

## GETTING THE PICTURE RIGHT

When my mother died one of the things I inherited was a box of family photos. The sort of thing that it's hard to know what to do with, and even harder to throw away! There were pictures of our family, holidays and other special occasions, but also of people I dimly remembered, and of distant relatives I never knew. Looking at them, sometimes I could re-live the event, but sometimes I was brought up short. Did old so-and-so really look like that? Was the party I remember as a big event only attended by a few? Some of the images I had carried with me since childhood were challenged and shown to be wrong.

I guess we all have had a similar experience, and have needed to revise the image we formed of someone on first acquaintance in the light of later impressions. Sometimes, though, we are reluctant to do this. We prefer to hold on to a particular image, maybe because it's more comforting, or because it's how we should like the person to be, even though it's only a partial view – like a lady who did not want to go to the Holy Land because she feared it would disturb her picture of Jesus.

It's rather like having a box of photos but never looking in it because we fear having our cosy images taken away. One image I grew up with was of gentle Jesus. I don't think it was a particular strong image, but it was there, and it coloured my picture of God.

Later on I had to round out this first impression. I began to realise that this gentle Jesus who went around doing good was no soft touch! E.g. Matthew 23 shows quite a different side to his character – it's the passage in which he criticises the Pharisees. He didn't express mild disagreement in a rather English sort of way, he tore into them and insulted them. He called them hypocrites, blind guides, whited sepulchres, snakes, a viper's brood. He couldn't stand what they stood for and he let them know!

One of the things I learned as my picture of God was rounded out was that wherever God was, it wasn't on the fence. He had clear priorities and preferences and was not neutral regarding the great issues of the day. When the Church began to stress God's preferential option for the poor I realised that this was true: the poor are God's special concern.

I also realised that when you look for signs of God's action in the world, you have to look at the anguish and pain, and not just at the love and pleasure, because God is present in judgement as well as in blessing. When we feel challenged we need to look for the hand of God in the experience, and to ask 'What is he saying to me?' It's tempting to hang on to our childhood images and not to look at the other pictures in the box, but then it becomes difficult to receive hard things from him.

Tough times bring us face to face with our image of God. If we picture him as a divine Jimmy Saville, there to 'fix it' for us, we are bound for disappointment. He didn't fix it for Jesus in Gethsemane, nor

for Paul on his travels when he was beaten, imprisoned, stoned and shipwrecked. Equally we shall be disappointed if we picture him as an over-indulgent parent protecting us from the consequences of our wrongdoing – Israel was not saved from exile; or if we picture him as an old-school Headmaster making sure things never change – Jesus and the Apostles changed the world.

Some people find it hard to receive love from God. Their image maybe is of a stern father figure always correcting them, or of a God of wrath demanding and punishing. Fortunately this has not been one of my images, but I have listened to those who have seen God in this way and know how disabling it can be. I do remember, though, one Holy Week when, as we followed Jesus to Calvary, it hit me that he did this for me. Since then I have known that God loves me.

This evening we heard St Matthew's account of the mother of James and John asking that her sons might sit either side of Jesus in the kingdom. Jesus reminds them that those who seek to share in his glory must also share in his suffering. And when the other disciples get angry, he reminds them that those who want to be first must be the slave of all: 'just as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.' Jesus is the crucified God: the cross is the sign of his love. That's another picture to take out of the box and add to our image.

So, as we approach Holy Week, it's a good idea to get our picture of God out of the box and see if its one we can really live with. How close is it to a true likeness? In Holy Week we see God in the colours of pain

and judgement, obedience and forgiveness. And we also see that whatever happens he is there; he can be trusted. Can we say with Job 'The Lord gives and the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord' ?

The grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be with us all. Amen.