

Acts 1:15-17,21-26; 1 John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19

What is it to know someone? Who do you know best in the world, and how well would you say you know that person? I always find it fascinating that I see the world and other people from my own perspective in my head of being me, but others look out their own eyes and see everything from the viewpoint of being them. And no matter how well we know even our closest friend or partner, there is always a private element. There will always be thoughts kept to oneself, always a whisper of the unknown and unknowable.

But we are relational creatures, and to the extent that we can, we love to build relationships. We share ourselves with each other, and at our best, are able to delight in the differences and similarities we share or complement each other with.

As humankind, over the centuries we have also wanted to build relationships with divinity. We construct worldviews and religions and worship and practices around how we understand ourselves in relation to God, however that is understood in the culture and time we inhabit.

And of course, over time, people wanted to personalise God, to be able to refer to their divine with a personal pronoun, and so the language we have inherited refers to God in the masculine language. But of course, theologically speaking, God isn't a man. God isn't intrinsically male or female - God is God, a divine concept we struggle to really wrap our heads around.

Our faith contains many mysteries, and God himself is one of those mysteries right from the start. How can the human mind comprehend such a thing? It's certainly difficult, if not impossible. But language helps us to hold a concept of God in our heads, and helps us to have a relationship with the creator. So God becomes a man, and in our gospel reading Jesus of course refers to God as Abba, Father.

It is also taught in many churches that men are the ones created in the image of God, while women are a sort of afterthought. A secondary creation not *quite* in the image of God, because God is male. But in Genesis chapter 1, it seems quite clear. It says:

“Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion... over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’ So God created

humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”

Both Adam and Eve are created in the image of God, male and female together.

Now if you've grown up Episcopalian, or in some other more liberal denomination or church, this may seem obvious and matter of fact. But for some of us, this might be revolutionary. For myself, the idea of being able to play with language around gender when it comes to God and faith was shocking.

A few years ago I tried a little experiment - I read some of Genesis to myself, the story of the creation of the world - but wherever there was a masculine pronoun used for God, I swapped it out in my head for a feminine one. And if you've never experimented with using different pronouns for God, I can recommend this exercise!

*“So God created humankind in her image, in the image of God she created them; male and female she created them.”*

What does this do to your sense of knowing God? Does it open a window? Does it feel uncomfortable? Does it bring irritation, or perhaps joy? It might be that doing something like this could help you to know yourself better. Your own faith, assumptions, or comfortable ways of thought. It is good to sometimes stretch ourselves, to challenge the way we always think about things, and to explore other avenues.

The truth is that each one of us is made in the image of God, and that every good way of being, of behaving - whether it be nurturing, protecting, teaching, encouraging - all such things are of God. When we mother or father each other in this holy way, we are living into the truth that we are imperfect yet beautiful models of the divine to one another, following the example of the God who we worship. I think that this is part of what it is to be sanctified in truth, as Jesus prays that we will be. Jesus has made God known to us in his modelling of love, and in honoring and emulating that modelling, to the best of our abilities, we are filled with the Spirit and surrounding ourselves with the truth of what it is to be made in the image of God.

In reality, we will always be mysterious to one another. We can never completely know another person, and even to know ourselves fully is a

challenge. There will also always be mystery in our faith. We can never expect to gain an exhaustive comprehension of God, and I'm not sure that we would want to try. But I value this mystery. There is something wonderful in knowing that there is always further to go in our understanding of God, and of ourselves. Always deeper to go in the developing of the relationship, in exploration, in stretching ourselves and challenging our worldviews. There is always more to know of the Spirit which we have been given, and more to learn in echoing Jesus' example of how to live in the world.

Jesus prays in our gospel reading today that we would have his joy made complete in ourselves. Perhaps a step closer in realising this joy can be found in learning to cherish the mothering and fathering of God, borne out in our actions towards each other as we discover more and more the image of God among us.

Amen