

Made in the image of God...

How many of us, I wonder have had – or still have – someone whom we really admire and is the sort of person we would like to be. In our youth they might have been our “role models” – perhaps now we think of them as people who inspire us. It can be good to have people like that, people who help us to raise our expectations of who we could be. On the other hand, it can simply confirm that we’re never going to be the person we aspire to. We’re just ordinary!

It struck me that our collect for today offers real encouragement. Let me read the main part of it to you again:

**Almighty God,
you have created the heavens and the earth
and made us in your own image:
teach us to discern your hand in all your works
and your likeness in all your children.**

Before we start to measure ourselves against someone whom we admire, it’s worth pausing for a moment to reflect on that amazing statement that we are made in God’s own image. You’ll recognise the reference to the very beginning of the Bible where the writer of Genesis says: “God created male and female in his image, in the image of God he created them.” (*Genesis 1:27*)

Before we start to think about being made in God’s image, we really need what God is like.

Where would you begin if you wanted to think about what God is like? My guess is that you probably wouldn’t choose the Old Testament. After all, don’t we all know that the God of the Old Testament is cruel and judgemental? Well, there are certainly passages that we perhaps wouldn’t want to turn to, but how about the verses that were read this morning – part of the prophecy of Hosea? (*Hosea 2:14-20*)

What did we hear there?

- God is tender and generous.
- God can bring hope to the most hopeless of situations – which is what the Valley of Achor represents.
- God longs to be in a faithful relationship with his people – like a husband and wife.
- God will bring harmony in creation and peace on the earth: there will be security and safety.
- Righteousness, faithfulness, love and mercy will characterise the relationship of God with his people.

That’s what God is like... And it wouldn’t be difficult to find many other passages in the Bible – including from the Old Testament – that reinforce that picture of God. So isn’t it amazing that we’re made in the image of that wonderful God?

But what’s the evidence that we are made in God’s image.

Perhaps you immediately think about what you see in the news. The brutality in Syria and Iraq and Ukraine and Palestine and Nigeria and Paris and... the list goes on – isn’t that clear evidence that human beings are certainly NOT made in the image of God?

That really does need to be answered – but first let’s acknowledge a contrary picture of human life: people who have gone to west Africa and put their own lives at risk to help fight the Ebola outbreak; people who work all around the world with those who are outcasts or persecuted; those who fight on behalf of the victims of injustice and exploitation; those who work selflessly in our own country – our own community – who bring help and care and support to us. There are people who inspire us and encourage us and in whom we could say we see the image of God.

The uncomfortable reality is that, part of being made in the image of God means that we have the freedom to reject God’s ways: we are not forced into a mould and we are not automatically loving and generous; it’s possible for us to be the complete opposite of what being made in the image of God is supposed to look like. On the other hand, there is the possibility of being people who do reflect something of what God is like.

The truth is, if we’re honest, we have experience of being both kinds of people: times when the way we live our lives means the image of God is very well hidden, and times when the image of God in us is plain for all to see.

What encouragement can we find in today's readings?

The Gospel story from Mark (*Mark 2:13-22*) speaks to us of something quite remarkable. We heard the story of the call of Levi – or Matthew as he's also called. He was a tax-collector, working for the Romans, and we know that these people were despised and hated because of their dishonesty and greed. Levi wouldn't be the first person you would turn to if you wanted an example of what being made in the image of God looks like.

But Jesus called him. "Follow me".

This is telling us, I believe, that Jesus saw in Levi the potential for change and for him to become the person God imagined him to be: someone who could demonstrate what being made in the image of God looks like. The story goes on to tell us that, in fact, there were many tax-collectors and sinners who followed Jesus. Levi wasn't exceptional!

It tells us that being made in the image of God does not mean that we have to be special people who are wonderfully holy. God sees in each of us the image of God – and offers us the opportunity to become the people who reflect something of God's own glory.

So what might it mean in practice if we believe we are made in the image of God?

Our prayer to the God who created the heavens and the earth and made us in God's image asked that God might

- teach us to discern God's hand in all God's works
- and God's likeness in all God's children.

'Discern' is an interesting request! It requires awareness and attention, an open mind and a willingness to be sensitive. For God to teach us we need to spend time just being still in God's presence.

Without discernment we lose touch with what it means to be made in the image of God. We can see that's the case in the terrible brutality we see in the world. Closer to home, it's what happens in our own lives when we lose sight of how God is working in us and in the world around us.

On the other hand, when God teaches us to be discerning, we begin to see God's hand in all of life's situations – not just the religious bits of our lives. God slowly transforms us and makes real in us what it means to be made in the image of God.

"Teach us to discern your hand in all your works – and your likeness in all your children."

Now here's a challenge! If *we're* made in God's image we have to believe that we are *all* made in God's image... And that means seeing God's likeness in everyone. That's not easy. It can't mean we are called to a bland kind of living where we think everyone's a SWEETIE! Clearly they're not, anymore than we are... We only have to look at the life of Jesus to know that he wasn't afraid to speak out against lives that denied the characteristics of being made in the image of God. If, using our gift of discernment, we believe it right to challenge someone about some issue, that's something we must do – but we must never lose sight of the fact that God's likeness is still in them, however hidden. We know how easily it can get hidden in us...

It does mean that in our daily lives we take seriously the call to recognise God's likeness in everyone – and it will change the way we treat people. The people we meet day by day, the people who part of our lives. At a wider level it's a particular challenge in a society that has to demonise and scapegoat people, especially the vulnerable, as a way of coping with its own anxieties and fears. It's a gift to society for us to keep hold of the insight that all – *ALL* – bear the likeness of God.

From the reading from 2 Corinthians it seems that the Christians in Corinth had begun to demonstrate this transformation in their lives, and we can't do better than conclude with some words from that letter: "You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, a letter of Christ, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God." (*2 Corinthians 3:1-6*)

As we discern the image and work of God in human life – including in ourselves – so in us too can be seen the work of God's Spirit. We become those who show what it means to be made in the image of God.