

Palm Sunday
April 5, 2009
Fr. Tom Elliott

Images of God

Mark 11:1-10
Isaiah 50:4-7
Psalm 22
Philippians 2:6-11
Mark 15:1-39

What is the first image that comes to your mind when I say the word, “God”? From the very beginning of our lives, images of God are being constructed in our minds. This is both a very good thing and problematic; it is good in that we rely on mental constructs of God in order to build our relationship with Him, but it is problematic in that every single human concept of God is going to fall short of the reality. Often, it is during very traumatic and difficult times that we become aware of how inadequate our image of God truly is. It is also during such times that people will inadvertently say things about God that are very twisted and can perpetuate a warped image of God.

Father Tony Stanganelli, in his article, “Finding God in Times of Grief” in Journey magazine, shares some of these twisted phrases in what he calls the “ten stupidest things that people say to people who are in grief.”

The one who has lost a loved one through a long-term illness often hears: At least they’re not suffering any more. The one who has lost a loved one through a sudden accident often hears: At least they didn’t suffer. To the one who has lost a spouse after many years of marriage we say: At least you have some good memories. The one who has lost a baby or a child often hears: You don’t know: maybe if they didn’t die something worse would have happened later on.... The one who has lost a baby through a miscarriage is often told: You can always have more children.¹

Not only are these comments insensitive, they can also perpetuate poor images of God. Therefore, we must address throughout our lives the question of whether or not our image, or mental construct, of God is healthy (leading us closer to Him), or unhealthy (leading us away from Him). The celebration of Palm Sunday gives us an excellent opportunity to look more closely at the importance of our image of God.

The Palm Sunday service provides us with two seemingly opposed images of God in Jesus Christ. There is the image of God (in Christ) from the reading at the very beginning of our celebration, where Jesus rode triumphantly into Jerusalem as a king. People crowded the streets, laying palm branches and cloaks on the road in front of Him as He made His way into the city. They cried out, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is to come! Hosanna in the highest!” (Mark 11:9b-10). This is a seemingly different image of God than what we heard in today’s Gospel reading, which described Jesus as being, not honored, but rather, mocked.

¹ Journey, volume 18, number 2, May 2008.

They clothed him in purple and, weaving a crown of thorns, placed it on him. They began to salute him with, “Hail, King of the Jews!” and kept striking his head with a reed and spitting upon him. They knelt before him in homage. And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple cloak, dressed him in his own clothes, and led him out to crucify him.

-Mark 15:17-20

While neither of these Scriptural images of God gives us the full picture of who He is, they do give us a chance to see how challenging it can be when God invites us to let go of one image for a different one. The people in the first Gospel reading today had the image of Christ as the king. However, their understanding of His kingship was very shallow. They wanted Him to ride triumphantly into Jerusalem and set things straight with the Romans, reestablishing the superiority of the Jewish nation. When Jesus was not the type of king they had imaged in their minds, they became very angry and disappointed. On one level we can say that God was inviting them to let go of their immature image of Him for a healthier one. If you and I are honest, we will admit that God has sometimes not been who we expected Him to be for us and it has left us feeling angry and disappointed. In such times, we must allow God to give us a new image and a new understanding.

At the risk of over-simplifying the spectrum of mental constructs we have of God, I want to offer just two extremes. On the one end of the spectrum are the transcendent² images of God. When these are taken to their greatest extreme, God becomes one to whom we can never truly relate, love, or trust. It's as though we place ourselves in a box where God cannot find us and, therefore, we never see or hear from God. The root of such extreme images is often anger.

At the other end of the spectrum are the immanent³ images of God. When these are taken to their greatest extreme, God becomes so familiar that we lose reverence for Him. It's as though we have placed God in a box so that we see and hear from Him whatever we *want* to see or hear from Him. He becomes little more than a projection of our own selves. The root of these extreme images is usually pride.

Every mental construct of God falls somewhere within this spectrum—between transcendent and immanent. Recall the image you first thought of at the beginning of this homily. Where would you place it on this spectrum? Here is a list of some more common images of God. Which ones do you feel are transcendent and which ones do you feel are immanent?

Father (Matthew 6:9)	Teacher/Rabbi (Matthew 23:8)	Advocate (1 John 2:1)
Creator (Romans 1:20, 25)	Master (Luke 8:24)	Comforter (John 14:26)
Messiah (Col. 1:3, John 1:41)	Bridegroom (John 3:29)	Healer (Exodus 15:26b)
Eternal King (1 Timothy 1:17)	Savior (John 4:42)	Love (1 John 4:16b)
Most High (Hebrews 7:1)	Bread of Life (John 6:35)	Redeemer (Isaiah 54:5)
Consuming Fire (Hebrews 12:29)	Light of the World (John 8:12)	Firstborn of All Creation (Col. 1:15)
Peace (Hebrews 13:20)	Good Shepherd (John 10:11)	Word (John 1:1)
Lawgiver (James 4:12)	True Vine (John 15:1)	Lamb of God (John 1:36)
Judge (James 4:12)	Holy One (Acts 3:14)	Chosen One (Luke 9:35)

This week, I invite us to be conscious of what our image of God looks like and how God might be inviting us to let go of it for a new understanding of Himself.

² The word “transcendent” means “extending or lying beyond the limits of ordinary experience” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary).

³ The word “immanent” means “being within the limits of possible experience or knowledge” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary).