unfeeling, absent God become detached from human emotions.

Our image of God shapes how we hear the Easter stories (*unless we have great courage and vulnerability to open ourselves to the stories changing our ‘God’*). For example, take three different metaphors for God on Good Friday:

- **God is a supreme ruler**, a sort of benevolent but unyielding president/ military general/ CEO. Almost by definition a male image. We know that men in these roles make hard choices for the overall common good, which means not such good outcomes for some individuals. These men send young people to war, for a noble cause, and have to stand back with a certain degree of emotional detachment to make those choices.
At the cross, this God is also able to ‘turn his face away’ as Jesus dies; to make the call that this is the best overall plan, despite personal loss to Jesus. ‘Love’ has inherent within it a sense of ‘balancing the lesser of evils’, allowing suffering ‘for your own good’ or ‘for the greater good’; obedience to this love is required, even if that reinforces subservience to suffering or even abuse.
- **God as mother**, with a womb-love for both Jesus and humanity. God as mother at the cross is in desolate weeping. God as mother needs the disciples (or the angels?) to hold her back or she would fling herself at the cross and tear Jesus off; She and we hold each other in our grief as this atrocity unfolds, that the Light of Life, the holy child of Bethlehem nurtured through the trials of ordinary life, should be destroyed by human pettiness, fear, jealousy, power-struggles and human refusal to listen to Jesus’ message of Love.

- God as Incarnate One hangs on the cross, hangs in our pain, in our shame, in our loss and grief. God is not separate from us but entirely part of us, in our lowest place, even into our death. There is nowhere we can go that God is not.

Yet even the image of God ON the cross can be interpreted in totally different ways: Elie Weisel ('Night') writes of a child executed before prisoners in a concentration camp, and his response as the crowd asked 'where is the God of mercy?' was 'Here, hanging by a noose' – for Weisel, it was a death of faith; his God was dead. Jurgen Moltmann ('The Crucified God'), taking Weisel's story, transformed Christian theology by declaring that God was hanging dead with the murdered child, and by entering INTO our suffering was transforming and redeeming us. Previously Christian theology held to the Greek idea that God was 'immutable' – could not be changed – therefore could not suffer (because to be perfect was to have nothing that could change); Moltmann, and followers, responding to the Holocaust, said: yes, God can suffer, and suffering CAN change God.

These are just three of a myriad of images, not presented to say one or other is better, but to demonstrate how different the same story is if the God we come into it with is different. Often the God we bring is an unconscious image we have cobbled together from our life experience, especially our early childhood. The question (Sallie McFague) is not 'which is true or false?' but 'which is better for our current context?' Often the God we pray to is a reflection of our fears, and/or our desires. *Is this still appropriate for our current context?*

Activity: Who is the God you DO NOT believe in? Who is the God you DO believe in? Who is the God you are not sure if you believe in or not? (pic below of Easter Camp 2018 whiteboard with collected responses to all three)



Rabbi Brad Hirschfield: *We are all looking for ways to think about God that mean we can 'let real life, with the pain, not blow us apart'.* (writing soon after September 11, to communities trying to make sense of tragedy and violence)

Images are based in our experiences, so we should expect them to change as we change. Faith development theories (especially James Fowler) say our God changes as our faith evolves, often along a predictable pattern:

1. **Undifferentiated Faith:** pre-language: God as provider (we revert to this in crisis)
2. **Projective Faith:** God as miracle-wonder-worker magician; often quirky personalisations (age 2-6)
3. **Literal Faith:** God as external authority figure, non-intimate connection and sense of upholding law (6-11)
4. **Conventional Faith:** God as transcendent and AMAZING (awe & mystery), mostly controlling from outside, but also personal friend who talks to me: Leader/ master who knows my name. (teens, linked to conforming with external religious authority)
5. **Reflective Faith:** as critical reflection develops, moving away from conforming to authority: God is love, a co-worker, someone we are responsible to as we sort out our life-choices/ commitments (young adult, often through to middle age)
6. **Conjunctive Faith:** God as one we are attracted to rather than subject to, companion, warm & reliable; we have personal responsibility as we travel alongside this God (middle age)
7. **Universalising Faith:** God as ultimate transcendent union, often unlinked to tangible models/ metaphors; God as a life-force (saints and old age – in some ways not so different from where we begin, as infants – God is our all and we are subsumed by God, who is all we need)

LAYERS does not mean faith gets progressively 'better' – just as forty year olds are not more valuable or important than five year olds, but have a more complex life experience to process, so it is with faith. People do not always move through all these layers, or in this precise order.

Often our intellectual understanding of God moves to a new way of doing faith, but the God we emotionally connect with remains that of an earlier life stage. The task of spiritual journeying is not to be rid of earlier models, but to allow them to be incorporated into ever-wider understandings. In crisis, we tend to revert to what made sense earliest, and gradually work our way back out again to our adult faith. THIS IS RIGHT AND GOOD not a failure/ regression. ALL the layers remain there, and can be available to us when we need them.

We need 'to name God in a way that is meaningful and real' for OURSELVES (Margaret Schrader).

What name for God is right for YOU, today? Are there names for God that need to be crucified? What might rise to life in their place?

Christian culture has been bad at allowing metaphors to move forward and adapt to new cultures, new times, new realities. *'King' no longer means what it did for the Hebrew people; 'Father' has been corrupted by centuries of being embedded in patriarchal hierarchies.* (Sallie McFague): Theology needs to be a house with the doors and windows constantly open, where guests (ideas about our faith) can come and go.

Images don't change easily. *After twenty years of intellectually believing in and emotionally desiring a feminine face of God, and almost that long of actively changing my own prayer language to use 'She', singing 'She', reading 'She' to my children, when I come to pray it is still a male picture of God most likely to arise.*

The bearded man stands in the way

Enough with politeness
And beautiful words.
Deference. Patience. Prayer.
Get out of my way!
Be gone. Be shelved.
Be dusty forgotten and quaint.
You are not my God!
You bearded man
Reserved. Stern. Unbending.
Some days a lolly box.
Most days a frown.
Grey suit. Neat hair. Sad smile.
Lift your soft leather shoes
Off the veins of my heart.
Let me stir to a More Than
To Mercy Beyond.
Something. Alive. Real.
Clever head and yearning soul
Know there is a deep More
But you
Sir
Block the path.

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New images for God can be threatening, as they involve a fundamental realignment of our sense of the Mystery of All. At some point, many of us encounter a space where NO METAPHOR WORKS. *Every image will one day fail because every image is ultimately too small.* We are left only with our experience, which always feels like NOTHING to begin with, as metaphors were the guideposts that helped us understand our experience. But if we cannot let go of our metaphors we are holding them as idols – *our images have become more important to us than the actual reality of God in our lives.* We don't like letting go, and more often our images are stripped from us than willingly ceded.

We will never get our heads around all this, and that's OK. Richard Rohr: *'Even a little bit of God is well worth loving, and even a little bit of truth and love goes a long way.'*

Rather than talk more, I am inviting you to engage with your image of God, or possibly new images of God, either on your own or in pairs or [VERY] small groups. Suggested ways to do this follow – or invent your own. But don't just TALK ABOUT it – also pay attention to your responses, listen to what bubbles up; in whatever way you come close to God – 'pray'. You might find that an image comes up for you that you think 'but that's not right!' or 'I don't believe that!' – try not to just push that image away, but listen to it and see what it might have to say to you.