

Life and faith in rural Britain...

COUNTRYWAY



In the image of God

The creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2 are endlessly fascinating. The language of God's creation is at once both breathtakingly beautiful, and mysterious and strange. We hear God talking, speaking thought and intention into the cosmos, which coalesces into reality. All the things we know and encounter have their origin in the breath of God, God's creative Spirit, bringing all things into existence from nothing. And from these first things all else unfolds in the course of God's good time, from cosmic black holes to new species of creatures on our planet. We are still discovering the miracles of God's creation.

In the midst of this, the stories draw us into the question we all want answered: how did we come to exist, to be part of creation? After all, the creation is good and loved by God without us: night, day, seasons, plants, creatures – all of these are part of the tapestry of beauty and complexity ordained by God. Why, then, have human beings come into existence?

We are told something very mysterious. I like Robert Alter's translation the best:

And God created the human in his image
In the image of God he created him
Male and female he created them.
And God blessed them. (Genesis 1:27)*

Part of God's creation

This means first of all that humans are also part of God's creation. We are part of that same tapestry of divine love that characterises the bringing into being of stars, water, insects and volcanos. And we know this because our bodies are made from elements that were once part of stars; the water in our bodies has passed through all kinds of animals and plants. We are connected to the cosmos and to the planet in every cell we possess. And when we die, those components of our mortal remains are recycled.

But at the same time, there is something very particular about being human. This is offered to us as being created in the 'image of God', the *imago Dei*. That is the source of our identity as spiritual beings, intimately connected. But what does this really mean?

There are various theological interpretations of *imago Dei*, but I like to start with the language in the verse above, which takes the form of a mirror: 'And God created the human in his image/In the image of God he created him'.

So there is something about humans that should mirror God's creative self, that presses us to do God's will 'on earth as in heaven'. That should ideally mean that humankind AND the creation we care for, sees God reflected from us, should see the goodness of creation radiating from us, from our awareness of God, our beautiful relationship with God. It makes no difference whether we are male or female; all humans are God-mirrors. And it

is important to read past the creation verse into the following one: 'God blessed them'. Blessing flows from the essential goodness and rightness of the creation of humans. God sends us his love and delight in us.

An imperfect mirror

Except of course, we are *not* perfect mirrors. The story of Genesis unfolds into tragedy. Adam and Eve, as all of us, move away from that perfect, reciprocal relationship with God. And, just as a mirror stops reflecting perfectly if you angle it away from the light, so the 'image' is dimmed and broken when the humans insert their own will against obedience to the Creator's wish for them.

But the 'image of God' is not lost in them. The mirror is darkened – to use Paul's phrase (1 Corinthians 13:12) – but the image of God in all of us needs to be restored.

Jesus is God's perfect mirror. (That is one reason why theologians have argued he was without sin.) In Jesus, we see that first creation made clear to us (the 'second Adam') and what Jesus also does is to show in word and deed what it takes for us to change the angle of reflection back to the blazing glory of the knowledge of God the Father: repent and believe. In Jesus we see the Genesis story as it was supposed to work out; humans doing God's will in creation where 'even the winds and the waves obey him' (Matthew 8:27). The salvation offered to us in Jesus's death and resurrection mends the mirrors within us and means that we can be with God and live with God in the context of that first blessing.

The image of God in rural communities

What does the idea of the 'image of God' mean for our identity as Christians today, especially living and working in rural communities? First, we should notice that we are part of creation, not superior to it. We are not automatically loved more than animals, plants, stars or seas.

Second, it means that the mirror of God in human beings is dimmed but not gone. Our behaviour continues to darken the mirror: we fight wars, subjecting ourselves, other creatures and our planet to extraordinary violence and destruction. We are selfish, arrogant and stupid a lot of the time. But at the same time the mirror in us is the pathway to God's call to us, our need and desire for relationship with God, the spirituality that is a journey in every human. No person is exempt from this prompt of God in us.

Third, Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life because he shows to us the perfect mirror of God, what we need to do and to become: follow him and be like him as perfectly as we can. That means undoing and repairing the effects of human sin, caring for others and mending our ravaged planet.

And finally, we are *still* blessed. God continues to accompany us, loving us. Our task is still the same one to which we are called in Genesis: to care for God's creation, to be stewards of all that is created, to walk with God in the adventure of Eden, our planet. If we thought a bit more about how we are intended to be mirrors of God's love for the world, perhaps we would glimpse 'on earth as it is in heaven' more clearly.

Dr Anne Richards
National Adviser: mission theology
Mission and Public Affairs, Church of England
anne.richards@churchofengland.org
@AnneRRichards

* Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, WW Norton & Co., 2018