

IMAGES OF GOD AND DISCIPLESHIP

By JOHN J. VINCENT

FAST, FRIENDLY AND USUALLY FREE'. It is over the window of a solicitor's shop in the barren barricaded courtyard at the foot of Park Hill Flats in inner-city Sheffield. John Howell made an option for the poor and set up business to ring the wealthy central area's professional status solicitors with his inner-city open-door solicitors' firm. Now, nine of them operate with him from shops in Spital Hill (down the road from our place) and Park Hill. 95% of the clients are paid for by legal aid. John himself agreed, for no money, to oppose the TSB flotation—and stayed to field the High Court and House of Lords Hearings when TSB took me to court on it, and paid the costs.¹

'Fast, friendly and usually free' would be a good description for any church, were it true. It conjures up the image of people looking at you welcomingly, simplistically, with the ability and willingness to function immediately on whatever is your concern, without pre-condition or guarantee.

The image of something or someone 'fast, friendly and usually free' is the exact opposite of the usual image of God. God is not fast but slow—'the wheels of God grind slowly'. He is not friendly but distant—'our God is a consuming fire'. He is not free but cocooned—'in light inaccessible, hid from our eyes'.

Images of God and human activity

Images, dominant stories, ruling paradigms both issue in and in turn help to mould models for action. The way people behave determines the way other things behave towards them. And the way other things behave determines the way people behave. Or, in personal relationships, the behaviour of one person develops in reciprocity with other persons.

The images which God obtains are determined by what God is used for. And what God is used for determines the images he has. Images of God are not therefore isolated from the things God is thought to be doing, or is allowed to do, or, ideally, reveals himself as doing. Certain dominant stories become the way in which God

is assumed to act, and certain images thus become clarified and settled. But, equally, the behaviour of the believers also influences the way God appears. What believers and followers do becomes an important influence in fixing the ambits and limits for what God appears as.

Moreover, the images of God function as determinants for discipleship models, regardless of the origins those images might have had in their biblical or historical contexts. Biblical scholarship, which attempts to establish the actual weight attached to an image in its original context, is here of little use to us. The image has long since taken flight from its biblical base, precisely because of its use as a discipleship determinant.

Images of God can be repressive. Many of the traditional images of God are repressive so far as human perception and capability are concerned. The image of God as Almighty has often functioned as part of a repressive system of human holiness or discipleship. If God is Almighty, then it behoves human beings to be in fear of his power and might. God declares 'I am the Almighty' (Gen 17,1), 'God Almighty' (Gen 43,14), and 'the Almighty One' is a regular term for God in Job (Job 5,17; 6,14 etc). People must fear the destruction of the Almighty (Joel 1,15), though one can 'abide under the shadow of the Almighty' (Ps 91,1). God is 'the mighty God' (Ps 50,1; 132,5; Isai 9,6; Hab 1,12).

The human results of God as Almighty are twofold. First, people fear the power of the Almighty. Human beings are powerless if God is all-mighty. Second, those who see themselves as God's agents seek to wield on earth some portions of his almighty power. Kings, rulers, chief priests must be 'mighty' if they represent him.

The models of holiness and discipleship which follow are obvious enough. First, 'What is Almighty, we should serve' (Job 21,15)—that is, the clue to the human stance is that of recognizing one's creatureliness, and acting as if one were in fact subservient to some almighty power. Service, worship and obedience are the unavoidable implications and the appropriate attitudes of any human system related to an almighty God. Second, those who perceive themselves as having the Almighty 'with them' (Job 29,5) naturally proceed with a certain confidence, and tend to ape the almighty power of the God they see themselves as serving. A certain boldness, hardness and even fanaticism often appear, since, if God is almighty, nothing else needs to be considered. Third, there is an inevitable tendency for the power of God to produce a

human discipleship pattern in which fear is a dominant element. If God is all-powerful, then he is no trifle with human foibles. Consequently, it is appropriate that any human attempt to relate to him must be in the light of the power he wields.

In addition, the concept of an all-powerful being at the top of our whole idea of how the universe functions inevitably creates a model for the whole of secular society—a top-down model of power at the top and obedience from below. And so the pattern is established of authority and control downwards, and deference and acceptance upwards, which is assumed to be the rudimentary model for human organization.

God in Mark's Gospel

The biblical tradition which proves of undying fascination to me is the Gospel of Mark. God in Mark's Gospel appears in four separate but related ways. First, there are the statements which imply a traditional Jewish God figure. In the forty-eight places where *ho theos* is used, it stands alone, without elaboration. The exceptions are 11,25 ('the one in the heavens'), 12,27 ('the living God') and 9,37 ('the one who sent me'). God alone forgives sins (2,7), gives commandments (7,8f; 7,13), joins in marriage (10,9), is good (10,18), can do all things (10,27), requires things (12,17), is the God of the Patriarchs (12,26), of the living (12,27), is 'one' (12,29).

Second, there are the places which imply a special relationship by Jesus to God. Jesus is Son of God (1,1; 3,11; 5,7; 15,39), the Holy One of God (1,24). God is addressed in prayer only at 15,34: 'My God, My God, why have you left me?' Jesus refers to God as Father only at 13,32, 'only the Father knows the hour' and 14,36, 'Abba, Father, all things are possible for you'.

Third, there are the places where God appears as approving the activity of Jesus. In 1,11, the 'voice from heaven' says 'This is my son, my beloved, I am well pleased with you'. At the Temptation, angels, understood as ministers of God, minister to Jesus (1,13).

At the Transfiguration, the primary mediators of Law in the form of Moses, and prophecy in the form of Elijah, appear and disappear, leaving Jesus only, left as the Divine Mediator (9,2-8). 'This is my son, my beloved—listen to him' (9,7).

Fourth, there are the passages where the Kingdom of God is named. 'The Kingdom of God is at hand' inaugurates the Gospel

(1,15). The Kingdom of God 'has come' (9,1), can now be 'entered' (9,47), has its distinctive citizens (10,14f), is hard to enter (10,23-27), has its 'secret' (4,11), and one can be 'not far from' it (12,34), or 'looking' for it (15,43).

God has been described as the neglected factor in Mark's Gospel.² It is true that most scholarly books on Mark say little or nothing directly about God. This is understandable. For God in Mark's Gospel is not specifically the subject or the object of concern. Jesus and the Kingdom of God are the subjects and objects of primary concern. Jesus appears at the outset with his proclamation:

The times are filled full!
The Kingdom of God is at the door!
Change yourselves completely,
And give yourselves over to the Good News (1,14).

Here, as so often in Mark, there is no explicit naming of God. The clear implication is that it is God's Kingdom which is being proclaimed as newly arrived. So that there is an implication that God is there to some extent because his Kingdom is claimed to be present. The rule, the realm, the authoritative government, the *basileia* of God is the point at issue. Almost all the debate and controversy in the gospel story is related to the question whether or not God can correctly be assumed to be behind what is happening. Is it in fact God's *basileia*, his Kingdom, at all? Because if it is God's Kingdom that is happening, then we can guess what and who God is, whose kingdom this is. And we can guess what God is doing from what the Kingdom-embodier, Jesus, is doing.

The dominant impression of God in Mark's Gospel is not the conclusion from considering the texts, however. The dominant impression is that we do not now begin with a God who is known, but rather with a Jesus who does things and invites one's response. When you see what Jesus is doing, you have to raise questions about God. If you conclude that what Jesus is doing is inconsistent with the way God is, then you have to call Jesus a blasphemer. Ten texts at least in Mark support the accusation of Jesus as blasphemer.³ If you conclude that the proper way for God to behave is as the defender of his holy law, then you have to call Jesus a law breaker. The debates with opponents do not indicate that Jesus is right in Old Testament or judaic terms—rather that those terms have to be suspended to make way for Jesus.⁴

But if you look at the things which Jesus does, and approve them, then you are faced with a problem. Is God also really approving these things? If he is, then everything is in a mess—the doctrines about God included. If God stands behind Jesus, then everybody else is wrong. This is precisely what Mark claims—that everyone else is wrong.

Mark claims that Jesus is Lord or Master, and that he goes about his business, right from the beginning, as if he were God Almighty. This is the difficulty that the scribes and Pharisees find in him when they observe him healing and, by the same token, forgiving sins: 'Who can forgive sins on earth, save God alone?' (2,7). And Jesus remains silent because the scribes and Pharisees have observed precisely the thing which is the whole object of the operation, notably that God is now no longer performing his actions in heaven because Jesus is doing them on earth.⁵

Obedience to God

Jesus's concern at one level is to recall Israel to obedience to God. The God of Jesus in this sense is the God of the Commandments. It is necessary that the Commandments be heeded and obeyed. 'Whoever does the will of God is my brother, sister, mother' (3,35). The religious rulers are condemned because they 'leave the commandment of God' and hold to their own traditions (7,8), 'rejecting the commandment of God' (7,9), 'making the word of God void through your traditions' (7,13). People can be 'not on the side of God' (8,33). People must 'render to God the things (or the money!) of God' (12,17). As the Pharisees and Herodians observe, Jesus 'truly teaches the way of God' (12,14). Jesus criticizes his opponents as they know neither the scriptures nor the power of God (12,24).

The rich young man (10,17-22) and the scribe (12,28-34) are classic instances of the way in which obedience to God and God's law functions as the 'first stage' in Jesus's mission. The rich young man has kept the commandments from his youth (10,18-20). Jesus, looking on him, loved him (10,21). But he then receives the invitation to discipleship which he cannot meet (10,21-22). The scribe 'understands' the two great commandments of love to God and neighbour (12,29-33). Jesus sees that he answered wisely (12,34). But he is still only near to, not part of, the Kingdom of God (12,34).

Thus, the strategy of Jesus is, at the primary level, to seek

to confirm people in the commandments. Those who obey the commandments of God are to be loved and respected. Obedience to God is the basic starting line in Jesus's scheme of things.

However, Jesus's special project is designed to cater for those who *cannot* be obedient to God, for those who are excluded from the system of commandments and obedience. All the kinds of individuals whom the system excludes, Jesus brings in—a madman (1,23-27), a leper (1,40-42), a paralytic (2,1-12), publicans and sinners (2,15-17), law-breaking disciples (2,23-27), a man with a withered hand (3,1-5).

Finally, Jesus turns his attention to the system itself. One by one, the essential economic, political and ideological aspects of the system are dismantled: marriage and divorce (10,1-12), wealth (10,17-27), political power (10,41-45), the Temple (11,12-25; 12,1-12), imperial taxes (12,13-17), Jewish Law (12,28-35), scribal authority (12,38-40), Temple power (13,1-2). Israel, the fig-tree, is sterile (11,12-14; 20-24). The great questions can no longer be answered within its terms (11,27-33). The vineyard is to be given to others (12,1-11). No wonder they look for a way to arrest him (12,12).⁶

The conclusion is inevitable. Obedience to God can no longer be allied to the system of the Old Testament as it works out in practice. Obedience to God has to be supplemented by discipleship to Jesus.

Jesus as the new image

The tradition of discipleship in Mark's Gospel has found many interpreters recently. The main lines are clear and need not be summarized here.⁷

What becomes relevant to our present purpose is at a slightly different level. It is to observe how the aspects of discipleship to Jesus base themselves on similar aspects in the work and activity of Jesus. That is to say, Jesus seems not only to replace or supplement obedience to God with discipleship to himself. He also appears, at least in Mark's view, to be substituting himself for God as the model or paradigm which has to be followed. Obedience to Jesus supplants discipleship to the commandments.

This becomes clear even in some of the terminology which Mark uses. Jesus's leaving home and family (3,31-35) demands and explicates the disciples' actions when they 'leave' (*aphentes*) their nets (1,18), their relatives and workmen (1,20), their home

(1,29-31), indeed, 'everything' (10,28). Jesus's receiving new relatives (3,35) implies and explains the 'hundred times more' brothers, sisters, mothers, and children which the disciples receive (10,30). Jesus's dependence upon the generosity of others (15,41) is a model for theirs (6,8-11). He engages in preaching (*keryssein*) (1,38-39) as do they (3,14; 6,12). His message of repentance (1,14-15) is at least in part a model for theirs (6,12). 'Gospel' (*evangelion*) can be used for Jesus's preaching (1,15) and for theirs (8,35; 10,29). His method of healing might well have been imitated when they, like him, 'cast out devils (*daimonia ekballein*) and anointed with oil many sick, and healed them' (*daimonia ekballein* of Jesus 1,34;39; of disciples 3,15; 6,13; *therapeuo*, heal, of Jesus 1,34; 3,2-10; 6,5; of disciples 6,13). His destiny of suffering (8,31) determines theirs (8,34-36). His rejection by his own people (3,20-30) prepares the way for their rejection (13,9-13). He has 'no leisure to eat' (3,20) because of his mission, and the same is true of the twelve (6,31). His being 'beside himself' (3,21) accounts for their 'messianic enthusiasm' (10,37). His being lord through being servant (10,45) demands theirs (10,42-44). His losing his life (10,45; 15,31) is the way they must lose life and thereby find it (8,35).

Thus, the image of Jesus functions for disciples in a similar way to that in which the commandments of God functioned for the faithful Israelite.

Discipleship to Jesus as image for obedience

The final stage in the process is the stage whereby, in totally different contexts, the image of Jesus as the disciples' Master becomes suggestive or determinative for contemporary behaviour and mission.

This piece of agenda is probably more present in all our studies than we usually recognize. As I said at the outset, we do not in fact talk about images—of God or of Christ—without already in our minds having some notions about what we can use them for. Indeed, writing in the area of biblical studies—that with which I am most familiar—invariably makes some kind of 'leap of faith' between contemporary understandings now, on the one hand, and biblical understandings in biblical times, on the other. One need only recall the dramatic changes in biblical studies over the last century to know that this is true.

Yet it does not mean that theological or biblical elements are simply used and abused to provide images for contemporary styles

and assumptions. There is a perceivable dialogue taking place, and there are edges at which one knows if too much is being claimed, or at which the images have been totally transformed. I used the use of the image of 'almighty' to make the point earlier. Now, I have to say that the usable images of Jesus are those which can confirm or critique certain aspects of contemporary culture and lifestyle, but yet within a recognizable and more or less historical frame.

A year or two ago, I became convinced that the contemporary image by which Jesus might have been known today, or at least by which he could make an appropriate re-entry, was that of the Radical. Nearly twenty years ago, I had worked with the notions of the Secular, and tried to re-tell the story of Mark's Jesus in that milieu. I had more recently become convinced that the image of Liberator, popular though it was elsewhere in the world, would only be perverted to suit vested interests if it were employed here, separated from Jesus's work as Bondman or Bondage-bringer, or Bondage-creator. So I am working at a theology for Britain in terms of 'Bondage and Liberation' (to appear hopefully in 1987). But the image that seemed to be the one which linked most naturally the story of Jesus in Mark and my own convictions and experiences in contemporary discipleship to Jesus was that of Radical. The image of Radical thus both disciplined the material in Mark, and the material from my world today. A creative dialogue between the two contexts is facilitated by the adoption of a dominant image which seems to make sense at both ends, and which one then 'tries on'.

Only in this kind of way can Jesus actually function as an image for discipleship or obedience. The test is, of course, what comes out at both ends. Do the lines of contemporary discipleship, which purport to derive from the biblical or theological storehouse, in fact come alive by means of the mediating image? In the end, I simply have to say that it works for me. Hopefully, it might work for others, or, even better, provoke them into creating something better. I close with a piece from that book.

Taking Pages from Jesus's Book

(The first three of twelve.)

1 Jesus represents new possibilities for people.

Jesus invariably brings something novel into situations.

- Jesus provides ways for a person to move, to change,
to discover, to revolutionize.
Jesus shows how people can be used.
- This means that we have to provide 'ways of escape',
that we have to point people to different methods and
directions,
that we dig holes for people to fall into, prepare
support mechanisms for failure,
that I am free to be used by others.
- 2 Jesus shares himself with others, is person-oriented.
Jesus seeks out individuals, involves himself in indi-
vidual situations.
Jesus goes to the people and deals with them one by
one.
- This means that we are to give ourselves to people,
that we have to seek out those who need and who
need the most,
that we are not discipled to ideas, or beliefs or
principles,
that I am free to give myself in an attitude of love.
- 3 Jesus goes to the poor and outcast.
Jesus feasts with groups and individuals who are
excluded from normal society.
Jesus forms a movement of the poor.
Jesus holds up the happiness of the poor as judgement
and mercy for all.
- This means that the disenfranchised or neglected are our special
concern,
that outsiders need to claim Jesus and the Kingdom
in their own way,
that the poor are the people of God's special care,
that I must learn from the poor.⁸
Jesus as God sets humanity the problem and the
opportunity of representing a Radical God. Jesus
gives us, indeed, a God who is free and ready for
us; a God who is person-oriented, self-sharing, like
a friend; and a God who excludes no-one, and is
available to the poor, to those with nothing to
bring. Jesus gives us a God who is 'Fast, friendly
and usually free'.

NOTES

¹ Cf John and Grace Vincent, *TSB: The New Future* (Trustees Saving Bank Depositors Association, 239 Abbeyfield Road, Sheffield S4 7AZ; June 1986).

² Donahue, John R.: 'A neglected factor in the theology of Mark', *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 101.4 (1982), pp 563-594.

³ Vincent, John J.: *Radical Jesus* (Marshall Pickering, 1986), pp 73-76.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp 31f.

⁵ Vincent, John J.: *Secular Christ* (Lutterworth Press, 1968), p 88.

⁶ *Radical Jesus*, pp 77-78.

⁷ Cf Ernest Best, *Following Jesus: discipleship in the Gospel of Mark* (SNTS Supplement Series, 4, 1981); W. H. Kelber, 'Apostolic tradition and the form of the Gospel', in F.F. Segovia, ed., *Discipleship in the New Testament* (Fortress Press, 1985), pp 24-46.

⁸ *Radical Jesus*, pp 97f.