

MADE IN THE IMAGE OF GOD (1st of 3 Sermons)

Lent 1 2016 – Rev Deryck Collingwood

COMPANIONS IN A GARDEN

This theme of our being made '*in the Image of God*' could take us many places. But for me it begins with the creation story, taking us straight to our relationship with one another and with the earth – and how we come to understand *truth* in the light of that common story.

We could begin with the story of a people's identity – that 'Wandering Aramean' in today's reading from Deuteronomy, being given possession of a land of milk and honey – but these are things I will come back to over the next couple of weeks. Today, I prefer to start with babies! And wherever you were told babies come from, I suggest this may have some bearing on what you were told of the origins of religion and the nature of faith in God.



Look at the image of a child, lying there, utterly dependent upon us. We probably feel a certain warmth, which has to do with the beauty of that child as well as pure vulnerability. But this probably also has something to do with a sense of responsibility, our own 'place' in that chain of dependency, giving us a role and importance to which we are glad to respond.

As soon as someone has to face real questions, as an *adult*, about their *own* vulnerability and their own mortality, things can look very different. We are reminded that we are no longer in control; rather, we are forced to put ourselves in the hands of others, hoping that they will be able to help us.

Above all else we may put our hope in God and, often as not, religiously-minded people will look for meaning in that struggle for hope. We are reminded that we are the creatures, not the creator. We are dependent upon a higher power.



So such an exploration could lead us towards images of God in Christ and that includes the Body of Christ, in our mutual dependence upon one another, just as in this face of Christ there are nearly 3000 small images celebrating community life in a village in Northumberland.

If they could do that with pictures of themselves, what could we do with the good people of our own church community?



So when we are told, in scripture, that we are not just 'created', but "created *in the Image of God*", what does that mean to us? If it sounds like something designed to hurt the brain too early on a Sunday morning, don't be surprised or dismayed, let it wash over you. Theologians and philosophers have wrestled with that very question for centuries and their answers are not all that satisfying, should you be prepared to spend time with them and ponder.



In the image of God... “male and female created ‘he’ them”.
Now there’s a conundrum.

We accept creation as male and female, but
by a male God.



Does it make a difference if we adjust that a
little? I trust not.

But each time we speak of God, we paint a little picture, a word picture. A picture may paint a thousand words, but each ‘word-picture’ speaks in itself. And pictures, whether in words The Psalmist says we are made ‘a little lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honour.’ Well, on a beautiful, glorious morning such as this, how do you feel, wearing your angelic crown, waking to yet more horrendous news of human dis-honour exemplified around the globe?

One positive thing we can perhaps say of our human species, which in some capacity has been with us for a very long time, is that this crowning glory of creation, brings with humanity a sense of the ‘otherness’ of goodness and beauty and truth which is to be strived for in this life, which belongs truly and rightly to the realm of what we call the divine.



And this desire to express the otherness of divinity springs deep. This charming and magnificent lady is now in the national museum in Ankara in Turkey. She was formed from earth by people who very likely lived deep within the earth – some 8000 years ago: perhaps the Mother of all mother goddesses.

She came from and represents the womb of the earth, one of the earliest known examples of a lasting religious expression. For as we have become all too aware in our own generation too, the fertility of the earth *is* in so many ways the sustainable future of our offspring.

And, one of her successors: Diana, whose followers became very cross with St Paul for challenging her dominance in Ephesus.

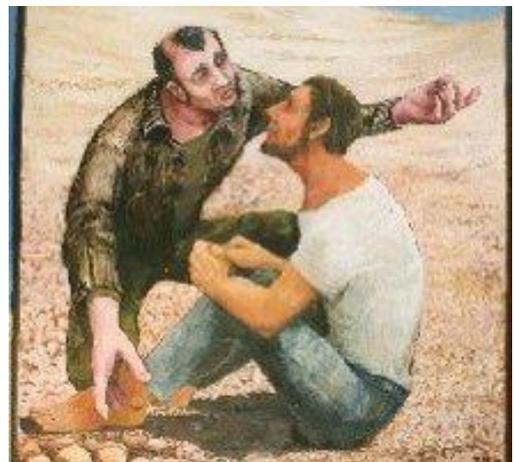


If you find the dominance of male imagery in Christianity difficult, spare a thought for Paul and his contemporaries, whose lives were made utterly impossible, to point of imprisonment and death, because of the overwhelming domination of fertility cults of female deities of his day. Commerce as well as religion revolved around them.

It is really no surprise that male imagery gained the upper hand in early Christianity; though that does not equate to easy male power in Christian gatherings that, by and large, remained based within the home for over two hundred years. And in the home, women had not just involvement but a shared power. We see signs of that even within the New Testament.

Into this world of very basic earth religion of the surrounding nations, the Hebrew tradition brings something very different. Rather than having lots of gods and goddesses competing for our affections in strength and prowess, the message of the One God means that the Divine is free to deal directly with humanity, sometimes through special messengers, sometimes in a special 'tent of meeting'.

And the presence of God in the person of Jesus brings that proclamation not just a step nearer but into a whole new order of nature. When Jesus is tempted in the wilderness, the first two questions posed to him concern very down-to-earth realities – food and power: turn stones into bread to appease hunger, and take authority over the nations in return for worship of the devil. In both instances Jesus replies by appealing to scripture: "it is written..."



He appeals to the authority of what is handed down to them in the tradition. He will not be diverted by personal interest.

So the crafty devil then attempts to use this dogged determination of Jesus to his own advantage by suggesting, in the third temptation, that he throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple in a grand gesture... "for it is written, 'the angels will protect you and bear you up'..."

In other words, if you are going to take your authority from scripture, I have the perfect means of directing you away from that path. But Jesus simply refuses to put God to the test. Scripture and tradition are not enough, they can be readily manipulated. We must first and foremost be people of faith. He is not about exploitation or manipulation; the power he brings is of a nature quite different to ways of former earth religion.

And something else is strengthened, I believe, in the coming of Jesus. In the Old

Testament, many different images of course are used to describe God. But one of the most prevalent is that of 'God Most High', El Elyon. He sits in contrast really to the 'Almighty' God, the strong one who protects land and peoples from within.



El Elyon, the Most High, shares that feature common around the Mediterranean world, of being able to see far and beyond what the human eye can see: he foresees potential danger; he can lead the way to safety; he knows where the good grazing grounds are beyond the visible horizon. El Elyon is a friend to a people on the move.

And in a generation that has developed the technology to see what is happening to peoples around a world that in many ways appears to have grown smaller as a result, seeing ourselves reflected in the image of such a God may speak to us too of what it is to be fully human, made *in* the image of God.



In the next address, I want to pick up on this theme of people on the move alongside a God-on-the-move and what that may mean in terms of our relationship to the land that God has provided for our needs, just as we are created to be stewards of the earth's needs.

May his angels bear us in their hands, lest we dash our foot against a stone.