

I wonder if you have ever considered what it means to be made in the image of God? The message we have just heard about God making humans tells us that every single person has inherent value. The statement that we are all made in God's image is fundamental to what we believe about God and how we understand the story of the Bible. But although scripture uses the word in various places it's not immediately obvious what it means and we have to do some work if we want to find out.

To give an example: when we hear the expression "he/ she is the image of his father or her mother" does that make us think of purely physical attributes or other characteristics as well? And when it is linked to God, does it mean that human beings and God share similar physical characteristics?

*[Picture of display in Lichfield cathedral displayed here]* It is full of selfies. Thousands of children from across the diocese have drawn simple images of themselves, and these are displayed in a stunning installation suspended beneath the great central spire, the ever-moving faces swaying gently in the ever-changing light. This beautiful artwork is called *In the Image and Likeness: a Constellation of Images* and Bishop Michael said "it demonstrates very powerfully the enormous variety of our people in this part of England."

Or perhaps it suggests that humanity and God share similar moral values and the ability to exercise free will? Most Christian (and to some extent Jewish and Muslim) interpretations of this passage are influenced by Greek philosophy, which arrived later, bringing with it the notion of a "soul" that exists separately from the body. But that's not in the message we had read to us.

What does this bold claim really mean? "Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

Firstly, when we hear the word 'us' it implies that God is not alone when he does this. Here is the first major revelation in the Old Testament of the fact that God is not a single unity but that there are other Persons within the Godhead, and he is talking to the other Persons involved. I will unpack the word 'God' a little more after the second reading but this theme will develop as we go further in the story of the Bible.

Secondly, the Hebrew word for "image" used in the phrase "image of God" is "*selem*". As I said just now, we have to do some work to tease out more about what "image of God" means, and this word gives us something to learn from. Elsewhere in the Bible it is often translated "idol", as we shall discover.

Surprised? How about this? - in the Ancient Near East, "Image of God" was a title reserved for kings. These special, chosen rulers were regarded as representatives of the gods, reigning on earth on their behalf. Kings were often considered so closely connected to the gods that they were divine themselves. This made the king special and separate from his people.

Think about Egypt - we are probably aware that the Sphinx has been put in place to guard the tombs of three powerful Egyptian kings. These kings, as a physical representation of their god, ruled on his behalf but were also believed to be gods themselves. They were deified and worshipped and so needed a guardian such as the Sphinx. (But for today, I want to concentrate on the Bible text alone and see it through the eyes of those who knew the Hebrew scriptures in the time of Jesus.)

Thirdly, Genesis tells us that humans were created with a purpose: not just to be autonomously unique, but vocationally set apart. When God says he will make humans in his image, he has a purpose in mind that he makes clear: they are going to have dominion - or “reign” - and be “fruitful.” This reigning and fruitfulness reflects the image of God! This is truly innovative and does not appear in any other creation story. We are to subdue the earth, bring it under control, and reign over it. This in fact is what it means to be made in God’s image—to reign over creation in God’s name, as a steward, manager, or royal governor. As a king would plant a statue of himself in a conquered territory to stake his claim as ruler of that land, so God plants his living images in his world to implement his reign over it. Our reigning is a call to advance the creation. God created a beautiful space and wanted to share it with humans in a partnership. We were called to work together with God at making this creation as amazing as possible. We read a modern version of Psalm 8 together...

*What are mere mortals that you should think about them, human beings that you should care for them? Yet you made them only a little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honour. You gave them charge of everything you made, putting all things under their authority— the flocks and the herds and all the wild animals, the birds in the sky, the fish in the sea, and everything that swims the ocean currents.*

Very different, for instance, from the Babylonian Creation Myth [*described in separate leaflet*]. In that, the gods created humans to do the drudgery so they wouldn’t have to. What a contrast to our reading in Genesis, where we are created to co-rule with God, having his characteristics and his outlook on life to enable us to look after the earth that he made.

In the second reading humankind has been given a similar mandate, but now they are also called to “tend to” the garden. *“The Lord God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to tend and watch over it.”* - Notice the language of purpose here. They were placed in the garden to take care of the garden. So what does it mean that image bearers of God are ones who reign, are fruitful, and tend to the created potential (a garden) around them? Adam and Eve were placed within a sacred space in close communion with God. Their purpose was to take care of this garden, multiply, make more gardens, and creatively make them better. They were to take what God had given them and do something beautiful with it.

It also reinforces the fact that humanity is different from the animals - by naming the animals, it showed a caring for them but not a fear. Adam was ruling over them in a positive way.

Finally, I want to draw your attention to the different ways that these two passages talk about God. This is because they are different words in the Hebrew. In Genesis 1, the Hebrew word is Elohim, the Creator God who created the universe out of nothing, whereas in Genesis 2 it is Yahweh, which is often translated “Lord” and implies relationship and interaction - another theme that we will be following in the weeks to come.

So, the image of God includes both who humans are and what they do. We are the visible representations of the invisible God. If one wants to know what God looks like, simply look at humanity, the crowning jewel of creation and the only creature made in God’s image and likeness. We are called to reign and tend the earth as he would.

To finish, here is a quote from Ravi Zacharias...

There was a man who came to Jesus and said to him: *Is it all right to pay taxes to Caesar?* Jesus looked at him and said: *Do you have a coin?* The man said *yes* ..so Jesus said *give me that coin* and then asked.. *whose image is on it?* The man said *Caesar...* So *give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.* The man should have asked a follow up question... *what belongs to God?* Jesus’ answer would have been *whose image is on you?* No other founder of a world religion would have put the man in that place.