

Seeing the Image of God in Others

Tell the story of the Carmelite nun you met as a child and how her face glowed with holiness. Her face epitomized the notion of Awe, Reverence and Wonder that comes from a life totally committed to being in a prayerful relationship with God.

We have been doing a sermon series on discovering the awesomeness of God in the ordinary. Today I want to explore how we discover the awesomeness and wonder of God in those around us.

Scripture teaches that we are made in the image of God.

In the beginning God created human beings in God's own image.

*In the image of God they were created ;
male and female.*

How awesome, how wonderful that God has built into us some of His own qualities!

We share with Him the experience of personality,
the concepts of love, truth, beauty, meaning, will, and reason.

These attributes enable us to relate to God and to each other in ways that other created beings cannot.

Humankind has been singled out by God, to be endowed with a unique capacity for moral and rational awareness.

How special is that!

It is no accident that in Genesis 1, when God reaches His crowning creative act which is the formation of human life, the wording of the text changes from the impersonal "let there be" to the deliberate and intimate expression,

"Let us make humans in our image, after our likeness."

God's plan for humans included giving them responsibilities on the earth:

"And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth"

I find it awe inspiring that God intentionally created all human beings both male and female in His own spiritual and moral likeness to represent Him on Earth .

We are made by God, in the image of God.

And this is what makes *all* men and women deeply valuable.

This point is echoed throughout the Bible.

Reminding ourselves of this should encourage us to treat every person with great reverence.

In theology this is called **Imago dei**, Latin for "image of God." It is a foundational theological concept in Judaism and Christianity.

Clearly, *image* does not pertain to a bodily shape, because God is spirit.

Rather it refers to the fact that humans share or reflect God's attributes like reason, morality, personality, and creativity.

A relational understanding of *imago Dei* argues that the image is found in human relationships with God and each other.

This means that we can see God, know God, be inspired and amazed by God through our relationships with others.

While no one person can possibly reflect the whole image of God we can see awesome glimpses of God's image in the people around us.

1 Corinthians 12:27 states, *"Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it."*

Think of someone whom you consider reflects something of the image of God for you.

What is it about that person that seems especially godly to you?

Tell the story of the friends who lent us the money to come to New Zealand.

Now, while God created us all in God's image, sometimes it is difficult to see God's image in some of the people who cross our paths.

I would also like to acknowledge that sometimes it is difficult to see God's image in myself!

When I get snappy and snarly and hissy over something small or sulk when things don't go my way, I remind myself of that little poem by Henry Longfellow:

There was a little girl who had a little curl right in the middle of her forehead.

When she was good she was very good

When she was bad she was horrid.

At times it is hard to believe that I am made in the image of a loving, caring, patient, nurturing God.

Now let's think of those people who we find it difficult to love.

People who try your patience,

who behave badly.....

and then there are those people who do awful things....

How do we navigate bad behaviour while holding on to the Biblical concept that we are each of us made in the image of God?

I find it helpful to make a distinction between the image of God and the likeness of God.

The former refers to our innate resemblance to God our Creator that is common to all of us;

while the latter refers to the moral attributes and character of God that as Christ followers we endeavour our whole lives here on earth to nurture and cultivate.

It's a bit like the child who might resemble their parent but may lack the kindness, integrity, moral resilience and character of that parent.

When we find it challenging to recognise the image of God in others we must do two things: Firstly, we remind ourselves that the person in front of us is of inestimable value because God created them.

God has poured God's life into them and given them gifts and talents and God loves them.

Secondly, we endeavour to view them with the same lens of grace, unconditional love and compassion with which God views us with all our faults and failings.

I came across this poem *By Khanyi Tshabala* which I believe sums up the challenge of loving people who we find it difficult to love.

Every human is fighting a story you cannot see

Every human you meet is a story you entered somewhere in the middle

You missed the beginning

The thing that happened

The thing after the thing that happened

The years it took to become

Who stands before you

Read gently

You do not have all the pages

And the rest is still unwritten.

It is in the decision to assume a posture of unconditional love that we will both discover the image of God in others and reflect God's image to others.

If we are to discover the image of God in those around us then we must return to the Scriptural understanding of who God is,

God is Love.

1 John 4 reminds us of this.

God is love

²⁰ Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. ²¹ And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

John Lennon summed it up nicely, *Love is all we need.*

In the cut and thrust of our temporal lives, it is all too easy to forget that it is every human being's life's work to learn to love others as God loves us.

Jesus Christ demonstrated this in every aspect of his life and ministry and after all he is the fullest and most complete example of a human in God's image.

Scripture tells us that he is "the very image of God's substance" (Hebrews 1:3) "the image of the invisible God". (Colossians 1:15).

He was, and is, and ever shall be, love incarnate.

He taught us above all that if humans are visualise God, then we must love each other, for it is in loving with all its imperfect iterations that we best see and reflect the image of God.

See Matthew 25:31-40

And the righteous shall say:

'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

This love which mirrors the face or image of God is unconditional and is sourced in compassion.

Extending unconditional love to others is the essence of what it means to be a Christian.

Because Scripture has imparted the awesome truth to us that we have all been made in the image of God, we are called to treat each other with the utmost reverence, to see the image and likeness of God in each person, and having seen it, to honour it and to gracefully serve it. For in so doing, we express our love and reverence for our awesome, wonderful God.

Let us pray

Dear God,

Please forgive me when I struggle to love others and when I hold back grace.

Give me Your eyes to see people the way You see them,

Your ears to listen with compassion,

and Your heart to love even when it is hard.

Fill me with Your unconditional love so that it overflows to those who are difficult to love.

In Jesus' name, Amen

Activity

Light a candle on your way up to communion for someone you find difficult to love or for someone who bears the image of God to you today.