

SIGNPOSTS SERIES – NO 1

THE PICTURE WE HAVE OF GOD IS A CRUCIAL MATTER

Nic Denny-Dimitriou - 3 September 2006

Psalm 146; 1 John 4: 7-16; John 20: 24-31

What if, instead of a sermon, I gave each of us a large piece of paper, and asked us to spend 20 or 30 minutes writing down our thoughts about God? Or, instead of using words, some may prefer to draw or paint or make a diagram; whatever would help us note our thoughts and represent the “mental picture” we have of God. Would any two people come up with the same notes or pictures?

Obviously, the answer is “No”. Even if you put 100 people in front of a scene of natural beauty and asked them to draw or paint or describe in words what was in front of them, no two would be alike. Amongst some there would be great similarities, given that we would all be looking at the same physical scenery, but others would quite divergent, and all would express not only our individual creativity but also the highly individual ways in which we viewed that scene.

And to use the commonly used example, if even ten people witnessed a traffic accident, there may be up to ten variations of what happened, even if none of them conflicted with each other but simply gave a different picture of what had been observed from different vantage points. It would therefore be unrealistic to expect us to offer exact replicas in our views and understandings of God.

Yet all of us, from youngest to oldest, and the deeply faithful and the deeply questioning (and those last two often go together), and the regular churchgoer and the occasional churchgoer and the person who prays daily and the person who only prays in crisis – or the person who mainly prays when all is going incredibly well – no matter who we are or what our practice is regarding our faith, each of us has a mental image of God. It will reflect our thoughts and experience of whom or what we think God is, and how we understand God to relate to the world and to me and to others, and what God’s character is like (to use a human word), and what God’s priorities and intentions are.

In January 2005, I used a story from Trevor Hudson’s book, “Signposts to Spirituality” (*Struik Christian Books, Cape Town – first published 1995.*) Trevor, a Methodist minister in Gauteng, is known worldwide for his down-to-earth writings on faith and daily living. I am using his book as the outline for this sermon series we are beginning today.

The story is quite dramatic so some of you may remember it, others will either not remember it or were not here that Sunday, but either way, it bears repetition:

Trevor describes meeting with a former medical missionary and now a practising psychiatrist, who was his friend and mentor. Having listened to some personal concerns, the mentor asked Trevor: What is your picture of God?

“At first the question seemed unrelated and irrelevant to the concerns I had expressed. What did my view of God have to do with crowded days, an over-scheduled appointment book and strenuous efforts to achieve and accomplish? Surely, I thought to myself, all that was needed was some practical counsel regarding time-management and realistic goal setting.

“However the question communicated my companion’s clear conviction that **the way we live is profoundly shaped by our picture of God** (emphasis – mine). Perhaps this was also why William Temple, that great Anglican minister and spiritual leader, had once rather provocatively observed that if people live with a wrong view of God, the more religious they become the worse the consequences will be, and eventually it would be better for them to be atheists.

“In his autobiography, William Barclay, known throughout the world for his helpful commentaries upon scripture, recounts a personal experience that powerfully affirms our ongoing need to examine our picture of God. The BBC had asked Dr. Barclay to do a series of talks for radio broadcast on the subject of the miracles in the gospels. Without denying the historicity (historical reality) of the gospel records, Dr Barclay stressed the importance of the symbolic recurring of these miracles for contemporary life. As Jesus stilled the storm on the Lake of Galilee, he continues to still the storms that rage in human hearts. When the series ended, he was interviewed by the producer and asked how he had come to such a view.

‘I told him the truth. I told him that some years ago our 21-year-old daughter and the lad to whom she would some day have been married were both drowned in a yachting accident. I said that God did not stop that accident at sea, but he did calm the storm in my own heart, so that somehow my wife and I came through that terrible time, still on our own two feet.’

When the interview was broadcast, letters poured in. Amongst them was an anonymous letter:

‘Dear Dr Barclay, I know why God killed your daughter. It was to save her from being corrupted by your heresies.’

Not having the writer’s address, Dr Barclay could not respond, but he writes:

‘If I had had that writer’s address I would have written back, not in anger – the inevitable blaze of anger was over in a flash, but in pity and I would have said, as John Wesley said to someone, “Your God is my devil.” [Then Dr Barclay concluded:] **The day my daughter was lost at sea there was sorrow in the heart of God.**’ (Emphasis mine.)

(Quote ends; Signposts to Spirituality - pp 19-20)

All of those points reflect a view, an understanding of God. Which again begs the question: “What is your view of God?” What has shaped it? And what is your understanding of God’s love for you, and of how God relates to you?

Of the many different angles we could take – especially if we had all morning – let me focus on only two aspects, to help us look at and understand God, and in our own thoughts, to help us to reflect on our images of God: The Mystery of God, and the Person of Jesus.

1. God is Mystery

“Mystery” is a word we grapple with, because its meaning changes, but both the Scriptures and the experiences of many people of all ages and cultures seem to affirm that God is “a boundless Mystery”. That does not mean we are unable in any way to fathom God. What it does mean, is that God is unlike anyone or anything else, there is no other like God. God is sometimes described using the term “other” – that is more-or-less the meaning of the word “holy”; it means that God is separate and completely different in nature to us and to the rest of creation.

The person who is convinced they have completely figured God out, can be sure that they are wrong! It hasn’t stopped people from trying, in part because we find it easier to live with a dogmatic certainty than to live with a God who cannot easily be grasped in every way.

To quote from Trevor Hudson (p23):

‘In any true picture of God there will always be room for mystery. Acknowledging God in this way gets us to take off our shoes in God’s presence. We begin living on tiptoe. Our lives are touched with a renewed sense of awe. And as James Houston has observed, awe is the starting point in our quest for God. He writes: ‘Awe encourages us to think of God ... as someone outside and beyond our own small concerns and our own vulnerable lives. Awe opens us up to the possibility of living always on the brink of mystery. Awe helps us to be truly alive, fully open to new possibilities we had not envisaged before.’”

2. To know what God is like, we have to look at Jesus

Having spoken of God as Mystery, nevertheless our faith makes the powerful claim that God stepped into human experience, in flesh, in and through the person of Jesus Christ. I have sometimes used the phrase, that Jesus is “God in skin”. I have used the same phrase of us, in saying that we represent God in skin.

But it is through Jesus that God's face is known, deeply and personally. St Paul, writing to one of the early Christian churches, says of Jesus: "He is the image of the invisible God ... in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." (Colossians 1: 15 & 19)

To remove too much woolliness and vagueness from our knowledge of God, we must turn to Jesus. It is Jesus who shows us who God is: In his words, and in the things that Jesus does, and in his act of dying, and in his rising from death.

Again, quoting Trevor Hudson (pp 29-30):

"Jesus is our picture of God. Filtering all our ideas about the Holy One through this decisive disclosure of himself through Jesus of Nazareth is the only safe way to redraw our God-picture. This is what I have been seeking to do ever since that surprising question in the office of my mentor and friend [refer to the story on p2 in this sermon]. I have come to learn that the God whose face I see in Jesus speaks to each one of us by name and whispers: 'You are loved just as you are. I am Abba, your heavenly parent, who welcomes you with open arms when you come home to me. Your presence is deeply desired at the family table of my friendship. When you hurt my other children through your actions and words I get angry, though my anger will never stop me loving you. On the cross I died so that you would know the full extent of my offer of forgiveness. Your suffering is my suffering. Your grief is my grief....'"

When our hearts and minds are touched by this great love we are ready to explore the adventure of the spiritual life.

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#### **Notes on the Scripture readings:**

(Briefly elaborated on before the readings, in the services)

#### **Old Testament Reading: Psalm 146**

- Song of praise
- Do not trust human princes, but
- Trust in God who made heaven and earth
- Justice for the oppressed
- Food for the hungry
- Lifts up those who are bowed down
- Looks to the interests of strangers, the orphaned and the widowed (those with no-one else to look after them)

#### **New Testament Reading: 1 John 4: 7-16**

- Love is from God, and God is Love
- God's love revealed in this way:
- God sent his Son into the world –

- Not that we loved God, but that he loved us (i.e. God's initiative)
- And sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins

**Gospel Reading: John 20: 24-31**

- Jesus did many signs NOT recorded in this book
- But these are written that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name

ENDS.