IMAGES OF GOD AND PASTORAL CARE

By ADRIAN LYONS

IMAGING OF GOD is something one hardly dares take as an aim in life. Better to begin by recalling dramatic events and images which have shaped one's sense of who God is and how God behaves, and try on reflection to learn more from those. As heirs to much that is precious in the jewish heritage and that of the early Christians, and with the gift of hindsight over many centuries since, we are a more privileged generation in this respect than any before us. This is fortunate since, given the difficulties of fashioning religious language and images in a dominantly secularist age, we need to draw more deeply and passionately on these life-giving resources than have recent generations.

For my formal entry to priestly ministry, the thanksgiving Eucharist after ordination, I chose a gospel episode about pastoral ministry, a favourite then and an inspiration these past ten years. The passage was Mark's account of the feeding of five thousand (6,30–44). Ramifications of that simple story have continued growing and revealing themselves in a variety of pastoral contexts. Mark in fact signals the pastoral intent of his account from the first, with a 'still' image of the pastor gazing compassionately at his people, perceiving them as sheep without a shepherd. Jesus's first move is that of leader and simultaneously that of provider: he set himself to teach them at some length. Here the pastoral minister finds a reminder that there are, and remain, needs which can only be met directly by the magisterial figure of the Lord himself. This frees us from taking on responsibilities not our own.

The powerful and exemplary part of Mark's story remains for me the sequence in which the disciples become alert and bring to Jesus's notice the further hunger of his audience. Then comes the instructive moment when he sends them among the people, garnering from these brothers and sisters of theirs whatever resources they can give, meeting them face to face, and finally seeing in an unmistakable way the fruitfulness of that encounter. This figurative way of indicating that a christian minister does well first to evoke from his people what they have seems more full of wisdom than

ever at a time when the Church is seeking pastoral renewal. The gospel here assures us that even when the needs of people seem overwhelming, the way to proceed is to gather the insights, caring skills, emotional support and physical resources available within the group itself. That is the way towards delight and abundance. The pastoral minister, lay or ordained, has a special role in noticing current needs, bringing them to the Lord's and to others' attention, seeking whatever is to hand, approaching and visiting those who may be able to help, and finally, in joy, helping both givers and receivers to celebrate the Lord's providence. Though Mark's style is, as always, understated, the picnic atmosphere and surprise at abundance at the end are evident.

In ministry among undergraduate university students I was often alerted to images which speak of reconciliation in the broadest sense, that is, with oneself, with significant others, and with God. Those biblically-based images that allow for a developmental dimension were found to be specially helpful. Those grappling with the tasks of young adulthood (but not only those) frequently have difficulty with images that have a static quality: often images remembered from parental or church instruction are cited as appearing so, and as inhibiting.

By contrast, the ending of the flood story (Gen 8,15-9,17) shows a growth in understanding in a surprising quarter. The passage contains elements that are attractively insightful for those whose imagination can tune to them. As always with imagination, and therefore with images, individual differences must be allowed for. The story goes that Noah and his boat people have landed. In thanksgiving, Noah decides to sacrifice a young animal to the Lord. God is pleased by the fragrance of smoke rising and makes an extraordinary declaration: 'Never more will I curse the earth because of mankind, because their hearts are evil from their youth'. At first this remark appears illogical and nonsensical. Surely the Lord meant: 'because their hearts are good from their youth'; that is, they are 'deep-down good'. Indeed many copyists adopted this reading, but as often with manuscripts the more difficult reading has the ring of authenticity. When probed, it discloses a surprising and revealing turn in the narrative. Up to this point, God has relied on the goodness which he placed in creation and on that special goodness characteristic of the pristine humans. But with the episodes of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and the Flood people, his disillusionment has turned progressively blacker. But

now, as Noah's act of gratitude eases the pressure, God has a moment of discovery. This people is not good at all! The Lord relaxes into understanding: his expectations have been unrealistically high. With a sigh of relief and a smile of recognition he is free to see his people in a new light. Another surprise follows immediately: the first covenant and the rainbow sign. This is frankly a covenant not with an idealized race, but with all who are 'evil from their youth'. The mode of the story may be 'primitive', as much of the best australian painting is, but the deployment of the mode is purposive and sophisticated. The vividness of its imaginative force makes it a key story among the many testifying to God's realistic love. A successor is Paul's intense formulation, 'He loved us while we were still sinners'. While this latter has a bareness appropriate to Passion Week, the Genesis presentation has the playfulness of a children's tale devised more for parent readers.

To think of the good news of the Lord Jesus, and to be without the set of images arising from the parable of the Two Sons, is to highlight our indebtedness to the evangelist Luke. The story (15,11–32) yields different insights in a variety of pastoral contexts. It is specially valuable for parent and late-teenager working through the scenes of necessary separation. That is to take the story fairly literally. I have also found a warm welcome for a more figurative, quasi-jungian, approach which sees the two sons as necessary and complementary aspects of a single personality striving to be reconciled within, as well as to be reconciled to God as parent. Audiences and individuals have readily recognized in the parable those aspects of oneself represented by the adventurous younger son, sociable and extravert, prepared to risk all, determined to taste life to the full even when that means tasting the dregs; he is also perceived to be on a course of forgetfulness, devaluing tradition and heritage, in danger of vacuousness and self-destruction. Opposite strengths are discernible in the older son: he is faithful and dutiful, one whose life and relationships are built on continuity, who is persistent in face of everyday work and suffering, the responsible one on whom the father can rely. His faults are well-rehearsed: self-oppressed by duties and responsibilities greater than he need assume, unleisured, showing no use for celebration and having no taste for it. When the turning point of the story comes—a turning point for both sons—the younger finds a way through to reconciliation with his irresponsible self, and in consequence to

openness towards his father. The older son's disposition is such as to preclude reconciliation, or at least such as to make it most difficult. In that aspect this is a cautionary tale, even for a jungian. Out of sorts with himself and his life-choice, the elder is unable to relate to his brother, the one who should be his 'other half'. He cannot bring himself to name the other, referring to him only as 'this son of yours'. His life remains joyless. The parable leaves incomplete the reconciliation of the three figures—except to affirm strongly the commitment of the father to each of his sons and to the life-project represented by each of them. Jesus's parables are often open-ended. We are left to dream of the qualitative change, and the paradisal restoration of relationships, to which the story points at its ending. To dream of such a reconciliation and maturing of relationships is to imagine something closer to a rebirth or a resurrection rather than a restoration.

The end-of-Flood story from Genesis offers 'stills' of a God learning to be reconciled to his people, to the actuality of those he has made. On the reckoning of the Genesis author, God was in need of that reconciliation. It is an enticing story, inviting the hearer not only to admire the God-figure portrayed in it but also to value a God whose sympathies are universal, and who is therefore called 'perfect' or 'complete'. It is also an invitation to extend one's own capacities to empathize with a broader spectrum of people and not to have one's charity limited for always by new discoveries of human fallibility, or even malice. The parable of the Two Sons is a dynamic tale, pointing the two sons on converging courses towards the house of their father. Few stories are as pastorally compassionate or hopeful as this one. The final image we are left with is that of a God-figure who does not foreclose on either child, but who has faith in the efficacy of time, and who creates space and opportunity for growth.

One of my favourite images of God is that of the maker of spaces, not so much extraterrestrial ones but those of the interpersonal and intrapersonal kinds. The gift of places where one can not only live but thrive, the provision of friendly spaces into which one can move confidently and creatively, and the discovery of peaceful space between persons, are not to be taken for granted but are to be treasured among the most real, yet intangible, blessings. Maker of spaces, or perhaps productive spaces, is not itself a biblical title though if pressed to cite scriptural warrant for it, I would turn first to Genesis chapter 1. There the creator is not the destroyer

of all chaos, nor the locker-away of all threatening floods or torrents, but rather the one who prepares and preserves a little space (God's half-acre) which is at the same time enough space for a garden.

I have a growing respect and affection also, born of pastoral experience, for the Lord of good timing, whose moves are always made in the fulness of time and whose devotees, often with much life experience behind them, have the gift of noticing the signs of the times. The best of those in the helping professions have this special wisdom, knowing not only what is required but when is the moment. Generally they encourage their client to attend and wait for his or her moments of readiness, and are themselves ready to respect the rhythm of things. To put the matter another way, it seems clearer with experience that the provider, the bread-giver, is not only generous but is giver of what the particular day requires: thus the giver of daily bread.

Among students, the rhythms of a group striving to be welcoming often led eventually to conversation about God's image and likeness. At a time of life when exploration of identity and of one's acceptability to a group of one's choice are major issues, this territory often proved fertile when old images of God seemed to be failing. Sometimes the issue would be whether someone should be excluded from a christian group for transgressing the code or spirit of understanding in the group. Sometimes there were frank confrontations with guilt feelings occasioned by mainstream Christians' instinctive rejection of overtly fundamentalist Christians: 'How can I, a Christian, react so strongly against my sisters and brothers whose style offends me so much?' In these and other ways, the task of forming on-campus christian groups whose image would be faithful to their sense of God constantly tested and tantalized students as well as graduates and faculty on occasion. The Lord and his dreams were seen to have the richness of mystery. Paradoxical language came to seem the only mode possible. One might speak of the Church as a special group chosen by God to testify in word and act to the time when there will be no special groups; and of the Lord as one who calls favourite people to tell everyone that God has no favourites. God's way of dealing with jewish and christian people often came to be seen as open-ended and question-provoking. So those Christians on campus who found God's plans to be sharp-edged and eminently knowable came to seem alien in spirit; the meaning of fundamentalism arose often

as a question, while at the same time the task of bridging the gap between those of other christian traditions came to seem more urgent. The pain of disunity might at any one moment be a test of faith or a spur to prompt reaching out: it was rarely absent. Meanwhile many christian students found their time on campus a time of learning to live with real doubts, explore new territory where a christian consensus is unlikely to emerge for some time, and indeed to discover along the way that one was called and commissioned to do these things. This discovery was exciting for many intellectually lively students and reshaped their sense of God. If the Lord is not a God of firm boundaries and pre-packaged solutions, but the Lord of discovery, then one's faith-development on campus might parallel rather than conflict with one's basic experience as a student.

Presented with varying portraits of parenting in their own families and in those of their friends, some students came to see that if God is called Father (or Mother) such a declaration asks more questions than it settles. Whether one's own experiences of being parented are on balance more liberating than limiting may have much to do with a person's ability to address God with confidence. Bringing into the open one's operative images of God as parent may in fact be an essential task for a young adult thinking through ethical questions, particularly when a 'break' with God, religion or the Church is contemplated. For some, the image of God as parent came into focus only through imagining themselves as parents, or dreaming of the liberating presence that the best of human parents can be.

Crises of christian groups, when emotions are stirred and issues of justice are not far below the surface, easily evoke images such as those that arose in Jesus's mind as he sought to present and enact his Father's kingdom. When a person's right to belong within a group or a household is thrown into doubt, the pastoral minister asks rightly, at least interiorly, 'What would the Lord be thinking and feeling here?' The mystery of God's inclusive Spirit, so active in Jesus on those various celebrated occasions while he was at table, comes to the fore. If being a Christian implies that the solution to a tense situation must be found without excluding anyone, then solutions of a different order from everyday ones must be sought. What is demanded is indeed a peace that the world cannot give. God is then to be imagined not only as the God of each of those initially in turmoil, but as the force for unity

among impossible opposites. There are of course parts of the world where this God is prayed to often and with feeling, since no other will do. My point is simply that the miniature counterpart of such situations is to be found in the process and history of any group I have had the privilege of belonging to or observing; and that tense times are often discovery times for those who seek God together. Prayer space brought into a group's dilemmas can throw up vital and creative images.

Given the dramas of inclusion and exclusion among young adults, as friendship groups prove volatile and individuals develop at different rates, the God of the outsiders comes to have special force and poignancy. Often petitions at liturgies have consisted predominantly of remembrances of individuals and groups who find themselves exiled in some way. The inspiration of the prophets, who could not countenance any kingdom where the orphan, the widow or the stranger stood neglected, informed such moments. Largely this inspiration was mediated through memories of Jesus, who would certainly have encountered much less opposition had he not imaged God by inviting all kinds of person to any table where he himself was welcome. The blessings of such a way of acting are evident, of course, at gatherings of previous strangers where the spirit of welcome rises uppermost, and where traces of God (and of the familiar) are found in persons apparently quite foreign to one another. When awkwardness gives way to relaxation and then to celebration, the Lord of the feast and his people from the highways and byways are not far to imagine.

An important element in gatherings of this kind that I have experienced is the australian way of travel. We travel because those living in comparative isolation need to 'see the world' and because we need to leave our shores to gain perspective on our country. On returning from a moslem country, many young australians who travel are likely to be more alert to the growing moslem population in their own country, and alert to the origins of many individuals well on their way to becoming islamic australians. Examples of old traditions, national and religious, entering the australian mainstream could be multiplied. Christian students can scarcely avoid reflecting on the meaning for Australia of its changing ethnic face. Nor can they long avoid questions about the providence of God for those of other faiths. In this connection few shared images of God come to the minds of australian Christians.

Even within a catholic group on campus, where much is common

custom or tradition, the growing number of students from ethnic backgrounds and worshipping traditions other than the roman one (adopted by Anglo-Celts) stimulates questions about the image of the Church, and the image we unwittingly project about our God. Since the Australian Catholic Church has made comparatively few concessions to the cultural diversity and richness of its people, questions arise too about our faithfulness to the Lord whose presence at table was actively invitational.

With pressures mounting for older residents to move over and to accept into the mainstream Church those of indo-chinese, latin-american and other cultures, and with the abiding challenge to welcome into their own land our australian Aborigines, one hopes soon for a flowering of religious art to inspire the one country. Without images to lead us, challenge us, and reconcile us, I doubt that we will be touched deeply enough by the Lord of all nations—whose image we need represented most of all. At this time, it would be fair to say, such a need is not widely recognized. The Church continues preoccupied with provision of services. Imagination and creativity are not much promoted, either as being vital characteristics of Jesus's ministry or as elements essential to a renewal of religion now and for the future. Perhaps we have for too long lacked images that have power to ennoble us and lift our spirits, and even now lack the nerve to seek them—and commission others to do so.

Another essential element in any current discussion of images of God in a pastoral context is the feminine. Writing about the femininity of God, or even the feminine in God, is to venture on to tricky ground. While scriptural support is overwhelming regarding the key place of women in the ministry and life of Jesus, and Mary is the gospel model of a Christian (and much more), finding feminine traces of divinity within the judaeo-christian tradition is to look at minority elements. Certainly this scarcity is culture-bound, but whatever of that, it is significant that current christian understanding is moving the wisdom literature, the Song of Songs, some tender passages in Isaiah and the book of Ruth closer to centre stage than they have been. In liturgies, particularly where women have been the recipients of sacraments for the first time, congregations sometimes switch pronouns in hymns, so that 'She is Love' alternates with, or takes the place of 'He is love'. While a note of defiance may intrude on the first such occasion, that quickly fades to matter-of-factness. As always happens with

liturgical developments that come from the heart of the people, there is something here to be learned and discerned.

On lay-formation weekends, when those participating are invited during a quiet time to imagine God approaching them with a human face, I have been surprised how often the image that surfaces is a feminine one. Sometimes it is the person's mother, sometimes a famous or historic figure. Generally this outcome is quite unlooked-for, but afterwards is felt by the person undertaking the prayer exercise to have been altogether natural. Sometimes the appearance in reverie or fantasy of a God-like woman turns out to be the beginning of a person's ability to face pain or loss, and to set out on the path to inner healing. At what pace such experiences of both men and women will influence our public and liturgical language about God one cannot say. But given the renewed interest in the Genesis image of God as male-and-female, and C. G. Jung's insights into the complementarity of male and female in the psyche, one would be rash to rule out significant changes in ordinary theological language. This may be an area in which pastoral practice in prayer seminars and counselling situations may prompt doctrinal developments.

When one looks for images of God that answer to our experience of Jesus's suffering and our own, images of the Father's compassion seem only partially satisfactory. Consistently renaissance artists and later ones have looked to the figure of Mary to image something of the divine parent's anguish—and dignity—as well as her own. In deposition scenes, and especially in the Pietà, Mary's face is the one from above. 'He came to his own, and they did not receive him': anyone wanting to explore the impact of that rejection does well to focus first on the eyes and face of Mary, and from there to seek the face of God.

One final approach to the topic at hand. Given that Jesus himself is trusted by believers as the most accurate and comprehensive image of the unseen God, one looks to his ways of moving to inform one's own. A recurring question underlying many a person's quest for wholeness (or quest to grow towards the likeness of Christ) is that of emotional integration. What is the complete person like? Often the impression has been gained in the course of previous religious instruction, and through observations of Christians at work, that a narrow range of emotions characterizes the ideal christian personality. The impression is that the array of human emotions is finally to be reduced to two: love and peace. Anthony

de Mello S. J. has traced this 'heresy' to the contact, at various points in christian history, between the teaching and example of Jesus and that of eastern religions, notably Buddhism. Contrast the figure of the Buddha, serene in body and mind, beyond the disturbances of grief or ecstasy, with that of Jesus at almost any moment of his living and dying. Each offers a portrait of human life at its fullest, but Jesus's living to the full, in nerve and sinew, the dramas of his people and of his own destiny is a strikingly different figure from Gautama. He is known to have been angry not only when he cleared the Temple, but especially when Peter tried to divert him from his course; and exasperated frequently at the dullness of his student disciples. He had occasion for fear at Nazareth when his own villagers took up stones against him, and his agony in Gethsemane is eloquent. Grief came to him as Lazarus died; he wept too over his dear city. There is also evidence about the sunnier side of Jesus's personality, about walks in the fields, his evident pleasure in observing mustard trees flourish, fields ripe for the harvest, and a hen fussing over her brood. There are the accounts of his fondness for dining out, which scandalized some, and his quick-wittedness in argument or in choosing some detail of the table arrangements to exemplify the kingdom. His deep affection for friends, his openness to women and children—with a special feeling for their dignity—all of this is on record. It is through a multi-faceted personality and a rainbow of emotions that Jesus images God to us.

One is left in no doubt that to be a follower of Jesus is to have not permission but encouragement to respond fully and aptly to life as it happens, to deploy one's own personality in all its richness, and to free the Christ-likeness in others. To be centred and focussed, yet capable of being all to all, is our call to fulness of life. For men, as is well known, the problem areas are often those of grief and tenderness. For women, many cultures make expression of anger unwelcome or difficult. The christian pastoral worker moves to modify cultural mores, as well as to assist with individual difficulties. Discovering ways to break through typical obstacles to personality development can be, in the hands of a skilful writer, a valuable resource for the cultural critic and artist. For not only persons and groups but whole cultures are capable of growing to be more Christ-like. Much might be added concerning the 'personality' of particular groups, including those that are professedly Christian. One senses in some, particularly among

students, boundless goodwill—but also an assumption that a certain primness and restraint are integral to their christian image. It can be liberating to discover that the Body of Christ may to this day be angry, or grieve, or grow fearful, find moments of love and enjoyment, and in these ups and downs be in no way distorting the Lord's image. (I assume here that the source of anger is an injustice perceived, rather than competitiveness given rein; and so on.) If a christian group aims to be more expressive, and more nuanced, in response to events than are many other groups, and if it can counter the inhibiting force that many good people together exert on one another, then Jesus and his Father will be better witnessed to. If Christians develop something of the compassionate commitment of Jesus together with his lightness of touch and gift for innovation, they may lead our age to image God more vividly and attractively. All images of God, which we are, demand discernment and alertness about their actual effect. As the scholastics knew, what is received is not always what was intended, and in this media-age we know better than ever that the watcher is the decision-maker about the adequacy of our images. By our fruits we shall be known.