

## The Image of God - Colossians 1:15-28

What is your image of God?

What do you think God's image of you is?

Or, to put it another way, what do you think is God *like*? and what does God think you're *like*?

Even though much has been made of the fact that in the last census less than half of Australians identify as Christians, it still seems that most Australians believe in *something* - a God or a spirit, a higher power or a life-force, but we are left wondering what the God they believe exists is really *like*?

But how is it that we know what God is like? How do we see God?

Do we see God in the beauty of a sunset? In the wonder of creation at a microscopic level? In the vastness of the universe we see in the night sky? In the destructive force of a cyclone? In seemingly miraculous rescue from disaster? In acts of love and compassion? In the pure smile of a newborn child or grandchild? In the faces of those we love and choose to spend our lives with? I'm very fond of the line from the musical *Les Miserables*, "*To love another person is to see the face of God*".

And I think that all of those things are a glimpse of what God is like.

But then we wonder, should we have an image of God at all? After all, Exodus 20 (4-5) gives us the second commandment "*You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them...*"

Progressive theologians often resist saying what God is like, because to them it risks defining God. And to define God, they say, is to limit God.

But I think it is okay to have an image of God. The second commandment is about not making idols, and not worshipping idols in place of God. Rather, as we go through our lives of worship and getting to know God, through prayer and reading the bible and experiencing Christian community we can - and should - form an image of who God is - the God who we come to know; the God we worship.

And we certainly do see God in creation and in our lives - in fact, Paul writes to the Romans (1:19-20) "... *For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made...*"

But try as we might, by our own efforts, we can do nothing more than merely glimpse God - whether it's through the beauty and complexity of the world, through acts of love, in the innocence of children or through loving and being loved by those we care for.

Left to our own devices, we fall short, we do not see God, we do not know God, because - as Paul says in today's reading from Colossians (1:21) we have become " *alienated from God and ... enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour.*" - because we as a people and as individuals have turned away from God.

But we know that people seem to want to know God - most people seem to think that there is some sort of God, after all, and so Paul tells the Colossians, and indeed us today, how it is that God can be seen; from the opening of this morning's reading:

" *The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.*" (Col 1:15)

It is in the Son – in Jesus – that can we see God, and it is *only* in Jesus that we truly and fully see God. We may have glimpsed the awe and the wonder and the love and power of God in creation, but it is only in his Son that we see his full image.

In John's gospel we read that " *No-one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.*" (John 1:18) To know Jesus is to know God.

And later in John's gospel Jesus himself emphasises this when he says "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him." (John 14:6)

Now, we may well see others as role models, examples of Christ-like behaviour, people to be followed, people even to be inspired by, but we need to remember that they are not the image of God. We've seen it historically in the Church as saints became objects of worship, I think we can see it in how we regard the great reformers too, but even in modern times we tend to hold people such as Martin Luther King Junior and Mother Therese as pinnacles of faith, people to be emulated. And they are, of course, great inspirations and role models for us.

But no matter how good and faithful these people might have been, we need to remember that it is not them who are the image of God, but Jesus.

And so it is too, with the activities of life. No matter how 'good' the cause is, no matter how essential or important the work, we need to be sure that it is not taking our focus away from Christ. We saw in this morning's gospel reading how Martha had so many important things to do, she overlooked the most important visitor she had ever had, (Luke 10:38-42) even while she was intently preparing for him.

Having identified Jesus as the image of God, Paul goes on to explain what this means for us, that Jesus is " *... the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together...*" (1:15-17)

Paul's use of the term 'firstborn' in this context, means heir - the firstborn son is traditionally the inheritor of the estate. So Jesus is the heir of God's creation: All things were not only created through him, but they were also created *for him*.

And then, we read that "*He is the head of the body, the church;*" (1:18a) and that may seem to be a little odd. Jesus - image of God, firstborn over creation, everything made through him and for him. And now he's running a church...

Because we Christians get a bit preoccupied with explaining how the church is a body of people rather than a building, and it's easy to come up with the view that Jesus is fairly passive in these arrangements - that we should try and be like Jesus, we should try to do what Jesus would like us to do. But Paul tells something more: that Jesus is the head of the church: Not our church councils, not our presbytery not even our synod, and not the bishops, cardinals and popes of other denominations. The church, as a body, answers to Jesus.

"*[Jesus] is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.*" (1:18b). Jesus' resurrection points to our own resurrection. Once again he is described as the firstborn - the heir to the resurrection life. And so Paul's commentary moves from the creation of everything through to the redemption and reconciliation...

"*For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.*" (1:19-20)

And this is the essence of our faith: God created all things through his Son; that creation turned away from him - we turn away from him; and then God made peace through his Son. God didn't turn away from us, God didn't do the wrong thing by us, and yet it is God, through this phenomenal sacrifice who moved to make peace.

You'll know the song "The servant king" that we sang last week... there is a line in it that "hands that flung stars into space, to cruel nails surrendered". Think about that - the Son, the heir of all creation, through whom all things were made was rejected and mocked and flogged and nailed to a cross.

The Son of God - the very image of God - was nailed to a cross...

And that is the God that we as Christians know. God who knows what it's like to experience human life, who knows sorrow and suffering.

And that should be our image of God.

Which brings us to the second question I asked: what image does God have of you? What do think God thinks you're *like*?

Do you think that God thinks of you as a hopeless sinner, someone with a black heart and dark secrets, which you might try to hide, but God *knows*?

Or do you think that God sees you as the pinnacle of the Christian faith, goes to church every week, reads the bible every day, prays all the time, goes to bible study, puts quite a reasonable sum in the offertory? You know, someone that God should be really proud to have as a follower?

Or do you think God thinks of you as a person who does a fair few good deeds, tries to do what is right, sometimes gets it wrong, but really, on balance you're not too bad -and you hope that God will look after you in the end?

It is easy to fall into views like this, but Paul tells us something quite different - from verse 21, Paul tells the Colossians that "*... Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—.*" (1:21-22)

Paul captures the gospel neatly (as he has a habit of doing throughout his letters) when he says that: Once we were separated from God, but through Christ we have been reconciled with God.

If we have turned to Jesus in faith, God doesn't see us as a hopeless sinner, nor does he see us as an enthusiastic follower of the law, nor does he see us as someone who's, on balance, not all that bad. Because of the reconciliation in Christ we are holy in his sight. God's image of us is people who are without blemish and blameless before him.

Whether we have dark secrets, or we are exemplary in our public expressions of faith, or are just 'not too bad', we are made holy in God's sight. Not through any action of our own, but through the grace of God in Christ.

Paul doesn't end there, and he goes on to explain that we must “you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.” We must hold on the hope of the gospel, the very gospel that Paul is explaining.

And though we are saved, though we are made without blemish and without accusation in the sight of God, we mustn't put our feet up. Paul explains how he has worked to share the gospel, how he has suffered to spread the good news of Christ:

*“Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness—the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the*

*Lord's people. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.” (1:24-27)*

Paul's work in spreading the good news of Jesus - which in his case involves physical suffering - is in response to Jesus and for the sake of the Church. Paul isn't suffering or risking his life in order to earn God's favour, he is doing it because God has given him his favour. And so it is with us: people often think of Christians as people who are doing the right thing - being moral and ethical and helping the poor and so on - in order to be right with God, but really, we are made right with God through Jesus, and in response to that, we work to do the right thing.

And finally, Paul tells us that the good news is for everyone when he says:

“[Jesus] is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.” (Col 1:28)

So let's uphold the image of God: Not simply the glimpses of God that we have in creation, and that we experience through our friends and families and communities, but the full image of God that we have in Jesus. Jesus through whom all things were created and are sustained.

Jesus, God the Son, who entered the world, who lived and taught and healed. Jesus who died and rose again, who ascended into heaven. And who will come again, in glory.

Let us be reassured that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, we, his followers, are holy in God's sight, without blemish and blameless before him.

And recognising what God has done for us, let us respond as Paul did, and as faithful Christians throughout the ages have done; suffering if we must, but proclaiming the gospel in word and in action. Let's all be servants of God, continuing the commission God gave to Paul, presenting the word of God in its fullness, making Jesus known.

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. He is the one we proclaim; warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

And we do this to the glory of God.

**Amen.**