

IMAGE OF THE INVISIBLE GOD

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IMAGES EMBODY. On the desk in front of me as I write is a coloured photograph of two hands. The emaciated skin-and-bone hand of a starving black child lies in the palm of a plump, well-nourished white hand. Images can embody a world of meanings. In the sense in which I am using 'images' here, they are the expression of one reality, or set of realities, through the medium of another:

This man, with lanthorn, dog and bush of thorn
Presenteth Moonshine . . .¹

Besides embodying meaning, images also evoke and even demand a response. In Chaim Potok's beautiful novel, *My name is Asher Lev*, it is images that provoke the final breach between the hero and his father. Asher, a painter, invites his father, a committed, active member of the Hasidim, to an exhibition of his work. This Jewish artist, brought up in the Brooklyn Hasidic community, has painted a series of crucifixion scenes with his mother as the crucified figure. His father reluctantly comes to the exhibition, takes one glance at the pictures, turns and walks out. Images are also as natural to language as is sound, and the world is full of images, of realities which to a greater or lesser extent embody other realities.

These characteristics of images provide us with some of the reasons why the metaphor—and it is a metaphor—of Jesus Christ as image of God is helpful and even necessary for Christian discipleship. St Paul was the first Christian theologian to use the metaphor (eg Col 1,15–20; 2 Cor 3,12–18) and later writers have built on his foundation. In Jesus Christ God presents humanity with a unique and definitive image of God's own being through the medium of a human life and death. A key provides a way into a map and the country it represents. Here I am using the metaphor of images and the experience of contemplating images as a way into exploring the image of the invisible God put before us in

Christ. This approach also highlights the metaphor of the image of God as a point at which some converging lines in theology and christian experience meet—two dimensions of Christianity which have not always admitted to having much in common.

The glory of God in the face of Christ

A contemplative experience that is shared by many people who regularly engage prayerfully with the New Testament can help us to look more closely at Jesus Christ, image of the invisible God. Not a few people find that if they pray with the gospels, pondering, meditating, contemplating, reflecting on gospel scenes and passages over a lengthy period of time, noticeable changes begin to take place in themselves. These changes include new insights, new ways of understanding Jesus, God, themselves, the world and other people. But changes also occur which affect their deep personal values and attitudes and their patterns of behaviour. Experiences such as these may start in a retreat, for example, or some other setting in which one is engaging more attentively than usual with the gospels. And if the practice of meditation or contemplation continues in daily life, the changes are likely to be far-reaching: old values are lost and new ones found; aims and ambitions that once were very important now give way to different ones; new commitments replace old ones, while former attractions and preoccupations seem slight in the face of this new engagement. Usually the process is a gradual one.

Imaginative prayer based on the gospels, as in the ignatian practice of contemplation, can be a catalyst for this process of change. Here the person who prays enters imaginatively and personally into the gospel story and the history of Jesus. Experience shows that this kind of prayer can be powerful in forming the attitudes and values of a disciple. Beyond superficial emotions and interesting insights, deeper levels of feeling and affectivity are stirred and attitudes are touched and changed by way of the imagination.

This kind of contemplation is analogous to different aesthetic experiences. It can be as absorbing and immediate as reading a novel or listening to music. In some ways it is like watching a play or a film, while the one who prays is no passive spectator. It is like contemplating a picture, though the picture is not a static one but a story, and throughout there is a constant involvement with the persons and events of the story. It is a formative learning

experience in which the person who contemplates is shaped in the ways of Christ by looking at, listening to, attending to the image of God given to us in Christ Jesus.

Relationship to Christ, image of God

The relationship between Christ and the individual who contemplates this image of God is a complex one. It is nowadays a truism, but nonetheless important to bear in mind, that we do not have unmediated access to the Jesus of history. We relate to Jesus Christ both as a long dead historical person and also as a living reality. Our knowledge of him as image of God is mediated to us in numerous different ways. It comes to us, for example, through the faith experience of the early christian communities as expressed in the New Testament. It also reaches us through the countless images of Jesus that we have met on the way, and the traditions about Jesus that we have absorbed. And we interpret all these from our own personally and culturally limited viewpoint. These and other influences feed into and perhaps even distort our perceptions of Christ, the image of the unseen God, and our ways of being in relation to that still living image. This 'subjectivity', however, does not of itself invalidate our images of Christ nor our relationship with him who is in a definitive way the image of God. Part of the process of growth in discipleship, for us as for the original Twelve (Mk 8,17), is progressively and gradually to allow our images of Christ to be purified, clarified and corrected, and our relationship with him to be less and less subject to distortion.

The contemplation I have described and the relationship with Christ that it fosters help us to reflect on the 'image of the invisible God'. The theology based on this metaphor contains two main movements. There is a movement of God towards humanity in which the hidden and invisible God expresses God's own being in a definitive and 'ultimately satisfying' image² in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of the man Jesus of Nazareth. This image, however, is not simply a revelation intended merely for our intellectual enlightenment. God's action in expressing God's own reality in the image of Jesus Christ is a saving action, initiating a saving relationship between God and humanity. So the second movement is a movement of transformation in which the Christian grows in turn into an image of Christ. Both these two movements are present in the contemplative experience that I have been discussing: a recognition that Jesus Christ embodies God in a

unique, unrepeatable form and a contemplation of that image which gradually effects saving change.

It would be a mistake to reduce this process to an external and somewhat superficial 'imitation of Christ'. What is hoped for is not some kind of literal re-presentation of the words and actions and lifestyle of Jesus. Nor it is a matter of 'applying' the teachings of Jesus literally and directly to one's own circumstances. The process is both more subtle and more profound, a matter of organic growth by which I allow the gospel story and values to shape my story and my values.

When I was a young religious (and *very* young too), there was only one book which was required daily reading. It was not the bible, not even the gospels, nor the writings of Ignatius Loyola, but the *Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis. A Kempis presents Jesus, image of God and of true christian living, as an ideal model and tends to adopt the approach that the Christian conforms his or her life to that pattern largely by effort, asceticism, will and discipline, in order to fit the mould. The weakness of this approach is that it takes little account of the subjective elements in growth in discipleship. By that I mean the individual or shared gifts in their particular configurations, or the personality and personal circumstances of the individual Christian which come to the surface in imaginative contemplation based on the gospels and which are the seeds of a more organic kind of growth. It is fundamentally through communion with the living Christ that the disciple is gradually transformed into an image of the Son.³

There have been times in the history of christian theology and christian life when people have wanted to go, as it were, outside and beyond the image of God that is to be found in Jesus Christ, as though to have some 'purer' or 'more direct' knowledge or experience of God than is possible by means of this historical, flesh-and-blood image. This search would seem to imply a usually unrecognized underlying belief that the image of God in Christ is an impoverishment of God and that contact with God beyond images, if such were possible, would be more desirable. My reflections so far in this article would suggest that this is a mistaken trend, albeit perhaps an attractive one. It stems partly from our recurring penchant for dualisms of various kinds (body/soul, human/divine, spiritual/material) and a tendency to take for granted that what is 'spiritual' in the sense of non-material or disembodied is somehow higher or better than what is embodied. This goes

along with the view that so-called imageless thought, language and prayer are better than images when it is a matter of knowing or experiencing God.

Images embody, it has to be remembered. If we follow up the analogy of the arts, the way to grasp and appreciate the meaning embodied in a painting or other work of art is not to try to step outside the painting itself into some other world of 'disembodied' meaning, but to become steeped in the created work, the image itself. In his original and highly interesting study of the mystery of Christ through visual imagery, Aidan Nichols quotes a telling saying of Max Beckmann: 'To get hold of the invisible, penetrate as deeply as possible into the visible'.⁴ The visible image of God that is Jesus Christ embodies the richness of God. In our salvific contact with God, the way to approach the divine is to penetrate as deeply as possible into the images in which God has freely chosen to embody the Godhead. In fact we have no other access to the divine apart from these embodiments. In terms of johannine theology: 'To have seen me is to have seen the Father' (Jn 14,9; cf also 1 Jn 1,1-4).

The shape of the image

Jesus Christ who is the living image of God is neither simply the 'Jesus of history' nor simply the 'Christ of faith', if by that we mean a focus of faith separate from the historical Galilean. The Jesus Christ, image of God, to whom we relate in prayer as in other areas of life, is the living, 'whole', past, present and future Christ of the christian Church and tradition.

If Jesus Christ is eminently the living icon of God, it should be possible to describe those features of that icon that most truly embody the divine, to outline the shape of the image that reveals God. The historical Jesus of Nazareth is clearly part of the image in which the fulness of God is expressed. In all his actions and words, Jesus discloses God, and this disclosure appears most clearly in those significant actions and gestures which made up the fundamental structure of his life. Though, as we have seen, we do not have unmediated access in knowledge and experience to the historical Jesus of Nazareth, just as we do not have unmediated access to any historical person who has died, and though there is no extant biography of Jesus, still we can find in the gospels the essential lineaments of his life, the essential features of this icon of God.⁵

The actions and words of Jesus express a particular kind of love. It is a love which leads him to call disciples and associates, to seek out those who are lost, marginalized, poor and suffering, and to confront evil in all its variegated colours. His life also expresses in God's name an extraordinary kind of forgiveness, and his characteristic attitudes are to save rather than destroy, to choose life and growth rather than death and diminishment. In all this, astonishingly, he acts as a servant, while at the same time with authority and power. In these essential lineaments of his life, Jesus makes God present bodily. The Fourth Gospel's way of presenting Jesus as an image of God is to show him in all things turned towards the Father (Jn 4,34), in order to make clear to all the glory of the Father (Jn 17,1). His life was a doxology of the Father.⁶

Image of God in the Cross

The shameful death of Jesus as a criminal and subversive is an inalienable and to many a shocking part of the image of God portrayed in Christ. As the history of Jesus of Nazareth unfolded, his death had a place in that history as one way in which he embodied God. In the history of christian piety and spirituality, there have been attempts, ultimately mistaken, to separate the image of the cross from its context in the life of Jesus. But images find meaning and are rightly interpreted in a particular context. The crucifixion image at the climax of Chaim Potok's novel that I referred to earlier finds its particular meaning and impact from its context in the life of a hasidic jewish family. Outside that context its meaning and impact would be different. So it is with the death of Jesus and the image of his cross. They find meaning and evoke responses within the context of the life of Jesus and the faith of the Church. The cross then is not the totality of the image of God but a part of it, a part of the story of Jesus which itself is a dimension of the 'image of the unseen God'.

This is important if our spirituality of the cross is to be truly christian. Inadequate theology gives rise to inadequate spirituality. There are distortions in spirituality as there are in doctrine. When the cross and the death of Jesus are isolated from his life and ministry, the spirituality that emerges runs into dangers. The dangers are those of distorting the image of God that is embodied in the cross: as expressing, for example, a God who wants suffering and death for its own sake; or a God who, like an offended tyrant,

demands the death of the Son as expiation for sin. Such images of God distort and contradict that expressed in the ministry of Jesus.

By his words and actions in his ministry Jesus presented the people and their leaders with a particular image of God which has marks of personal originality ('not like the scribes'). This image was so substantially different from the image to which many of the people and their leaders were committed that they considered it a serious threat to their power and well-being. So Jesus had to be eliminated. For him to have abandoned that image of God would have meant betraying the love which his life expressed as an inseparable attribute of the being of his God. It would have meant betraying his disciples as well as the poor, the marginalized and the needy people, to whom especially he had offered this God. So closely did his proclaimed image of God reflect his own experience that to abandon it would have been a self-betrayal, a denial of the foundation on which his life was built. Since the death and cross of Jesus are also signs of love 'to the uttermost' (Jn 13,1), they stand out as the climax and consummation of the ministry of Jesus in which God's love was embodied.

Christ and his community

The historical person Jesus formed irrevocable bonds with other human beings, and through them with humanity at large, some of whom became his disciples, his community. An insight of Karl Barth can help us at this point to reflect further on another dimension of Jesus Christ as 'image of the invisible God'.⁷ Jesus Christ cannot be separated from the body, the community, of which he is the head. Barth uses an illustration from Genesis 1-2. Just as the man and the woman *together*, in the creation story, are created in the image of God, so also Christ and his community *together* are the image of God in whom the fulness of God is revealed.⁸ This opens up an important dimension of the image of God in Christ. It would be a mistake to see the historical Jesus as image of God in isolation from the personal and social relationships which he formed. Similarly the reality which we call 'Jesus Christ' is more than the events and relationships directly encompassed in the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth. This Christ is a living, present reality. Jesus Christ and his community *together* form the image of the unseen God.

Earlier I described some features of a relationship between the individual Christian and the image of God in Christ. This relation-

ship is open to two limitations which are important at the present time. The first is the risk that the relationship becomes what might be called 'monadic'. The individual Christian is naturally concerned with how the story of Jesus chimes in with his or her own personal story. This obviously reaches out into relationships with other people. But it is also vital not to forget the communitarian and wider social dimensions of discipleship. A second limitation, also more keenly felt at the present time than it used to be, has to do with the fact that in contemplating the gospels both women and men are invited to let their own personal stories harmonize with that of Jesus who as a historical person was male. It is asking women to accept that God be mediated to them in a definitive and radical way by a male image.

The notion that Christ and his community together form the image of the unseen God can help to meet these limitations, because it clearly has social and political consequences. It implies that Christians are in process of *becoming* images of God through belonging to the community of the Christ. It also implies that not only are individuals but also the community as a community is in process of becoming the definitive image of God which is the 'whole Christ'. Similarly, the community of Christ, in its relationships, structures and institutions, as well as in the individual lives of its members, has the responsibility of working to embody, precisely as a community, the justice and love of God. Imaging God has to include social and political structures and institutions as essential dimensions of the image by which God is embodied.

Jesus Christ and his community together, in their different ways, are called to embody God. Both women and men make up that community. These facts suggest further thoughts. Firstly, male and female members of the community are invited to be different and complementary images of God. The richness and fulness of God are not adequately represented by men or women alone. And secondly, women and men not only express in different forms the one reality of God but they also image different dimensions of the total fulness of God. In other words, perhaps there are some aspects of the reality of God which can only be imaged in the lives and beings of women, and others which can only be imaged in the lives and beings of men, so that together and with Christ as head they add up to a more adequate disclosure of God.

The Cross and the community

The image of God in the crucified Jesus also finds a place here. Jesus became more completely an embodiment of God through his ministry and through his suffering, death and resurrection. This was how the being of God was disclosed in the history of a particular individual who expressed God in an eminent and definitive form. This suggests that the same pattern of loving to the end, involving dying and rising, is the way by which the community of Christ as a community becomes, with its head, a fuller image of God. The particular forms which this pattern takes vary, of course, according to time and place, but Jesus has established the pattern. And the christian community, when it is faithful to its head, will be in danger of death when it embodies as a community, that is, in its social and political structures, an image of God which is likely to be seen as a threat by others, especially the powerful ones who use false images of God to maintain their power. In this sense in many places the community of Christ is still very much *becoming* an image of God, becoming a christian community.

Poets and storytellers as well as visual artists, theologians and film-makers are at home with images. Because images embody various meanings at once, they allow a poet to make multiple statements with a single image. William Langland's figure of Piers Plowman, in 'the most christocentric poem ever written',⁹ expresses beautifully in a single image several statements about Christ and his community as images of God. Jesus Christ, for Langland, is the ultimate expression of God's goodness as first shown in creation. He keeps appearing in the poem in various guises. Gradually it becomes clear, as the poem progresses, that Piers is an image of all humanity, and especially of those who are poor, and that Christ and Piers are one and the same figure.

Christ from heaven, in a poor man's apparel, pursueth us ever.¹⁰

Jesus comes to Calvary to 'joust in Piers armes'.¹¹ The gradual merging of these images in the course of the poem is the poet's way of stating with great subtlety and beauty the identification of Christ and the members, especially the poor members, of his community to form the image of God.

I began this article with the process of contemplating the image of God as represented by Jesus of the gospels and the gradual and profound transforming influence of that contemplation. After that

we looked at other dimensions of the image of God in Christ, so that the focus and material of our contemplation has been broadened. The inner city and the crowded train are places for contemplating the image of God, where people who belong to Christ embody the divine. That is not naïve piety, nor wilful blindness to reality. It is not pretending that every aspect of being human discloses the divine, nor denying the reality of evil. We can resist being images of God; we are free to refuse to grow. We can also, more usually, want and try to be images of God without appearing to succeed very well. But the theology of the image of God suggests that we find God by true 'christian materialism',¹² that is to say by penetrating as deeply as possible into what is truly human, because it is there, with Christ as head, 'the firstborn of all creation', that the divine is most conspicuously embodied.

NOTES

¹ Shakespeare, William: *A midsummer night's dream*, Act 5, scene 1.

² Nichols, Aidan: *The art of God incarnate*, (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1980), p 30. I am in debt to this rich book for many of the ideas in this article.

³ Orthodox theology stresses that this transformation takes place by God's gratuitous gift and puts little emphasis on human effort. For modern Orthodox reflections on Christ as image of God, see Lossky, Vladimir: *In the image and likeness of God*, (Mowbrays, 1974), pp 125-140.

⁴ Nichols, *op. cit.*, p 12.

⁵ Cf Nichols, *op. cit.*, pp 121-124.

⁶ Cf E. Stauffer, *New Testament theology*, (London, 1955) discussed by Nichols, *op. cit.*, p 124.

⁷ Barth, Karl: *Church dogmatics*, vol III, part 1, trans. by J. W. Edwards, O. Bussey and H. Knight (T. and T. Clarke, Edinburgh, 1958), pp 191-206.

⁸ Christians have different views about what constitutes membership of the community of Christ, and this is not the place to rehearse them. It can be argued that all human beings, simply by being human, belong in a fundamental way to Christ, since he too is human, and all are called to salvation.

⁹ Bennett, J. A. W.: *Poetry of the Passion*, (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1982), p 85.

¹⁰ Langland, William: *Piers Plowman*, B, xi, 180.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, xviii, 22.

¹² Leech, Kenneth: *The social God*, (Sheldon Press, London, 1981), pp 25-38.