

IMAGES OF GOD AND PRAYER

By KATHLEEN MCGHEE

IN A SINGLE sentence Shakespeare succinctly but eloquently sums up the whole theology of redemption. Portia addresses Shylock across the courtroom: 'Wherefore, Jew, though justice be thy plea, consider this: in the course of justice none of us would see salvation.' Would that many more Christians today could share this clarity of insight; would that many more could grasp this essential gospel message, that we do not get from God what we deserve, but rather what we need. The message is simple; the news is good. It is simply this: we are loved. We are loved unreservedly with an unqualified love: being a sinner does not count us out of this love, for integral to it and inseparable from it is forgiveness. God forgives, not because we deserve it, earn it or have any right to it: he forgives because he loves.

This may seem all very obvious when enunciated boldly as a theological position: simplistic, perhaps, to some but basically what we have all been teaching and preaching always, or at least from the enlightened time of Vatican II. Those of us who are engaged in pastoral care of one sort or another—priests with the care of parishes and those who are involved in the ministeries of spiritual guidance or counselling, in the confessional or in retreats, for example—are all too aware, however, that while the message has been well taught and well preached, it has not always been well grasped and many lives are yet untouched by this, the greatest of all truths.

To join the liturgical assembly and proclaim with gusto, 'We believe in one God' is a relatively easy task and one which many of us engage in, thoughtfully or unthoughtfully, every week. It forms the backcloth of our lives and is questioned only in moments of darkness, confusion or in the intimate company of friends when the topic 'God' dare be raised. Then we often find ourselves demanding or searching for an answer to the question, 'What do I know?' rather than witnessing to the 'I believe' that we casually proclaim Sunday after Sunday. To want to know, to understand, to weigh and to measure, to touch and to feel, these are our

inclinations. Yet since the day Thomas proclaimed, 'Unless I put my fingers into the holes, unless I see I will not believe', centuries of scholarship have gone into the exploration and explanation of what God is, and still it does not serve. Reason was ever insufficient: all we know is that thinking alone will never bring us to a satisfactory understanding of God—satisfying that is to the very core of our being. It cannot penetrate the darkness, it cannot plumb the deep recesses of the human heart, or climb the mountains of the human mind, let alone fathom the 'being-ness' of God.

We know and we believe and we preach that the process was never thus: that it has to do with engagement, with intimacy and with love more than with knowledge; that it is of the heart and not just of the head; that it is in relationship with person and not concept that we begin to glimpse not what but who God is: 'If you have seen me, you have seen the Father' (John 14, 9). So we preach and we teach the Christ, the revelation of the Father, and still we meet the 'strange gods' before us, and know that the 'golden calves' and the 'brazen idol' are alive and well among us. They come in twentieth-century costume, but they are there. God, the big bank manager, with a great abacus in the sky engaged in the everlasting task of debiting and crediting, eagerly anticipating not a monthly but a daily balance, to see if today's shortfall puts this poor mortal in the black or the red. Or again, God, the superior kind of hostess who politely but firmly watches her guests' behaviour, unashamedly correcting any social misdemeanours with the threat of ultimate exclusion should the norms be not observed in the future. Worse, God the disinterested mega-ruler, whose preoccupations, whatever they are, totally absorb him, while the struggle of mere mortals, whom he claims to have created, mean nothing more to him than an irritating and faint noise in the background.

We could all go on and on, reproducing examples of the kind of false Gods that we meet every day in our ministries. And we know we will continue to struggle chipping away at the crude images of God, in the hope that one day someone, somewhere will pull down the false idol and get a glimpse of the true God through our efforts.

But what of us? What of those of us who are the iconoclasts, and who genuinely believe that the God we preach and teach is the Father revealed in Christ? Is the God we give to others the God who lives in our own hearts? Is the God we preach the God

we live by? Or do the bogey-men still lurk, even for us, the readers of *The Way*?

Since it is with such teachers and preachers that much of my ministry is now concentrated in the apostolate of the Spiritual Exercises, I would like to give a few examples of the kind of situation that arises not infrequently when the active apostles take some time off to make a retreat, long or short, and to seek the God of their own lives in the silence of their own hearts and in the very depths of their own beings.

All the details of the following cases, names, places, years and the like are purely fictitious as they must be in the interests of confidentiality. Nevertheless the stories themselves are true.

Tom is a secular priest, ordained thirty years ago and now parish priest of an inner-city parish. At the time of the Council and after, he was of an age and had the opportunity to become very involved in working for change and his dream was to create a new Church for the future. He wanted more than anything else to be, in his own words, 'an agent of liberation for people who were suffering from the oppressive structures in the Church'. For twenty-five years he plodded away at doing just that, in spite of the rise and fall in enthusiasm about him and in spite of diminishing support of Church authorities and even from many of his fellow priests. During those years, he took every opportunity that he could afford in time and money to keep himself up to date with developing social and economic change, and remained faithful to his own resolve to preach a God of love who forgave, who liberated and who did not place burdens around the necks of his people. He came to make a directed retreat because he was now experiencing his own need to integrate and then to create some space for himself in the midst of a very active and demanding life. All went well until one day a passage from the prophets which mentioned the anger of God brought forth from him the most violent reaction. Given the extent of his exegetical knowledge, and indeed the amount of self-knowledge he appeared to have, his director was puzzled, especially since he refused point-blank to stay with his own anger or to pray the Old Testament anymore. A couple of days later, seemingly settled but still unresolved, he was praying the Baptism of the Lord. When his director suggested that the Father was saying 'This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased' not only to Jesus but to Tom also, he was quite shattered. What emerged after that was both painful and revealing for him.

It became obvious to him that while he preached a God of love and believed passionately in this God for his people, the God of his own life was really much more like the rector of an old-fashioned seminary, the house-rules open at his right hand and the moral theology textbook open at his left, glaring at him over a large desk. In struggling so hard against a system that he saw to be unjust, that very system had for him somehow become identified with God, so that the God of the prophets, for example, the God who told a wayward people to shape up for their own good, was simply intolerable for him.

For Tom the time of retreat was but a first step. The giant leap that he needed to make in his own concept of God and the integration that needed to take place between his preaching and his own living could not happen overnight; but it was a start, and the process of liberation of Tom, whatever of his people, had begun. At least his level of awareness had been raised, and that is often the first step. He could allow the God that he preached so well to look at him now and say:

Here is my servant whom I uphold,
my chosen one in whom my soul delights.
I have endowed him with my spirit
that he may bring true justice to the nations.

(Isai 42, 1)

Tom is typical of many of the good people, lay as well as clerical, that I meet in my everyday ministry. These are the apostles who have been working hard and long to help others say 'Jesus is risen', the Christ is alive and brings peace and joy into the struggle of life. Somehow or other, in their efforts, this Christ has escaped them; the pressures have been so great, the space so limited that time has always been for others with little left for themselves. They have had to be strong to persevere in their efforts for the kingdom: they could not afford to get in touch with their own weakness and poverty so that when it creeps up on them in mid-years it can be shattering, very disillusioning and leave them feeling not only forlorn and abandoned but very guilty as well. While they have been loving everyone else they have often forgotten how to love themselves, losing sight therefore of the essential truth that God loves them not because of what they do but because of who they are.

Another example of this came in the person of Margaret. She was a woman in her middle forties, who had spent the last twenty years of her life as an apostolic religious, nursing mainly in hospital situations. For the twelve years before I met her she had been working on a community health-education programme. This involved her, mostly with small groups of women, helping them to come to an awareness of the physical and psychological needs of themselves and their families and how to deal with these needs. Most of the women were in one-parent family situations and many of them had very little support beyond that which was provided by the state. As a result of doing this work, Margaret had also started, in her free time, what she called 'Christian Groups'. This was in response to the need that she experienced in some of her clients for some kind of religious and more specifically spiritual sharing.

On the surface, then, Margaret, coming along for her annual eight-day retreat, looked like a caring hard-working apostle whose life was pretty much together and for whom this yearly event was simply an opportunity to put some spaces into a fairly busy schedule. And since she seemed to have made the transition from hospital life to this less institutionalised type of work with great ease, it did not look as though this retreat would be all that different from any of her previous ones. So it was for the first couple of days. On the third day, her director suggested for her prayer, 'The Call of the Apostles' from St John's Gospel. Since the sureness of her own call was not in question in any way, the director also suggested that she use that particular day simply being with Jesus, and pray for a great sense of intimacy in his company. She could just 'go with him and spend the rest of the day with him' (Jn 1, 39).

Deep desolation followed, and a very agitated and distressed Margaret told her director the next day that being in intimate companionship with Jesus was the very thing that she could not bring herself to be. She was too ashamed of her own life to be that close to the Lord. It turned out that while she was working in a hospital environment her life was, in her own word, 'contained'. Everything and everyone, including God, had its place. The experience of her present work had turned all that on its head and she was beset with guilt that her life was so different from the lives of the women she was dealing with. She had so much and they had so little. It was not so much about material things that she

worried, however, but about people and relationships. Over the years she had built up good and important friendships with people she knew loved her and were there for her. Had she any right to this kind of security when these women had none of it? Moreover, the God of her life had also been 'in place' somehow in the ordered life that she led before. Now it felt as though some great victorian nanny in the sky was disapproving of her closeness to her friends and saying in a very reprovng way, 'This is not done: this is not how we behave'. Margaret was, in fact, very confused. And once more while she was trying to teach others that the God of love was the God of gift and life, she found herself denying the right to any love, gift or indeed life. The God she was preaching was not the God she was reaching. And life with all its pressures had prevented her from having the time or opportunity to integrate the God she believed in with the whole of her life. God was separate from the other elements and though she had been bringing a God of all things to people for years she had never actually found him for herself.

The retreat was very hard for Margaret and while only a little could be done in the course of a week she did come to some kind of peace with the belief that God loved her too, that her friends were his gifts and that unless she were alive through his gift, she really could not either grow in her own self-awareness or help others to grow as well.

Maybe the experiences of Tom and Margaret do not accurately correspond to your life or that of your friends but such examples occur so often in spiritual direction as to make me reflect that for many of us, unlike Portia, justice alone *does* remain our plea, at least for ourselves if not for others. While we are working hard at knocking down the false images that we describe as crude and death-dealing we are not in fact dealing with the subtle influences at work in our lives that prevent us from hearing for ourselves a God who cries through the prophet,

I led them with the reins of kindness, with leading strings of love.
I was like someone who lifts an infant close against his cheek;
 stooping down to him I gave his food, (Hos 11, 3-4)

nor in believing that this is being said to the sayer as well as to the listener.

It is beyond the scope of this article to offer solutions, and it would be arrogant on my part to suggest that there are easily

obtainable panaceas to be handed over the counter or across the direction room. This is certainly not the case. However I offer two points for your further reflection which may take you some way in the journey to awareness of self and of God.

The first is to be aware of how much one is being faced, in pastoral work of all kinds, not only with other people's stories but with one's own; that the listening to tales of struggle both at a personal and cosmic level can be a confrontative force in one's own life whether one is aware of it or not; and that happens at a psychological level, an emotional level and most powerfully of all, at a spiritual level. However different the facts that are presented, some points will be echoing in the listener's own experience. Time and pressure do not usually allow all of this to be dealt with; but if it is not adverted to, this kind of constant confrontation can only be violent or destructive and leave us in grave danger of becoming very frightened of ourselves as well as of God. God becomes all mixed up with the confrontation and is absent for us from responses which we have taught ourselves to make to others.

The second point is related to this. We are constantly being told that we need more space in our lives, space for ourselves and space for God; that not finding it puts us under threat of burn-out. And this probably corresponds to how we actually feel for a lot of the time. The problem for many of us is that we cannot always find the space or if we do we have a lurking feeling that we do not use it as we should. So the search for this good and wholesome thing can in itself become yet another burden, yet another source of guilt. The knowledge that we neither play enough nor pray enough becomes another failure to add to our list. Once more our image of God becomes all mixed up in this: God comes out looking like the issuer of a government health warning.

This takes us back to the very beginning, to the distinction between what I know and what I believe. Being full of knowledge which I bring to bear with great effect for others, will not serve me. The question is, rather, can I believe that God is loving me *now*, whatever the pressure, whatever the confusion, and that he (or, by now, she) is in the lack of space, in the space for playing, as well as in the space for praying? And maybe that is the call: to believe that the loving God that I preach is to be discovered for myself when I am convinced that the journey I join for others and the journey for self-awareness is, in the end, the same journey and the only one on which I, too, will find a glimpse of the one, true God.

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 ambit 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.