

Reflection for the Transfiguration of Christ by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

August 6th is the day in the liturgical year when we reflect on the Transfiguration - that moment when at the top of a mountain the veil between earth and heaven is pulled back, just a little, and we are given the image of Christ with his heavenly glory revealed.

Images can be very powerful things. They can be confusing, but they also influence us in many ways, triggering a whole host of differing emotions - feelings of joy and warmth but also, fear, guilt, and excitement, to name but a few. Not only do they touch our feelings and emotions, they can also influence the way we see the world in which we live.

When, though, we try putting the two together - our feelings and the way our minds react to images - what we see is that our action or reactions will inevitably be influenced by those images, particularly images which have become deeply embedded - those that we carry around with us all the time.

Those working in the media and particularly the advertising sector understand this so well. You only have to look at the adverts on TV that appear in the run up to Christmas to see the way they can and do influence children. By using images, youngsters' expectations are shaped and, with that, pressure mounts on parents when it comes to the question of what to buy for Christmas presents.

Yet images are not purely external things acting on us. We may also build our own mental images that influence the way we live and deal with these we encounter.

Consider something like the lottery. The image of double rollover or jackpots is held before us ... we could win! That win could change our lives for ever with large sums of money. Yet look at odds of that happening - mildly remote or virtually non-existent, but folk still buy tickets. Why? Because of the image they have created for themselves - an image of the way life could change forever - if only our numbers come up and we win all that money.

Or, to bring things into the day-to-day world in which we all live, think of the people you meet day by day and the images we create for them of ourselves. These images influence not only the way we think about people but also the way we relate or interact with them.

If the image is one of dominance or control, then that image will be reflected in the way we speak or relate to that person. It will be a totally different approach if our image is one of care, love, and concern.

The question I want us to think about today is what is our image of God like?

All of us have an image of God inside us.

An image of the God we have come to worship.

An image that has not been produced through seeing a photo of God, but has been put together as a result of encountering God in many ways and situations: in prayer and worship, through reading the Bible (take our Old Testament reading as an example) and other books, listening to sermons and receiving the teachings of the church, and through seeing and experiencing God at work in our lives and the lives of those around us. For the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration it is by seeing something of the glory of God revealed to them. (Look for a moment at the Pew Sheet and the image inside - an orthodox image of the transfiguration. How do you react to it? what strikes you most?)

What each of us must remember is that our image of God, can never and will never be perfect, because we are trying to fit God into the images and pictures of our own limited world and understanding, which is just not possible.

Similarly, an image of God that is positive for one person will be negative for another. The simple words "Our Father" at the beginning of the Lord's prayer provide an example of this. If

your experience of a human father is good and loving, then the image is positive. On the other hand, if your image of a father is negative, so may well be that image for God.

Whatever our own personal image of God is like. One of the things scripture shows us is how that image affects, in a very practical, way our worship of God.

Let me read you a few verses from Hebrews 12.

"You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. (For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death." Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear.")

What we have here is a very different image of God than the one you or I might describe if asked - the image of God in power on Mount Sinai - a terrifying picture. It is one which reflects something of the very nature of God, yet only part of that nature. The people's plea to Moses as he returns from that mountain is cover your face, we cannot cope even with a reflection.

That image of God - an image which creates a sense of fear for one's own life if one comes too close, as a result of humanity's unworthiness before God. Then look at the design and use of the Temple in Jerusalem. What you see is a reflection of that image of God - a large platform on the top of a hill, on which are a series of courtyards, one inside each other, with access ever more limited the closer the centre you go to the centre until you finally reach the Holy of Holies where the presence of God rests. There only one person can go - the high priest - and then only once a year.

The powerful image of God creating separation.

You and I see that separation as having been broken down through the incarnation of Christ; of God coming among us in the child of Bethlehem to die and save us. The result is that we see God as accessible, through his grace to each one of us. Each of us can have a personal relationship with him. Thus, God's love for his creation and his grace seen through Christ is an image reflected in our worship. So, in the words of one of the gospels: "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

Down through the centuries of Church History different accepts of God's nature and work have been the focal image of Church thinking. The reformation period, for example, focused on Christ and his atoning work. At the back end of the 19th century and into the 20th century, the image of God's holiness became more prominent.

And, as each of these images have risen in prominence in church thinking, so church buildings have reflected that both in appearance, layout, and worship style. Look at ancient church buildings carefully and you can see how have changed over time. Altars and pulpits getting more or less prominent at different periods; the height of the building also reflecting the different images of God.

Image is important in so many ways. And very often the images we hold are reflected in the way we live our lives, and not least through our worship.

We may struggle at times to understand events like the transfiguration. If nothing else, it should challenge and broaden our understanding of the nature of God. It brings us face to face with his glory and his power it reminds us of our unworthiness to stand before him, yet at the same time we see God's love and grace.

"God is Spirit and those who worship him must worship in Spirit and in truth."