

The Image of God

A sermon preached by Rev Dr Rob Gilbert at St Peter's Wolvercote on the 8 February 2015.

Readings: Proverbs 8:1.22-31; Colossians 1:15-20; John 1:1-14

What absolutely gorgeous readings we have this morning! Maybe it's to give us a treat before we get plunged into Lent, but this morning we have three passages of – you might say – pure poetry. We heard about wisdom, from the beginning of everything “rejoicing in [God's] inhabited world and delighting in the human race”. A wisdom which God's ancient people, the Jews, found echoed in the human spirit and in creation, and which later we believe in Jesus Christ became flesh and blood like you and me. We heard Paul's astonishing phrase – a phrase he is applying, remember, to the Jesus whose followers he had persecuted so energetically – that in Christ “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell”. And we heard again the Prologue to John's gospel and that phrase which to me always seems to be a perfect conclusion “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.” Because it says “as of a father's only son” this is for me a phrase at once intimate and familiar and tender-hearted, and also majestic and awesome.

At the centre of what these three readings are saying is something very difficult to put into words, something which maybe we *need* poetry for. Poetry helps to make it clear that the language being used is gesturing away from itself, rather than trying to define terms precisely. Poetry helps to make it clear that we're not talking about what's on the surface, not just what the words mean in a straightforward way, but somehow – as with all real poetry – *using* language to give a glimpse of something understood, if only for a moment, something that is hiding between the words, something flitting in and out of view.

The important ideas behind our readings this morning are that human beings are made in the image of God, something the Bible argues from Genesis chapter 1 onwards, and that Jesus's life seems to be an expression of God's own inner life, of God's Word, God's wisdom, in a human life. In Paul's words, if *we* are made *in* God's image then Jesus *is* God's image, the perfection of our humanity. In Jesus we see what it would be like for a human life to be lived divinely, for a human life to be completely transformed by the knowledge and love and presence of God.

What does it mean for us, to say that we are made in God's image? If we look within ourselves or into the heart of humanity in general, what do we find? Some of the news these days is so bad that we might be forgiven for despairing when we look at ourselves. But at the same time we *know* that human beings are capable of the most amazing creativity and imagination, and of hoping against hope (and being proved right), and of loving just for its own sake (and being proved right there, too, one way or another). I would argue that it is in our capacity to hope, and to love, and to trust, and to know the truth, and to create things – works of art, cars, parish rooms, you name it – that we are in the image of God, who is always making and always loves and who is himself the truth.

But aren't I being selective – focusing on the good bits of humanity and ignoring the bad bits? Ignoring how we can be destructive as well as creative? I don't think so, and I want to suggest that there is a total difference between what human beings are like *when* they are creative and what they are like *when* they are being destructive. It seems to me that all the dark things about human beings come to an end, in the end they disappear; but that all the creative things about humans last forever, they become permanent parts of the world and are remembered by God. The creative and

wonderful things about humans don't end, they flow out of us and transform the world, they make something better of the world. This fits with what Proverbs has to say, that God rejoices in his inhabited world and delights in the human race.

But if you believe in the evolution of human beings via natural selection, does it make sense to speak of our being in God's image? As a scientist, what would I say to make sense of that idea?

I think we have to trust our experiences, and *believe* in our experiences of faith, hope and love. I think we have to believe in our capacity to be creative – creative with our hands, creative with our imaginations, creative with our relationships. Even though these abilities doubtless evolved I think we have to see that these are aspects to our lives which have become independent of any evolutionary advantage they might once have had.

If I were explaining what I believe to one of my colleagues who is an atheist, I would start by talking about human relationships. I would start by talking about love – the love of two people for each other, which becomes a lifelong partnership; the love of a parent for a child; the love of an artist for the world they represent in a work of art; *our* love for the painting they produce; my love of scientific understanding; your love of football; the love of friends; the love of our neighbour. "Love" is whatever we do when we forget ourselves for the good of others. In our human experience we see how *creative* love is, and so we come to see that love has reality apart from ourselves, that it is bigger than us, and then we come to see that love is eternal, and that God is love. Of course, our ability to love evolved – and so did our ability to do maths and engage in depth psychology. It doesn't make any of them any less real.

I think that this is where we need to start, with love, if we want to understand the idea that we are made in God's image. And I think this is where we would be likely to start if we wanted to explain what we meant by saying that Jesus is God's image in human form. We would be likely to start by saying that he is God's image because he made it practically and openly clear in the way he lived his life, died his death, and rose in glory, that God is love.

If I was to make this kind of argument to one of my friends who is an atheist they might argue that saying we are in God's image is just wish fulfilment. Or that it is just arrogance. What would I say to that?

I would say that the best qualities human beings display "point beyond" themselves a bit like a poem points beyond itself; at our best we focus not on achieving something for ourselves but on forgetting about ourselves. I would say that human beings transcend themselves at their best moments, at the moments when they are most God-like. One way to see that is to note that human beings never I think lose the sense that they could do better or be better, human beings never lose the sense that they could be better versions of themselves than they are. The holiest people often seem to have the greatest sense of sin or of God's distance or absence – it's as if the closer we get to being in God's image the more we worry we're in the wrong. I think this gives the lie to the idea that saying we are in God's image is wish fulfilment. The nearer we get to achieving it, the further away we seem to ourselves to be. This doesn't sound like wish fulfilment to me.

Another way of looking at it is to say that human beings are *surprised* by their goodness and generosity rather than satisfied with them. Humans are surprised sometimes by what they find themselves capable of – surprised by how generous they can be, surprised by their ability to understand something. One of the things I've been saying is that being in God's image is not only

about being kind, it's also about being able to understand the world and each other – and I think that at base both being kind and understanding have something to do with being loving because they are to do with forgetting about ourselves and thinking about someone else, or something else. It's as if there's *more* to human beings than we often imagine, not less. It's as if we're *more* able than we imagine, not less, *more* generous, not less. I think that if talking about ourselves being in the image of God were wish fulfilment we would be saying something like “we're as good as we think we are – we really are as good as we think we are”. Whereas I think that in fact when we talk about humanity being in the image of God it's more as if we're saying “we have been in the wrong about ourselves, but we are also better than we imagined we could be”. It's quite a different thing to say “We're as good as we think we are” – which is a kind of idolatry and self-satisfaction – rather than “We have been in the wrong about ourselves, but we are also better than we imagined we could be.” And I think that when we say that kind of thing – when we're surprised by ourselves, surprised by our goodness or our understanding – that is when we realise we have come closer to being in God's image, closer to the image of God made flesh in Jesus Christ. Amen.