

Eater Sunday 2018 – Made in the Image of God

Core to Christian theology is the assurance that *we are made in the image of God*.

Gen 1:26-27 *God said, 'Let us make humans in our own image, in the likeness of ourselves, and let them be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of the heaven, the cattle, all the wild animals, and all the creatures that creep along the ground. And God created humans in the image of Godself; in the image of God, God created them; male and female God created them.*

But which image is that? And what does it mean? Is it simply describing a process: we become what we love; we become the shape of the God we believe in – therefore, whatever our image of God, we become *in that image*?

This is true, but I don't think it is what either the bible or Christian theology means by being 'made in the image of God' – because *that* has within it a sense that something of God was in us from the start, before we did or believed anything about anyone. Our inherent personhood is somehow connected with God. Thomas Merton: '*God utters me like a word containing a partial thought of Himself*'; Richard Boileau & Stefan Theriault (re Merton) '*Each person is the incarnation of a word that already exists in the mind of God*'.

Our 'image of God' is our 'mental picture of God'. Does this mean God has made us as *God's* mental picture of Godself?

But when Jesus is 'image of God' he is not just a representation, he *reveals* God, and somehow brings the presence of God to us. Are we likewise revealing God and bringing the presence of God to each other, or was Jesus way of being 'image' different to ours?

The images of God we have discussed over the weekend have been *pointers to aspects of God*. So if human beings are *in the image of God*, are we also pointers to something of who God is? Remembering that we are *in THE image not made as IMAGES*)

Because we are ALL in the image, we are united through God with all other human beings. Does this mean the image of God is what you get when you have us *all together* – each of us a little bit of a total picture? *Is the image the average of all humans – like the faces displayed at Cockburn Central that have computer-averaged the faces of people living in the district? Is it a problem that each one of us is 'one seven-billionth of the image of God'?*

And what happens to the 'image of God' in us when we sin? Does it hold up, or can we damage it?

Take a moment to consider what it means to YOU that you are 'made in the image of God'.

Four major ways in theological thought of understanding our being 'made in the image of God': *reason, righteousness, relationship, rulership*

- **Reason**

What makes us unlike animals is what makes us like God. Therefore: Reason is the essence of what sets us apart, so it is our reason that is the embodied Image of God in us. (Or perhaps our sense of humour – animals don't laugh)

- **Righteousness**

Both our actual loving/ good deeds/ turning towards God and our capacity for loving etc are the image of God.

Therefore when we sin we mar/ smudge/ distort or even completely lose God's image. [Esp Luther, but many others, especially in the Reform period] *Other approaches talk of Image and Similitude as separate things: we have the Image, untaintable, but our capacity to act like God is lost or damaged through our sin; Christ was both Image AND Likeness and so enables us to regain both.*

Richard Rohr: To be created in the Image of God means 'whatever good, true or beautiful things we can say about humanity or creation, we can say about God exponentially'.

For Both Reason and Righteousness: It is a problem that the image resides in a characteristic we can have more or less of. Therefore some people could be more or less 'in God's Image', which opens up avenues for discrimination/ persecution. Eg women have been historically construed as 'without reason' – therefore less in the image of God; colonialism viewed all the people described people found in far-off places as 'savages' – less 'reasonable', therefore not having to be treated as in the image of God; Disabled persons with different mental capacity to ourselves have been treated as 'less than' the image of God. OR (re 'righteousness') law-breakers may be considered not deserving of dignity; 'sinners' can be shunned, as they are no longer fully Image of God.

- **Relationship**

(Karl Barth the key proponent) It is in our relating to other people that the image of God resides; to be human in God's image is to be communal, to live in relation to others. *Links to Gen1: 'in OUR image... male and female'* As God in God's Trinitarian essence is relational at core (not three but one) so we are created not alone but with each other.

Care must be taken in this approach around having 'male and female' as a definition of 'Image': Yes, it can affirm equal dignity of women and men. BUT: it can also be used to say 'woman is not the image of God unless united with a man' (and vice versa – but this seems to happen less often!). This understanding can also be used to exclude from 'Image of God' anyone who does not fit our understandings of 'male' or 'female'– especially if heterosexuality is considered essential. It can also excludes intersex people, those born physically neither exclusively male nor female.

- **Rulership/ Representation**

(Particularly linked to Genesis 1) The word 'tselem' – image – also means 'idol' – a created thing to be a visible presence of an intangible entity. *Ancient kings were known to leave their statues in foreign lands – although there were a variety of functions for these statues, they were always a reminder that the King existed. Humans are therefore God's 'idols' on earth, the tangible presence of an intangible authority. Possibly this is why the command was given to 'make no idols' – because you ARE the idols.*

Genesis 1 presents humans as made in God's image at the same time as stating that they are made to rule over the earth: hence OT scholars suggest that to be in God's image is to be God's authoritative representative on earth, for the rest of Creation (either as a ruler/ dominion, or as a servant of God therefore serving the earth). TO BE THE IMAGE OF GOD IS OUR CREATED VOCATION.

This understanding comes out of a priestly tradition: humans are the mediators between God and creation.

The God-image of Genesis that humans are 'in' or representing is: Authoritative Sovereign over all creation - but it should remain true that we represent *whatever* image of God we hold. *Genesis had a Royal God, hence Royal representatives, but if we have eg God the Lover, our created vocation is to represent the Love of God for all creation*

Democratisation

Mesopotamian mythology (of the same period as our bible) has people in the Image of Gods – but only an elite, the ruling few. The language of Genesis mirrors much of the Mesopotamian stories, but challenges this notion of only some people being in the image of God. [Richard Middleton]: The ‘central Israelite vision about being human’ ... a ‘daring act of theological imagination’: that ALL people are equally in God’s Image. This conveys both privilege and responsibility.

Pause to hold this thought: every individual equally bears the Image of God. You. Your loved ones. Your enemies. Total strangers. Everyone past. Everyone yet to be born. No-one more or less so than YOU.

Mirroring

An analogy: ‘image’ meaning something like ‘reflection’: St Clare ‘Look upon the mirror of perfect love every day’ – because it is the source of who we are.

Mirroring activity: in partners, take turns being ‘God’ and ‘Image of God’, where ‘God’ moves and ‘Image’ copies, as if in a mirror.

When God looks at us God sees God reflected back. *What is the task of a reflection?* To watch the real thing, to move when the real thing moves. [Additional thoughts from Easter Camp participants: to be the reflection requires selflessness; you couldn’t pay attention to yourself when you were the reflection, only to God; It was impossible to be a perfect reflection, especially when God did something surprising like pull a funny face; When God says ‘you’re lovely’ God hears back ‘you’re lovely’; Becoming more ‘Godlike’ was not about paying attention to the behaviours I wanted to achieve but paying attention to GOD, and the behaviours flowed out of that.]

Unlike actual reflections, we have choice. We ARE the reflection of God, but we can choose to what extent we fully enact that; we can smudge the glass, or look away.

Do we then lose the image if we don’t act like God? [this is a weakness of this analogy] Perhaps: we reflect what God looks like if God chose *not* to be good; and/or: God sees us as God’s image regardless, and values us as God’s image at all times. We can cover or smudge the glass but never crack it: God still sees us as God’s image. [Another weakness in this analogy is that it has a sense of detachment, and a glass barrier between us]

Knowing ourselves as ‘Image of God’ guides how we can live. Sallie McFague discusses God as Mother, Lover and Friend, in relation to the world as God’s body: as Image of God, we therefore are to [verb] mother, love and befriend the world.

What images of God are meaningful for you? How can you reflect those images day to day?

It is no accident that the foundational stories that tell us we are made in the ‘image of God’ quickly also tell us that humans wanted to ‘be like God’ and that this was wrong. We didn’t want to just be reflections, we wanted our own mirrors, our own reflections. We make God in our own image – *which is reasonable, when we recognise that our own images are all we have available to us as metaphors for the transcendent*, but is NOT reasonable when we forget they are metaphors of our own making (ways for the reflection to try and understand what the reality is) and create our own Gods rather than our own Images, or set ourselves up as Gods.

What about Jesus?

As a human, Jesus was made in the image of God like the rest of us. But somehow he manifested that in ways that early Christian writers took to mean he was also God's image in a particular, special way. He was the fullest expression of human image-bearing; a fulfilment of the original intention for humans. *Using 'mirror' analogy: he was not just a reflection but a manifestation of God on our side of the glass.* And that fullest manifestation was a resurrected manifestation: to be fully human was to be so alive that even death could not keep him from Living.

John Kilner: Jesus is the image of God to which we are being conformed. Being made in God's Image is not just in the past, at Creation, but in the future, as what Jesus draws us into. The standard for transformed life. According to Kilner, 'Image of God' only became significant to Christian theology *because* Jesus was described in the NT as 'Image of God', so earlier Hebrew scripture references to the concept gained more weight. *Jesus is the key to what 'Image of God' means, not Genesis. Jesus shows us the image of God, and calls it out in us – particularly in the poor, the marginalised, those society treated as less-than, but also in the rich (you are not important because you are rich, you are important because you are in the image of God; you are not unimportant because you are poor, you are important because you are in the image of God)*

DNA

Another analogy: Humans are built to blueprints of God – but somehow we have come out a bit wonky. The plans are good, but we don't reflect them. So Christ came, to unpick the faulty work and reconstruct us as originally intended.

Our children have the DNA of Tyson and myself – they are made in our image. But they could choose to look and act nothing like us. Would it change their DNA? No. And if they stopped trying not to be like us, they would probably just naturally turn out like us; more so if they stayed close to us, trusted us, learnt from us, loved us.

Is 'Image of God' to 'have the DNA of God'? [*problem with this picture is that it separates out image/ likeness and again makes some 'more' and some 'less' reflections of God's image*]. If we hold this view, we need to respond to who people ARE, not who they are ACTING AS. *Sin is 'contradicting God's image' – being God's image, but not acting so.*

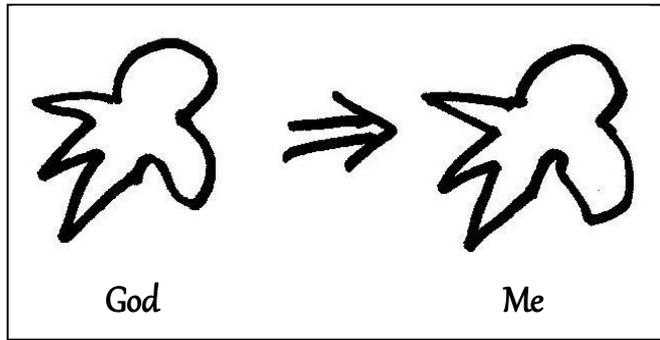
Resurrection in our DNA

Margaret Silf talks about the 'God-seed' planted within us; the presence of God, awaiting germination through resurrection. She writes that *sin is refusing to plant the bulb we have in our hands because we don't believe it contains a daffodil.*

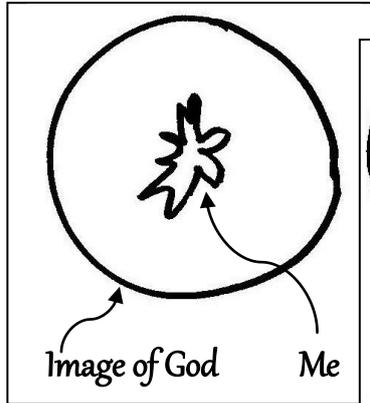
1 Cor 15 – Paul speaks of resurrected bodies, life beyond this life, as 'bearing the image' of the resurrected Christ. We were created with the eternal God in our DNA – life is essential to who we are – and Jesus, brought back to life, demonstrates that this DNA will be what defines us in the end: the DNA of life triumphing over death; goodness stronger than evil; love stronger than hate... We can wait for that in the future, but we can also know it is part of us now: in whatever muck we are going through, the LOVE and LIFE of God is in our DNA and will be called forth, somehow, because NOTHING can destroy that 'image' in us.

A thought bubble: 'in' as 'inside'?

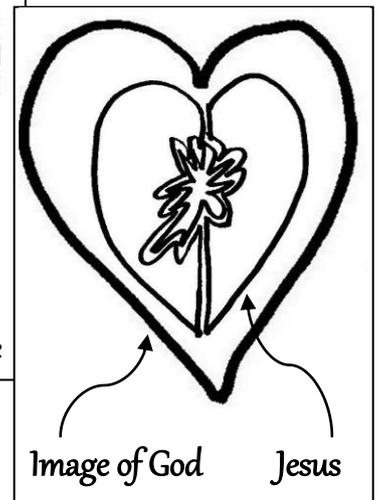
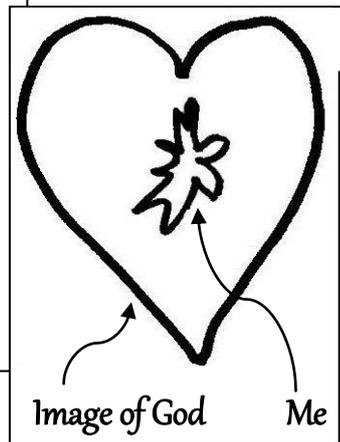
Usually when we hear 'made in the image of God' we read the 'in' as 'by' or 'in keeping with' or 'reflecting' or even 'embodying' the image of God (like cutting out biscuits with a God-shaped cutter – making biscuits in God's image)



But what if it is *inside* [in the biscuit analogy: we are baked into the dough *INSIDE* the God-shaped biscuit]:

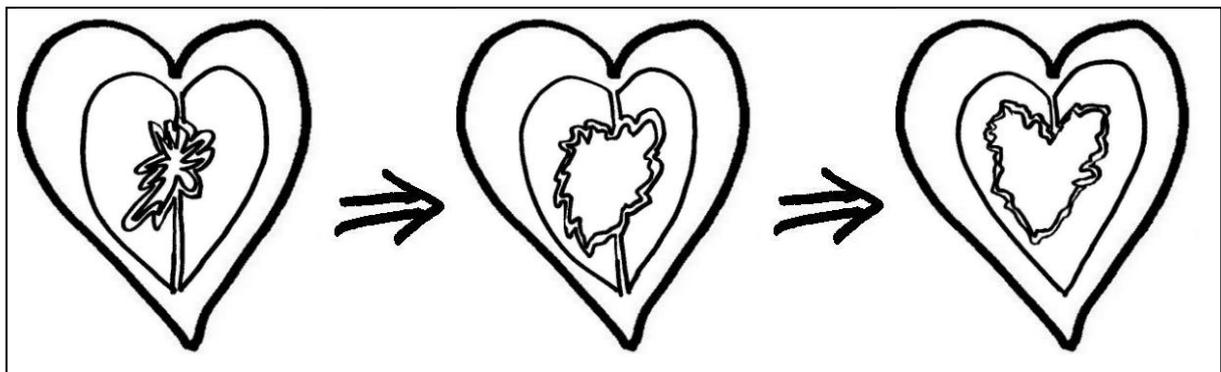


Whatever spikey shape we might be today, we are never any more or any less within the image of God.



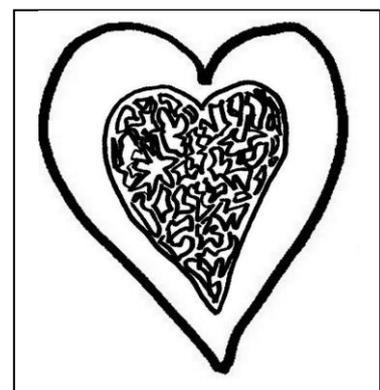
If the Image of God is God's Manifest Love, we dwell always *within God's love*. If we are reflections of God, it is from *within God's love*, trying to reflect back the colour and texture of that which surrounds us.

Perhaps Jesus was that love-shape coming close, wrapping around us, and by both example and by awakening the DNA of Resurrection within us, drawing us to be more like the shape we live inside. Jesus was the *broken heart* of God for us.



This is true individually, but also as a Body together: Jesus enters into the mess of how all our spikey bits are jabbing into each other and draws us into the shape we are made to be, the love of God manifest *inside of God's love*.

To be in God's image is to be KNOWN: to be known from when we are in the womb; to be within The Womb of God (*in whom we live and move and have our being* – Paul)



Maybe several of these ideas are true at once: We are **within God's love-image**, and have the **DNA of God**, and **reflect God back** to Godself; we are **representatives of God** for creation, God is reflected in our **relationships** with each other, we have **God-like capacities** unlike animals, our **capacity to love** and the love we do manage are **evidence of God** within us.

Whatever it means, to be made in the image of God assures us of our dignity and preciousness – and not ours alone (although that is true) but ours as part of humanity, male female and every other variant.

Discussion questions:

What was new in this today?

What old truth was reaffirmed for me?

What was challenging?

What gives me hope?

Where am I in this?

How will I respond to this? What might I do differently when I return from camp to ordinary life?