

Contemporary reading:

from “The Divine Feminine: the Biblical Images of God as Female” by Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, published by Crossroad New York 1984, quoting Rev Kathryn Piccard “Bible Images of God” (1977)

“I like Kathryn Ann Piccard’s emphasis on using the full spectrum of Biblical images of God - human, non-human, material and non-material. If we use only material analogies (God as rock, water and so forth) we are underemphasising the transcendent nature of God; we need also such nonmaterial images of God as love, word, spirit, verb, or light. If we use only human images of God (male or female) then anthropomorphism can be overdone and chauvinistic abuse of the natural environment can result. If we use role images (God as Father, or Husband, or Mother, for instance) to deify and/or justify sex role stereotypes, then a “sin of sexism occurs”. *It is all too easy to divert ourselves away from worshipping God to worshipping one particular image of God: and that is idolatry. The best way to heal ourselves of the idolatry we have fallen into is to utilise the full range of biblical imagery for God.*”

This is the fifth Sunday in July when we have been focussing on the Bible. During the previous four weeks, Susan has explored the Mamas and the Papas (the matriarchs and patriarchs) of ancient times; secondly, the Wisdom literature, particularly reflecting on the book of Job; then, the prophets, particularly Hosea (but Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King also got a mention); and last week, the Epistles (which Susan called First Century Social Media).

Throughout the month, she has reminded us that much of the Bible needs to be interpreted as metaphor, and in last week’s e-newsletter she quoted John Dominic Crossan, whom some of us have been studying:

“My point is NOT that those ancient people told literal stories and we are now smart enough to take them symbolically, but that they told them symbolically, and we are now dumb enough to take them literally...”

You may guess from my choice of the contemporary reading for today that I am leaning heavily on Mollenkott’s book as we explore lesser known Biblical passages.

I'm going to tease out some of the Bible passages, and then invite you to spend a few moments asking yourself:

What do these portrayals bring to my individual understanding of the Divine?

How do these metaphors speak to me?

To begin, there are a few Biblical references to God as mother. Perhaps the most poignant is in Isaiah 66:12, 13 (Good News Bible) where the prophet records God's promise of the new Jerusalem. This passage has been set to music beautifully by Brahms in his German Requiem:

"As a mother comforts her son, so will I myself comfort you" (NEB)

However, I want to explore some of the lesser known portrayals.

God as mother bear:

Hosea 13:4-8 particularly verse 8: "I will meet them like a she-bear robbed of her cubs, and tear their ribs apart" (NEB)

Two Sundays ago, Susan reflected on Hosea being one of the earliest of the so-called minor prophets, and she talked about how "the role of prophet is ... extremely uncomfortable". This passage certainly is!

For me this is the most difficult portrayal of God, so let's deal with it first! However, I think I found some insights which I hope you will also explore.

Mollenkott comments: "Understandably, Hosea's image of an infuriated female God has never achieved the popularity of the gentler, more sentimental imagery of God as a loving and self-sacrificial Mother"... what an understatement!

She continues: "Hosea's image depicts a Mother God turning in non-stereotypical rage at an ungrateful, unjust humanity."

The book of Hosea is a tough read, but I recommend you have a go. Hosea's prophecies about the idolatry and unfaithfulness of Israel towards God grew out of the metaphor of personal grief and anger at the continuing unfaithfulness of a spouse.

So when have you experienced such fury within yourself?

When have you been confronted with the challenge of harnessing that fury so that some good can come from it?

When have you ever felt righteous anger, or even outrage at some injustice, and been energised to fight for change?

And on the other hand, have you ever experienced being “supported” through such a negative experience, or experienced someone championing your cause?

[What does this portrayal bring to our individual understanding of the Divine?]

How does this metaphor speak to you?

God as mother hen:

(Luke 13:34 Good News Bible) “Jerusalem, Jerusalem! You kill the prophets, you stone the messengers God has sent you! How many times have I wanted to put my arms round all your people, just as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you would not let me!”

Thus/so Jesus likens himself to a mother hen as he grieves over Jerusalem. He would have been familiar with a number of references in the Psalms (ch 17: 8,9; ch 57:1; ch 61:4; ch 91:4) to God as mother hen.

Mollenkott writes: “...the primary significance of the image of God as mother hen probably remains personal and inward. God’s love for us is so sheltering and unconditional that we need not fear to face either ourselves or others. If we can trust ... the wing-images of the Psalmist, [then] the same Person whom Jesus called Father was, like Jesus, a reliably protective mother hen as well.”

God as mother eagle:

The King James Version writes: “As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings: so the Lord did lead him (Moses)”. Deuteronomy 32:11-12 – newer translations use neutral pronouns, which is unfortunate...

I just so enjoy the eagle th-th-th-thing

I need to declare that I cannot understand the original languages...

Mollenkott writes: “I have been told that the mother eagle takes the eaglets on her wings, swoops downward suddenly to force them into solo flight, then stays close to swoop under them again whenever they grow too weary to

continue on their own. What a picture of a loving God, caring nurturantly for us when we are weak, yet always aiming at the goal of our maturity and internalised strength rather than at morbid dependency upon a force external to ourselves!”

I talked to the children about the New Zealand dabchicks who carry their babies on their backs, even when they dive to feed on the bottom of the wetland: the babies just hang on! Now that is surely a picture of trust...

New Zealand black swans are very protective of their babies: one parent will swim in front and create a slipstream to make it easier for the little ones to swim along. The other parent will bring up the rear.

But when it's time for the babies to learn how to fly, the parents will appear to be quite vicious, and chase the babies along, pulling at their tail feathers to get them to take off and fly away...

Mollenkott writes that “the difference between God-as-hen and God-as-eagle is the difference between intimate cuddling and dynamic empowerment. We need both.... The same God who as mother eagle shoves us out of our nest and teaches us to fly and feed ourselves is also, at other times, the mother hen clucking for us to relax within the security of her loving wings.”

When have you felt protected? And when have you felt “pushed out of the nest” and sent on your way to mature?

[What does this portrayal bring to our individual understanding of the Divine?]

How do these metaphors speak to you?

God as female homemaker searching for her coin:

Jesus told this story at one of the many times he was being challenged by the upright establishment academics of his time (in other words, the Pharisees and teachers of the law) because he was being friends with the outcasts of society – he even ate with them...

I wonder who Jesus would have a meal with nowadays: the drug dealers? the bullies?

Every time I read Luke chapter 15, with its three parables about the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost prodigal son, I marvel that the story about the lost coin has survived two thousand years of committees deciding which writings would stay approved, and which stories would continue to be recorded.

The three stories are about repentance. That subject is huge, and for another day. But I would just comment that it has been suggested that repentance is about 'turning around'. In these stories I think repentance is about reconnection (the shepherd and the sheep, the homemaker and the coin, the father and the son).

Mollenkott writes: "To those of Jesus' listeners who had 'ears to hear', it must have seemed fresh and stereotype-smashing to hear Jesus talk about God as a woman - and a woman with money of her own!"

There is an interesting comment in a book Susan lent me: "Poet and Peasant: a literary-cultural approach to the parables in Luke" by Kenneth E Bailey (published by William B Eerdmans Publishing Company 1976). Bailey spent twenty years in the Middle East, particularly in Lebanon. He makes the point that the peasant village is, to a large extent, self-supporting, making its own cloth and growing its own food. Cash is a rare commodity. (We might call it a subsistence economy.)

He writes: "It has often been observed that the coin may be part of the women's jewelry or dowry. However, a distinction must be made between the Bedouin and the villager. Bedouin women wear their dowry in the form of coins hanging on their veils... Village women wear coins on necklaces. Obviously the beauty of the necklace as a whole is destroyed when one coin is lost. The loss is more than the value of the single coin." (end of quote)

And so, said Jesus, after a relentless search, and when the coin was found, when there was reconnection, there was great rejoicing...

I wonder where Jesus got the idea for that parable – maybe he saw his mother very hassled one day, and then saw her relief and delight at being reunited with the object of great value...

He was a great observer...

When have you lost something of great significance, and been very upset that you just could not find it, and searched relentlessly, and then rejoiced when you were reunited?

What does this story bring to our individual understanding of the Divine?

How have I experienced this reconnection?

How does this story connect with me?

So: I draw your attention to the end of the contemporary reading for today:

“It is all too easy to divert ourselves away from worshipping God to worshipping one particular image of God: and that is idolatry. The best way to heal ourselves of the idolatry we have fallen into is to utilise the full range of biblical imagery for God.”

Finally:

As a congregation, we have spent five weeks focussing on the Bible. Some have expressed an opinion that it may now be irrelevant to our spiritual journeys.

But I want to respond by saying that every week (when) I go on duty as a Justice of the Peace at one of the Service Centres around town, I know that I need to have a Bible with me, as I may have to “administer an affidavit” as the instructions say:

Someone may need to swear on oath a statement or declaration which may be used in court.

When that happens, they have to hold the Bible (or some other book which is sacred to them – the Quran, or the Bhagavad Gita) and say “I swear by almighty God...”

Or, what is more of a personal challenge, I as the JP have to say (looking them straight in the eye): “Do you swear by almighty God, that the contents of this your affidavit are true, so help you God?”

I tell this story because it illustrates how the Bible is an integral part of our nation’s culture, be it our church culture, or our legal culture. It is part of what we are as a nation. So it is important that we continue to value it and explore its messages for us.

I give the last word to Susan, from last week’s e-newsletter:

“...There is a need for constructive reassessment of the original biblical context, and more careful interpretation (in order to) mine its treasures. Let us not lose out on the wisdom we need more than ever before.”

And from one of the hymns she wrote for last week’s service:

“Love shines forth from this sacred book”.

So may it be.