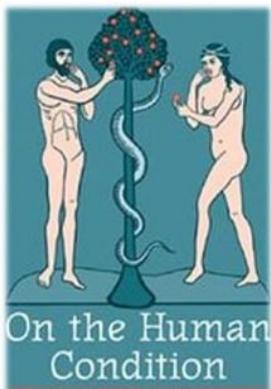


# MADE IN THE IMAGE OF GOD (2<sup>nd</sup> of 3 Sermons)

Lent 2 2016 – Rev Deryck Collingwood

## STEWARDS OR GUARDIANS?

In my first address last week on this theme of our being made in the image of God, I mostly focussed on the phrase that goes hand in hand with that in scripture, namely, 'male and female created he them'... and some implications of imagery and language around God and faith.



In this second address, I focus more on what we inherit, in those same creation stories in Genesis, in our relation to the earth: that earth which, we are told, had no-one to till it until Adam was formed out of the earth and was given a job. And then things went a little awry – and he and companion Eve were sent away from the garden to sweat it out elsewhere and populate the earth as they went.

On one basic level, we get back to the age-old split: roving hunter-gatherers, or settled farmers?

That's what niggles away at our deepest psyche, is it not, when we take a wee break from the norm... are you someone who longs to take that trip into space with Branson's Virgins...



or are you happy just to potter in a caravan,

or maybe a little closer to the earth, get the old tent out?



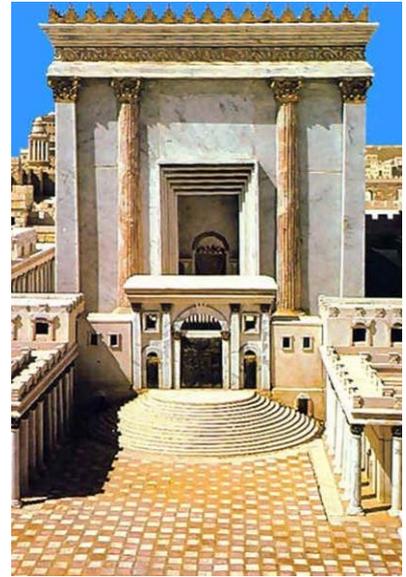
Or, maybe, you'd prefer something more robust, more predictable, more permanent ... like, it seems, palaces for kings...

and temples for the Divine: very desirable in days of old...

Let's be honest, most of us like a little comfort. But on holiday, we might accept a modicum of adventure. If, however, 'adventure' is your *lot* in life, then dreaming of a comfy holiday is definitely on. Dreaming of a settled anything probably becomes a way of life.

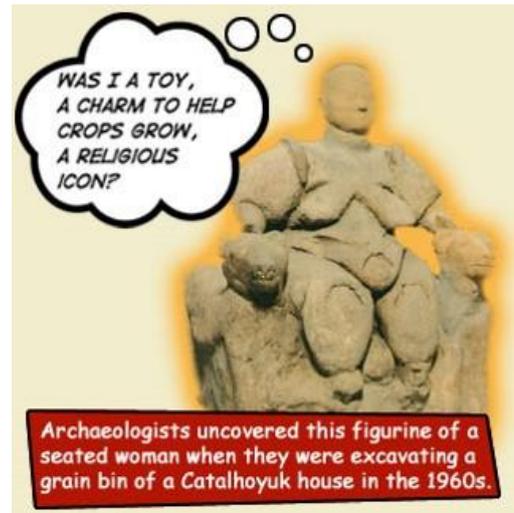


That first hint of what we might understand as religion, alluded to in my last address, arises in those earliest expressions of settled community. Park your tent, dig yourself in, commit yourself to a certain place and way of life, and you will find sooner or later that, as still happens all too frequently even in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain, the rains will lash, the floods will rise, the crops will be ruined and...



to cap it all, drought may then follow and deny your rescue plan. Sometimes we are not in as much control as we would like to think we are.

Perhaps all the more so several thousand years ago. To entreat the divine for a little assistance was no bad thing: for the earth and crops; for the animals; for human fertility for that matter too.



But perhaps too there was already a parallel tradition, not recorded as such until much later because its people were on the move and travelling light, of belief in the power of the divine who travelled with you. And, as I was suggesting last week, I believe, this tradition feeds into one of the dominant images used of God in the Old Testament: that of God the Most High, El Elyon.

These things impact upon the way in which we see, not just what God may be like, but who *we are*, in relation to our Creator. If we are made in the image of God, what sort of image do we see reflected back in ourselves?



The old gods of the nations were generally understood, it seems, as ‘collectives’ – bordering on the democratic perhaps, but that idea of a ‘pantheon’ allows for the possibility of dialogue and dispute and friction (and fraction) within the realm of the divine. Humans – mere creatures – become like pawns in the larger game that takes place within the heavenly realm. We see this sometimes graphically played out in the stories about the Greek and other gods.

See ourselves reflected in such a pantheon and we are likely to find ourselves striving to become as such gods – albeit in over-simplified terms, the roots of humanity are no longer in tilling soil and caring for creation, but become ambitious, we want to rise above our station, gain power, claim our territory and defend it.



Now enter that Hebrew understanding of God as ‘One’, a unified and unifying Being and, even under the terms of the old covenant, our reflection becomes of one drawn towards caring even for the alien amongst us, the one perceived as very different to us, for we acknowledge that the earth is the Lord’s and we are (all) God’s people. Stewards of the earth we may be, but not in rivalry or possessiveness, nor in selfish ambition; rather, our role is to be the *conscious* servant of One who has made us and all creation.



Conscious servants, who hold consciousness of that divinity which holds beauty and truth, who have conscience and are conscientious in the exercise of that responsibility.

Such an understanding comes primarily, I believe, from this God who is perceived as being ‘on the move’ – the One who accompanies a nomadic people and guides them through each wilderness.

In a more settled society, the question about God that seems more natural becomes, “Will God protect us?” – for we want things to remain much as they are, predictable, what we are used to, ‘safe’ in our own terms. And then what we are required to *do*, not least in a very predictable form of (church-based) religion, is to be loyal to the tradition that is passed down to us, obedient to its ways, to those in authority, and to its moral code.





In a society that does not have a settled existence, the more appropriate and fundamental question is more likely to be, “Will God *guide* us?” – for we cannot see where we are heading or where we shall find safety, and we have to trust in a power beyond our own; we must therefore have *faith*. We are pilgrims on a journey and we will work this out as we travel... or, rather, this will be worked out with us as we go.

So if the pope can question Donald Trump’s understanding of Christianity over the matter of building a wall to keep Mexicans out of the U.S., it seems to me that he might also wish to question British views of sovereign rights to shore up our coastal boundaries against migration from fellow Europeans as well as from refugees.



Those who wish to claim that both nations astride the Atlantic Pond are still Christian at base, when both insist on holding on to systems of so-called deterrence that they would deny to most of the world, while at the same time claiming the right to flex muscles



wherever we see fit, should perhaps reflect again on the way in which Jesus describes his own relationship to land and power and religious establishment (cf. the ‘fox’ in today’s Gospel passage Lk.13: 31-35). And while that ‘fox’ had his castle, Jesus called his disciples to follow him when he had nowhere to lay his head, and that meant their own need of sustenance, plucking a few heads of corn on the Sabbath, took precedence over religious observance.

Well, most of us are not heroes, seemingly giving up everything we might consider normal for the sake of discipleship. Most of us, like Mr Trump, would fight to hang on to what we have when it came to push and shove. We may have that choice of ‘fight or flight’ – stand up for what we believe in and what we have, or disappear off into some desert – if we don’t want to be overrun by some other way of looking at the world: and we are confronted with dangerous possibilities consistently in our news reports.

But Jesus was anything but a world-denying desert-dwelling hippy kind of drop-out. He wandered around the local villages of Galilee, we are told, before taking the road up to Jerusalem. He mixed with his own folk and with strangers, bringing a word of hope, of healing, of new life.

But it was a life that challenged the old, accepted precepts. Let me close with a few words from a recent interview in the Church Times, of all things:

*“In order for our actions to change – and they need to change, big time, with regard to climate change – we cannot stay within the same set of assumptions that created our present problem. ‘Father, King, all-powerful Creator and Lord’ is not a suitable view of God when it’s we who are the problem – our insatiable greed at the expense of both poor people and a deteriorating planet.”*



These are not the words of some young trendy. They are from an 82 yr old theologian with a lovely smile and earrings – one of my favourites, Sally McFague.

*“All the world’s religions that lasted,” she says, “are counter-cultural. Theology should be an aid to such counter-cultural practice, and this means, I believe, for Christianity, the practice of self-giving, self-sacrificing love.”*

Do we see ourselves *made in the image* of self-sacrificing Love? That is a question for us as disciples. And it is a key question, I believe, for the very survival of the church.