

27th Oct - Lyanne Mitchell - *Exploring the Concept of 'Image'*

The children in a Unitarian Universalist church school class were drawing pictures. The teacher asked one, "What are you drawing a picture of?" "I'm drawing a picture of God," was the reply. "But nobody knows what God looks like," objected the teacher. "They will," said the UU child, "when I get my picture done."

Good morning! and welcome to a slightly shorter service this morning. I am so pleased to see you all - following the service, our resident photographer Jim Mckenna is going to take some pictures of you all to refresh and update the images on our website. We need to show the world an up-to-date image of ourselves and our refurbished church.

My theme this morning is ***Exploring the Concept of 'Image'*** - because I thought this would tie in with our photo shoot. I'd like to explore it from first, from the personal point of view and then from a spiritual point of view.

I have some very short READINGS this morning - reflecting first, a personal and following that, a spiritual perspective of 'image'.

The first is the final verse from Robert Burns - 'To a Louse' Probably composed in 1785, around the same time as he wrote To a Mouse. 'You will all know it I am sure! A particularly audacious louse has made its way onto the bonnet of a local beauty, Jenny, while she sits in church. Jenny incorrectly believes that the winks and stares of the church congregation are in admiration of her 'gawze and lace' bonnet and vainly tosses her head.

O wad some Power the giftie gie us

To see oorsels as ithers see us!

It wad frae mony a blunder free us,

An' foolish notion:

What airs in dress an' gait wad lea'e us,

An' ev'n devotion!

In the English Revised Version of the bible, we read :-

And God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.

William Ellery Channing was the foremost Unitarian preacher in the United States in the early nineteenth century and one of Unitarianism's leading theologians. He was known for his articulate and impassioned sermons and public speeches, and

as a prominent thinker in the liberal theology of the day. Channing's religion and thought were among the chief influences on the New England Transcendentalists. The following is a short extract from an address called "*Likeness to God*", (1828) -

'Likeness to God is the supreme gift. He can communicate nothing so precious, glorious, blessed, as himself. To hold intellectual and moral affinity with the Supreme Being, to partake his spirit, to be his children by derivations of kindred excellence, to bear a growing conformity to the perfection which we adore, this is a felicity which obscures and annihilates all other good. It is only in proportion to this likeness, that we can enjoy either God or the universe.'

ADDRESS

Corporate Identity was one of my favourite subjects within the graphic design course I taught for many years in Further Education. The image a company or business presents to the world and the impact that a well designed co-ordinated identity can have - its logo, corporate colours, internal / external signage, letterheads and stationary - a BIG subject. A good Corporate Identity binds together all these elements to present a successful business image which will inspire confidence in its customers.

Sometimes companies need or want to change their image. A good example of this is Guinness. I am old enough to remember the company's jingle - 'Guinness Guinness gives you strength!' It was available on the NHS as a drink to build and strengthen people after illness. The company decided they no longer wished to have a 'health drink' image and pulled out of the NHS. A bold move. This may account for the extremely powerful and creative advertising they needed to employ to change their image to the dark stuff - 'the pint that is worth waiting for'!

I used to remind my students that even if all the smart, design elements were in place and working well within a Corporate Identity, if the person answering the phone..... or the person behind the counter....is rude - all the surface gloss of the Corporate Identity crumbles away. An effective CI has to go deeper - has to express an authentic commitment to service and customer care.

Whether we know it or not, we all have a personal Corporate Identity - the clothes we wear, our outward, surface appearance, our public face ...but we all know, this is not the full story!

Vain Jenny, in Burns' poem, believed she was being admired for her new bonnet - and would have been appalled to know the truth. I would suggest that most of us are not vain, like Jenny - most of us lack confidence about

our looks and how others see us. We are probably harder on ourselves than we need be. As I get older, I realise that on the whole, we are not judged or remembered by what we wear, what size we may be, or a good or bad hair day....we are remembered by a smile - a joke - a few kind words of encouragement or a sincere compliment...not what is seen on the surface, but expressions of what lies deeper within us.

If thoughts are kind, if hearts are open, then this will shine through all of the surface details of our public face and image, no matter how smart or shabby that may be.

William Ellery Channing was very concerned about the *imago dei* - the idea that God created humanity in his own image. This concept lies at the root of much of the teachings about human nature in the Western tradition. Human beings are supposed to have some sort of sacred nature, to be the children of God in the way that no other aspect of creation is, because we are the *imago dei*. The source of human goodness comes from God by virtue of our likeness to God. But what if it is the other way round? What if it is the opposite? We are not the *imago dei*. God did not create us. Humanity created God and when we did, we created God in our own image.

Does that sound shocking? I am not making an argument for atheism. I think that religious images are dangerous because they reduce the divine to a particular thing, a thing that can be quantified, studied and possibly dismissed. By the divine I mean the mystery of creation and destruction at the heart of the universe and the sense of awe and wonder with which it fills us.

If we allow the claim that the divine looks like, or is defined as, a particular thing we allow that it may not be another thing. This creates space for dangerous religious bigotry of the type - '*your God does not look like my God so therefore your God cannot be God*'. Religious images reflect the culture and the environment of the believer as much, if not more, than they offer hints of the divine essence. Forget this, and we will almost certainly enter into religious conflict. We should acknowledge the power that religious images have but only use them with great caution and with the knowledge that they are only partial symbols.

The universe is much too big for one image to capture its divine essence. In fact, the word God is too limiting for the totality of the universe. It is a *human construct* that tries to encapsulate all that we know and all that we do not know. Unitarian Universalist theologian Forrest Church writes this about the problem of the language and imagery of God: "...*God is not God's name. God is our name for that which is greater than all and yet present in each--the life force, the ground of being, being itself. So defined, God is beyond knowing or naming...*"

When we attempt to make an image of the divine we create pictures of ourselves and not of God. We have the *imago dei* because we are the ones thinking about God. We use human language and artifact to create our theologies and visions of God. These things are products of our culture, our experience and our physiology. They are much too limited to accurately describe being itself.

Channing believed we can trust that our divine powers can be growing and developing in us and that we will be ascending towards our Author. We end up developing what might be called a God's-eye point of view. We begin to take on one of God's brightest attributes, (according to Channing) : God's benevolence.

- The inclination to do good.
- To be kind.
- To do a charitable thing.
- To think about the common good of society, not just our own little self-centered concerns.

I think that lying deep within this concept of image - is the verb to imagine. In this way, human beings can emulate highest energy - they can rise above what may be accepted as the reality of the human condition war, violence, greed etcto what may yet be possible.

If we can imagine something, can we make it into reality?

After this service, let's smile with confidence into Jim's camera lens and let's hope that the image we create as a group of Unitarians on our website, will do justice to who we really are - our deeper selves, lying below the surface image. People who do their best within their everyday lives to turn *nouns into verbs* :-

Forgiveness into **forgive**
Inspiration into **Inspire**
understanding into **understand**
encouragement into **encourage**
creativity into **create**
shares into **sharing**
and image...into imagine!

Thank you for listening.