

# WOMEN'S IMAGES OF GOD AND PRAYER

By JILL ROBSON

**R**ECENTLY I WAS asked to speak to a group about 'How a housewife looks at God'. I mentioned what I was doing to an older friend who is a minister's wife and said that I would be speaking about the spirituality that arose out of my experience. 'Oh yes. How nice, dear. Brother Lawrence and finding God among the cooking pots. Serving people by making cakes for the Lord. How nice'. From that remark I did not feel I could really go on and explain how reflection on my experience had, in fact, opened up an understanding of liberation theology, and that what I was going to say was altogether more radical and challenging. Yet this incident stuck in my mind. I kept coming back to it, reflecting just how strong and how insidious stereotypes and role expectations are. They even seep into our prayer.

I also found myself remembering another remark made to me about women and prayer when I was a (mature) undergraduate student. I was attending a third year course on christian spirituality, in which we were making a detailed study of the various stages of the purgative, illuminative and unitive ways. I was the only woman, all the other students were ordinands from the local theological college. Towards the end of the course our (male) lecturer was discussing the difficulties of making progress in contemplative prayer beyond a certain point, and in particular the difficulties of yielding to the will of God. He then smiled at me and said, 'Of course, my dear, women find it much easier than men; they have much more experience of passively yielding'. At the time I was really rather pleased by the remark. It was nice that here was something important that women were better at, and I was not offended by the rather coy sexual allusion. After all, this fitted in with the traditional model of the soul as 'she', the beloved, and God as active lover. And it is a matter of common observation that women do indeed do rather well in the praying business—a quick look at the large number of important women

mystics shows that. The only two women doctors of the Church, Saint Catherine of Siena and Saint Teresa of Avila, are but representatives of the cloud of other women who witness to the truth of the observation.

But now, some years later, I wonder if the reasons for women's greater prayerful commitment are quite the ones that have been put forward. Have our stereotypical, preconceived and traditional images of both women and God prevented us seeing something else very important about women's experience? How has that experience shaped women, their approach to God and their experience of God's approach to them? These are the questions that I would like to explore in this article.

But first I want to look at how images work, at the power they have to bind us into rigid ways of seeing God and the world, and to examine their power to loose us into a new vision of the world and thereby reveal new aspects of God.

*The power of images to bind and loose*

'Christians are formed by the way in which they pray, and the way they choose to pray expresses what they are'.<sup>1</sup> So the compilers of the new anglican *Alternative Service Book* have written and, at face value, this looks like an obvious truth, if not a truism. But how far is it true for women?

Women as well as men have had their experience of God shaped by the images of God that have been offered to them in the liturgy and in devotion. And, up till now, these images have been largely male, or at least masculine ones: king, judge, lord, mighty warrior, father, shepherd, rock, fire, a two-edged sword etc., These may only be images, metaphors or analogies that we use to speak of God, who is beyond all our concepts and beyond all the images that we can have. But images are powerful. They shape the way we understand and experience the world around us. Moreover, they shape how we understand (and experience) the God whom we do not see.<sup>2</sup>

God comes to us in and through our ordinary experience of everyday living, through the fabric of our daily lives. But we need ways to recognize this. Also we need ways to speak of it and think about it. As with any other complex or abstract idea, the way we come to understand what is spoken about is by the use of metaphors or images. It is by drawing analogies with our concrete and perceptual experience of ordinary life that we obtain abstract

general ideas. We come to understand just what sort of thing 'God' is by the same means. How else could we learn but by listening, looking and joining in with the way other people speak about and act towards God? We are inducted into ways of thinking about, and knowing God by exactly the same subtle, tacit processes as we learn about how to behave at table; and what you do and do not say in front of your grandmother. We learn to play the language-game.<sup>3</sup> We are socialized<sup>4</sup> into our images of God.

Of course, images also illuminate and liberate. An original image or a parable can unexpectedly shed new light on formless or unnoticed experience. Suddenly, 'Wham!' Two ideas or experiences collide and there is a new thing, a new way of understanding a situation or a new way of relating to it. The new insight may be so forceful that it sends you, clutching your bathrobe, charging down the street to tell everyone. Or the new juxtaposition of ideas may set your heart so burning within you that you need to rush back the way that you came to tell your despondent friends how things fit into a pattern you did not recognize before—now you can see an ordinary everyday action in a totally new way.

The disciples on the way to Emmaus (Luke 24,13-35) are particularly interesting because the reason that they were so disappointed was that the image which they had of the Messiah had been proved by events to be a useless and inadequate one. But the new image of the Christ as one who must necessarily suffer before he could enter into his glory, the image of the suffering servant, not a glorious national hero, suddenly made wonderful sense of their experience. They underwent a sudden *paradigm shift*<sup>5</sup> as great and as far-reaching as that undergone by those who accepted Copernicus's idea that the sun, not the earth, was the centre of the (known) universe.

Copernicus and his followers met with a lot of opposition—people did not want to look at the 'facts' in a new way. Nor did they want to have to make a new shape of their world or think about it in different ways. The image of the helio-centric universe, with humankind somewhere on the edge, did not appeal. In any case, at the time it was first proposed, the copernican paradigm did not fit the observable facts any better than did the earth-centred theory. But by daring to look at the facts in a new way, further, previously unnoticed aspects of the solar system were recorded, all of which added further evidence to the helio-centric theory. But the old image had to be broken before the full

significance of the anomalies in the observations could be appreciated.<sup>6</sup>

Jesus had the same trouble with his disciples. They found the images that he used too difficult to take. ““This is intolerable language. How could anyone accept it?” . . . After this many of his disciples left him and stopped going with him . . .’ (Jn 6,62 and 66). All this talk of eating bodies and drinking blood, it was more than flesh and blood could stand. Things have not changed. Suggest that we might think about the motherhood of God, as well as (not instead of) the fatherhood of God and all sorts of deeply committed Christians get very upset.<sup>7</sup> Some find this intolerable language: an impossible image. With images of God, as with parables, it is very much a case of those that have ears to hear let them hear.

### *Images of God*

The images of God that have been dominant in the christian tradition have stressed particular aspects of God. The aspects that have been stressed have reflected the salient aspects of the experiences of those who have had the shaping of those images, namely men. Men have written the liturgy, the Office, prayers of devotion. Men have written treatises on prayer, men have systematized and mapped out the spiritual life, men have been confessors and spiritual directors. And, inside and outside the Church, it is men who have defined the social world and said what is and is not important. Women have therefore been defined by men and have had to take on the roles men have outlined for them. Or, at best, they have been allowed to live in their own way in the bits left over—the bits that men are not interested in. Here they may have been able to define themselves but these areas are considered to be marginal and unimportant and therefore dismissable. This dismissiveness is, sadly, often equally true for women as for men, because women have taken on the patriarchal world view—they have had little choice.

By this process we have all lost out, men as much as women, because at least half of what God is has been veiled from our eyes. When God made humankind, *all* of it, women and men *together* reflected the image and likeness of God (Gen 1,27). Because we have concentrated on the image of God as reflected in man (and in practice that has been God’s image as reflected in *men*), we have neglected to explore how that image is reflected in woman.

And because we have not seen God in women's nature and experience, just as we have not seen women's nature and experience as normatively human, so we have not been able to see God's image in women and men *together*. For as yet we do not have a complete idea of what that full equality of all members of humankind would be like (cf Gal 3,27-29).

To return to the remarks of the editors of the *Alternative Service Book*, 'Christians have been formed by the way in which they pray': women and men have grown in prayer and been formed by relating to a one-sided reflection of God's image and likeness. But 'the way they chose to pray expresses what they are'. This may well be true for men but it is only true for women in their private non-liturgical prayer<sup>8</sup> and in so far as they have been able to escape from the shackles of patriarchal attitudes and stereotypes. For, by and large, the images of God offered them have not been directly related to their own experience of being a woman, nor to the things that are salient in their everyday lives. Women have found themselves relating to a male God in a rather up-market, spiritualized version of how they relate to the men in their lives. Or have they? Publicly, yes. But in private? Well . . .

### *Challenging images*

To return to the remarks I began with about 'the spirituality of a housewife as finding God among the cooking pots *à la* Brother Lawrence and baking cakes for the Lord' and the other suggestion that 'women know about passively yielding'. Both of these remarks reflect the unquestioned ideas and images of women that are currently around in our society, mediated by our language. But do they in fact relate to the reality of the experience?

I do not know whether it was the experience of my spirituality teacher that women did passively yield either to him or to God, or whether it was an expression of his fantasies or stereotypical thinking and not actually related to his lived experience. (I have no way of knowing and it would be improper to speculate.) But I do know that passive yielding has not particularly been a characteristic of my experience either in relation to men or to God. And listening to my sisters it does not seem to have been their most notable experience either. The reality of being a woman seems to involve so much more than lying back and thinking of England (or the heavenly Jerusalem). We are only just beginning to understand the true nature of women's sexuality, and to find our own

ways of being able to talk about it.<sup>9</sup> When that understanding is a little clearer, then it can be brought to bear upon the difficult and sensitive problem of how God's nature is reflected in women's sexual experience. But this is not the article for that discussion.

### *The housewife*

I would like to explore a slightly less hazardous, but still largely unmapped area, namely that of being a housewife. But here, too, there are unexpected thorn bushes growing among the cooking pots (handy for artistic arrangements and making crowns). In doing this I am asking the question, 'What is it like being a housewife and what does that experience reveal to us of the nature of God?' And following from that, 'What does it tell us about our (women's) relationship to God in prayer?'

The image of God as housewife is a thoroughly biblical one, but one that we do not hear preached about or developed as an aid to devotion very often. Certainly I had never heard it developed nor even noticed it until recent years, when christian feminists started reclaiming the bible. This in itself is interesting, because here is an image that Jesus himself used in teaching—but which has been ignored. We have all heard endless sermons on shepherds and sheep, but not on the diligent housewife (Lk 15,3-7 and 8-10). The man who bought a field for the treasure in it, or the pearl merchant, are, I suspect, more remembered than the housewife making bread (Mt 13,44-45; Lk 12,20). The poor widow and her mite have passed into the language. But we rarely reflect on her poverty and what that is saying to us about the kingdom of heaven—or the present plight of widows living on social security (Mk 12,41-44). The reason for this selective vision is that being a housewife is an area that is considered marginal and unimportant. Why? Because it is women's work.

In exploring the experience of being a housewife I hope I am taking an experience that most women will have had, in one way or another, and which most men will not have had. It is not just about what a housewife does. She cleans, dusts, looks after the house, cooks, washes, sews, decorates, acts as personal body-servant and does a million and one other things—for other people and for nothing. She is not paid. The tasks she does are considered menial and of little intrinsic value; many are repetitive, some monotonous. The majority of them are unseen and largely taken for granted by those for whom they are done. Society does not

greatly value the doer of these tasks. This is reflected in the lack of payment. Even when similar jobs are done for payment the wages and status are low.

Anybody who has been a housewife knows the humiliation of being dismissed as 'only a housewife'. It is, I suspect, like being unemployed—suddenly you have no status and therefore your opinions and your whole being can easily be dismissed as unimportant and of no account. Added to which you are a woman anyway, so you count for less. Not only is being a housewife seen as an unimportant or dismissable activity, it is also seen as a non-activity. 'Oh! I see you are at home all day, you don't have a job', as if running a household and looking after toddlers were not a real job.

When it comes to attitudes of the Church in this area there is an ambiguity of attitudes apparent. On the one hand the work of caring for others is valued as service and, as *diakonia*, may be taken as the metaphor for clerical ministry. But somehow being a real servant does not have the same kudos. The same ambiguity also applies to the role of caring for children: being a mother is valued as an important, vital role. But when it comes to being taken any notice of, or being taken at all seriously, then it is, yet again, a case of 'The ladies—God bless them. The women—God help us!'

The practicalities of being a housewife are all to do with the basic realities of life: feeding people, keeping people in clean clothes, washing people—little ones, old ones, ill ones—looking after various bodily functions, being involved with birth, illness and death. And, perhaps above all, practising the art of organization which may be on a small or a large scale. In all of this it is important to know what works, when it is important to hold on to basic human, often bodily, priorities. It is no good expecting people to do complicated, demanding tasks if they are not fed regularly. It is unreasonable to expect someone to be cheerful and pleasant, even if they are in bed and being waited on, if they are sitting in a pool of stale urine. It is hard to be human in these circumstances, or when hot and tired after work, or cold, or hungry, or uncuddled and unnoticed. Doing all these things for people is just practical loving.

Practical loving has other aspects to it than simply clearing up the mess and keeping people fed and watered, important and vital as these are. Practical loving involves being there, wherever that

may be, and continuing to be there and not going away. That may simply be about being at home regularly cooking meals, welcoming people home from school or work. It may be about being a good reliable friend to call on in a major or minor crisis. It may be about regularly visiting an old or ill person. It may be about nursing someone through dying. It is about not abandoning others when things are painful and difficult. The practical loving is also the expression of deep emotional support and beyond that it may be about going on loving despite the personal pain, and at the cost of extreme vulnerability.

Women, housewives, can offer this steadfastness because their work and their role have given them two things. First, the insight into the importance of staying alongside others in pain, distress or difficulty. They know, very often from their own hard, hurtful and marginalized experience that having someone else alongside matters, and it makes a difference. And secondly, their vulnerability and lack of status has given them a freedom, a freedom from the constraints of status and role expectations. It is probably easier to risk losing everything if you have very little to lose. And, if you are not worried about how you are seen, then that frees you from fear of shame and ridicule. The women who did not desert Jesus, and who steadfastly stood at the foot of the cross while he died, and the women who later returned to bury his body regardless of the cost of being misunderstood are biblical examples of steadfastly staying there, no matter what. And in our own day these characteristics of fearlessly going on loving and caring about matters that are important, no matter what the cost in public derision and personal risk, are shown by the women of the Plaza de Mayo<sup>10</sup> and the women of Greenham Common.

### *God the housewife*

This is not all of what it means to be a housewife, but I hope that it captures some important aspects of the experience. The question now is, 'To what extent does this experience reflect the nature of God?' Well, some of these characteristics can, I think, be seen reflected in the picture of God that Jesus shared with us. A God who is prepared to enter into human life in a makeshift cradle and die in public humiliation is certainly one who is prepared to enter into the essential bodiliness, disorganization and general messiness of our human condition.

The housewife's experience of being devalued, discounted and



ignored certainly has powerful echoes with Jesus's own life. There can be no doubt that Jesus thought feeding people was important, whether it was the five thousand or cooking breakfast for his friends after a hard night's fishing (Lk 9,10-17; Jn 21,9-14). He also deliberately tells us that God is like a woman making bread for her family (Lk 13,20-21). Equally, Jesus's concern for the ill, the lame, the blind and the sick leave no doubt that God cares deeply about the bodily well-being of people. Jesus washed the feet of his friends so they could enjoy their supper in a more relaxed and comfortable way (Jn 13,3-17). And it is this model of simple, menial, despised, bodily service to others that he offers as the way we should serve each other, and which shows us the way God looks after us.

But it is not just the heroic parts of being a housewife that reflect God's nature. It is also the bits that get laughed at and about which jokes are told. God, apparently, is like the persistent housewife who will not give up the search for the lost coin until she has found it (Lk 15,8-10). And God's nature is also reflected in the laughed-at fussiness of women being broody over their chicks, wanting to look after them and over-mother them (Lk 13,34). Even the smallest action is noticed and marked by God, who cares about little things and the minute details of organization and behaviour, and who knows that it is often the little apparently unnoticed things that really matter (Lk 12,2-7; 13,22-30).

The housewifely care of God can be seen in the way she manages her household: God the organizer. This is seen in the story of God creating heaven and earth and all things in it, and organizing it all so that it runs smoothly, and then spending a day sitting back with her feet up (Gen 1-1,3). This is indeed a story of a piece of superlative domestic organization. In fact the word *oikonomia* (which is used specifically of household management) is chosen to describe God's plan for humanity for all time (Eph 1,10). The same word is used by Ignatius of Antioch in the second century of God's organization of her household affairs by a huge total plan.<sup>11</sup> This plan centrally involved providing the eucharist for our comfort and nourishment, within the household of the Church. What more housewifely image could there be than that of keeping a welcoming, open household where good food can be had?

### *Praying to God the housewife*

Now if God is even in some respects like a housewife, what

difference does that make to how women relate to her in prayer? The first thing is that as God is the housewife, it seems appropriate to speak of God as 'she' and to use feminine words of her. I think it can also make a big difference in many other ways. It enables you to speak to God simply, straightforwardly, woman to woman, as one who understands and has the same way of looking at things. And that in itself can be a liberation: to be free to talk to God as one who knows what it is like, not just to be human, but particularly what it is like to be a housewife. So instead of having to address one's prayer to a great king who is surrounded by hordes of adoring seraphim who are running around keeping the fire burning and plumping the cushions on the throne, one is able to talk to her in women's talk, as a sister, as one who understands and cares about the little things as well as the big ones. Perhaps a bit the way you can tell the children's grandmother, or a woman neighbour, all about little Johnny's cold and how the loo got blocked up, and your worries about the pain in your back. This simple, trusting way of talking to God is certainly the way Jesus encourages us to pray (Mt 6,5-15). Yet I have come across deeply prayerful christian women who have been afraid to pray about their worries, or about their bodies, or family 'trivia', because 'God isn't interested in these things and (he) would not understand'.

Now if we pray to God as housewife we know that she is concerned with the state of our bodies as much as the state of our souls. She does care if we are ill, in pain, miserable, hungry, depressed, oppressed or exploited. These things matter to her. And she herself is a God who has entered into human life. She has shown us through Jesus that part of her nature is revealed in loving—despite the pain and suffering involved in steadfastly staying in the place it is necessary to be in, no matter what the cost. God knows all about pain, hurt and rejection. She knows the cost of openness and vulnerability. She has shown us that she is on the side of the poor, the oppressed, the misunderstood and the rejected. And perhaps it is difficult in our affluent western society to see it, but as housewives who are devalued we should rejoice and be exceedingly glad when we are spoken of disparagingly, and when we are misunderstood. For it is there that we are closest and nearest to God, and following in her pattern of life: doing menial jobs and being misunderstood for it.

Being able to pray to God as housewife can also mean that there can be a lot of no-nonsense straightforwardness about the

encounter. God knows about the things you are involved with and knows about you. There can be no pulling the wool over her eyes: there is no need to be anything but straight. So there is no need, indeed no point, in playing games. This means that it is much easier to challenge and be challenged because it comes from a basis of mutual understanding and respect. The respect for God is for her superlative organizational ability in coping with an extremely complex super-system, and on the whole keeping it working reasonably well. So any challenge or criticism from her comes from one who knows from the inside. She is herself a skilled practitioner, her view of the matter cannot be dismissed lightly, for she does understand (cf Heb 4,15-16). This can indeed be a two-edged sword.

Talking to God like this is in the same tradition as the way Saint Teresa of Avila spoke to God about the way God treated friends.<sup>12</sup> (Although she kept up the polite form of 'Your Majesty' when she was writing.) This way of talking was also how Don Camillo tackled things with God. However, a no-nonsense approach to God is not all straight talking and confrontation. It can also open up the possibility of laughter, and sharing a joke. The lack of pretence means that both of you can see the joke, the funny side of humanity and particular human situations. The particular situation may be desperate but there are things to laugh about in it: in its sheer awfulness, or in the ludicrous positions we all get ourselves into. Women have known for centuries how to laugh together while getting on with the job, however dreadful it is. This laughter may be a survival technique but it also helps to avoid the snare of pomposity. And who wants to relate to a pompous God?

Praying to God as housewife is not just an exercise in bringing God into the tiny details of human life and thereby somehow reducing her stature. It can also be to heighten the wonder and awe at the amazingness of God. Here is a God who has organized a household of such complexity as to include the whole universe and who is able to manage the multitudinous aspects of keeping it going from the minutest detail at the subatomic level to the largest themes of history. Such a God certainly deserves the deepest respect, for this is a truly awesome task. A mystery beyond our comprehension.

Now if God is a housewife administering a huge complex household, then a very interesting possibility is raised. As house-

wives, we are only too well aware that our best-laid plans frequently go wrong. Things turn out differently from what we had expected, because we were dealing with people. Moreover, in dealing with people, crises have to be coped with there and then. Is it like that for God too? Does she not always know exactly how things are going to turn out? Is she having to cope with crises? Is she suddenly having to find new unexpected ways of dealing with organizational problems? Are Band-Aid and Bob Geldorf her creative and unlikely answer to famine in Africa? Perhaps this idea of God not knowing exactly how things will turn out in the end, and so always being in the process of becoming, has something of the flavour of what process theology is saying.

But finally the God who is housewife looks after us, lays on regular good meals for us and gives us our daily bread. She does not mind if we treat her as we treat other housewives. So sometimes we take her and all her efforts for granted, hardly noticing how well we are being looked after. And that is all right too. Because, as housewives ourselves, we know that it is not necessary for those we are lovingly looking after to be always congratulating, complimenting and appreciating us. That would make the whole thing far too self-conscious. That would take away the loving acceptance of each other which puts the trust into the situation. So it is all right to relax with God and take her loving providence for granted. Although no doubt she too does also appreciate being noticed and thanked once in a while, just like the rest of us. Yet her loving care of us does not depend on our always remembering to be nice to her. Her deep care and concern for us means that we can trust in her providence and good organization at all times, even in the face of the most unexpected and unlikely crisis.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Preface to the *Alternative Service Book*, p 10, (London, Clowes/SPCK/Cambridge University Press, 1980)

<sup>2</sup> For further discussion of the effect of metaphors on our understanding and perception, see Lackoff, G. and Johnson, M.: *Metaphors we live by*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980).

<sup>3</sup> A 'language-game' is a wittgensteinian idea which refers to the whole way that we use, in speech, writing, thinking and action, a particular set of words or concepts. It refers to ordinary language use, or how the language is actually *used* rather than formal definitions of word use.

<sup>4</sup> 'Socialization' is the whole process by which a child is brought up to share the norms, ideals and world view of the society in which it is raised.

<sup>5</sup> A 'paradigm-shift' happens when someone, or a whole community, suddenly changes the whole way that they interpret reality. It was first coined by T. S. Kuhn in *The structure of scientific revolutions* (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1970) in relation to how a scientific community changes its basic theoretical position.

<sup>6</sup> Cf Kuhn, T. S.: *The copernican revolution*, (Cambridge, Mass., University Press, 1957).

<sup>7</sup> For example, the debate in the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in June 1984, on the very reasonable document *The motherhood of God* (Edinburgh, St Andrews Press, 1986).

<sup>8</sup> For further discussion of the effect of exclusive liturgical language on women see Janet Morley's article 'The faltering words of men' in Furlong, Monica (ed.): *Feminine in the Church*, (London, SPCK, 1984).

<sup>9</sup> Cf Kitzinger, Sheila: *Women's experience of sex*, (London, Penguin, 1985).

<sup>10</sup> The women of the Plaza de Mayo are a group of women, mostly mothers whose children have 'disappeared' for political reasons in Argentina. They meet regularly in the Plaza de Mayo to protest and grieve and ask the government where their children are. *Selection of poems of the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo*. (Basquedo, Blackfriars, Oxford, 1983).

<sup>11</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Ephesians*, ch 20.

<sup>12</sup> The story is told of St Teresa that she was travelling with a party of nuns making a new foundation. They were exhausted from travelling during the summer in hot, covered carts. They were short of sleep due to bad inns full of fleas and noisy muleteers. The weather broke in a violent thunderstorm just before they reached the ford of a river now in flood. As they crossed the river a wheel came off their cart. Teresa prayed: 'Lord, this is *too much!*' to which the Lord replied, 'Teresa, this is the way I treat my friends'. 'No wonder you have so few', she responded.