**St Andrew’s on The Terrace Sunday 23 July 2017 Pentecost 7 Can we image God in Art?**

***Exodus 20: 1-4 The Ten Commandments*** *Then God spoke all these words: 2 I am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; 3 you shall have no other gods before me. 4 You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.*

***Matthew 6: 28-30*** *And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, 29 yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. 30 But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will God not much more clothe you —you of little faith?*

***Contemporary reading : The Relationship Between Spirituality and Artistic Expression: Cultivating the Capacity for Imagining by Christine Valters Paintner***

*Dr Christine Paintner is speaking to educators in the university system ‘Ultimately, our greatest creative act is the living of our daily lives. Creativity is about making space and listening deeply to our lives and the world around us; seeing beneath the surface of things to the depth dimension of the world; opening ourselves to the newness that stirs there; developing a relationship to mystery; cultivating a sense of spontaneity and playfulness; and giving form in a loving and intentional way to our commitments. All of these processes contribute in significant ways to the creation of meaning in our lives.’*

This reflection, once I started to think about it deeply, has provided a few surprises at the issues which arise when we consider God and Art and the act of trying to image what God might be like using the artist’s brush or pen on paper or walls or any other kind of surface. We can, maybe, fall into the trap of assuming we are the only generation who has declined to describe God in concrete terms because we see the impossibility of doing justice to as wide and broad and deep a concept as the divine or the sacred. In fact as we look back we find others living much earlier than we have seen the problem of capturing what is essentially mysterious in a single moment with specific shape form and colour.

As long ago as the ten commandments – whether we date them from the time of Moses or in later written documents, they are still millennia old – as long ago as the ten commandments there is doubt expressed as to the wisdom of trying to capture the sacred in an inanimate object. This is seen like the other 10 commandments to be so important, the words are put into God’s mouth. Not only is this God to be the God above all gods, any idol of anything in heaven, on the earth or under the earth is banned. The assumption is that such images would become objects of devotion and so human beings would miss the point. In relating to the idol, in being bigger than the idol and in control of the idol, they would not only get the wrong idea of how the sacred and human related, they would miss the nuance and dynamics of a real relatedness to the ever changing ever developing sacred. One idea captured in artwork at one time, only would capture of fleeting glimpse, a mere facet of a much larger whole. We human beings would be trapped by the limitations and transience of our own perceptions and inhibited in our growth, knowledge and experience of what could be like to explore the mysteries of both the human side of our world and its spiritual dimensions.

This prohibition exerted a lasting influence on first Jewish art, then early Christian art and also Muslim decoration. Not only for the Jewish people was the name of God hardly to be breathed, nor should the image of God be created. So decoration in synagogues and temples was of sacred objects rather than of God. For example, the menorah the 7 headed candlestick used in homes and places of worship, though this menorah etched in stone was found in a 2,000 year old drainage channel near the city of David. More organised images of the menorah could be seen in mosaics, or carved in relief on stone walls. Writers on Jewish art comment:

The portrayal of YHWH in any kind of human or concrete form is absolutely forbidden, and there is a strong tradition of avoiding sculpture, especially if large and free-standing, of all types and in all contexts, but especially religious sculpture. ​ Two-dimensional images, including those of religious subjects and humans, are often regarded as acceptable, especially if on a small scale, such as book illustrations, the concern always being to avoid anything approaching idolatry.

This began to change slowly but “At first only the Hand of God, often emerging from a cloud, was portrayed.” For example, a portrayal of the hand of God as an isolated motif in a fresco from Catalonia in Spain. Then, “Gradually, portrayals of the head and later the whole figure were depicted, and by the time of the Renaissance artistic representations of God the Father were freely used in the Western Church.” And the hand of God went from just the hand to the whole body of God supported by cherubims as he reaches out to create humankind, as in Michelangelo’s famous portrayal of Creation on the ceiling of the Sistine chapel.

And here we have par excellence the face of God, and the image of the grey haired man with a beard floating in the heavens was born. In an period when age was equated with wisdom, and men did not try to camouflage their greying hair, perhaps God could only ever have been white-haired. It is a good example of an image of God which suited it patriarchal, age revering times, but which does not serve us well now. There are women of an older age with the accompanying wisdom who could now be models for an image of a creating God – reflective women, beautiful women and too, women with a sense of humour.

Centuries later, William Blake in his illustrations for the book of Job also chose a male God to portray in his The Ancient of Days setting a compass to the Earth – obviously one who has gone to the gym, though Blake’s musculature is not as clever as Michelangelo’s. Following the line of gender enquiry I looked for God the Mother on the internet images and found for page after page images of Mary the mother of Jesus. It has long been recognised by scholars that Mary has provided a feminine addition to the gender balance of the Trinity and the question “Is Mary God the Mother?” is a common question amongst theologians interested in the gender identity of God. Some metaphors for God, for instance of God as one who bakes bread, sometimes fit with one gender better than another at different times and places in our world. See the first few stanzas of Alla Bozarth Campbell’s poem ‘Bakerwoman God’

Bakerwoman God,   
I am your living bread.  
Strong, brown Bakerwoman God,   
I am your low, soft, and being-shaped loaf.  
  
I am your rising bread,   
well-kneaded by some divine   
and knotty pair of knuckles,   
by your warm earth hands.   
I am bread well-kneaded.  
  
Put me in fire, Bakerwoman God,   
put me in your own bright fire.  
I am warm, warm as you from fire.  
I am white and gold, soft and hard,   
brown and round.  
I am so warm from fire.  
  
Break me, Bakerwoman God.  
I am broken under your caring Word.

Bakerwoman God, remake me

The gender identity we might image for God is, of course, not such a problem when people reject the idea of not only a personal God but any kind of anthropomorphised representation of God. If God is not to be described in reference to a human person’s qualities, then our imaging does not need to reflect either gender

Does science help us? In our scientific world, what does God look like? At the large hagron collider in Geneva, CERN released this picture of a typical computer screen shot while searching for the Higgs Boson, the so called ‘God particle’ was seen. Of course this is not God, but scientists think it could be the particle which gave mass to the matter created at the Big Bang. In a sense this might be as close to God, the source of Creativity, as a scientific experiment can get. Technology can help us to representations which express something of the life, dynamics, colour and fluidity of how we might like to think of God now. Does abstract art help? The two paintings on the front of the order of service represent apparently God as war and God as love but in some ways the two paintings are quite similar. Is the quest to represent God in Art doomed? Jesus is credited in a rare moment as saying even very simple beauty had its own value when he praised the beauty of simple wildflowers - the ‘lilies of the field’ and compared them favourably with one of Israel’s richest kings – “Solomon in all his glory” I doubt if we *should* persist with trying to paint God when sentimentalising is the result. This is the pattern for a do it yourself needlework kit! Or, we could fall back like Jewish and Islamic art on representing sacred moments rather than sacred beings, like Moses’ encounter with the great I AM at the burning bush.

I decided that what I had learned from this reflection on religious art and scripture and God that any representation of God is the best inspiration of the artist at a point in time. Many 11 or 12th century paintings showed Jesus and the disciples in medieval clothing quite anachronistic to their own first century life. In the same way, any artistic representation captures a moment in time, a thought of the second, a labour of only a few days or months. And so, it carries with it the limitations of our thought and development at that point of time. As our world and we move on, we need to take all those representations with a grain of salt. But also, as we move on, we need continue to make our own discoveries, we need to continue to explore through science and art, sculpture and thought, through drawing and music, what God is to us now, today and into tomorrow. In this search we are aided by, but not bound by, the art of yesterday. And, if one of the thoughts we can have about God is that God is the source of all creativity our search for that mystery needs to employ as much creativity as possible. Let us not forget, particularly those of us who are not artists in the strict sense of the word, what Christine Painter said in her article to educators:

Ultimately, our greatest creative act is the living of our daily lives. Creativity is about making space and listening deeply to our lives and the world around us; seeing beneath the surface of things to the depth dimension of the world; opening ourselves to the newness that stirs there; developing a relationship to mystery; cultivating a sense of spontaneity and playfulness; and giving form in a loving and intentional way to our commitments. All of these processes contribute in significant ways to the creation of meaning in our lives.

So may it be.

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