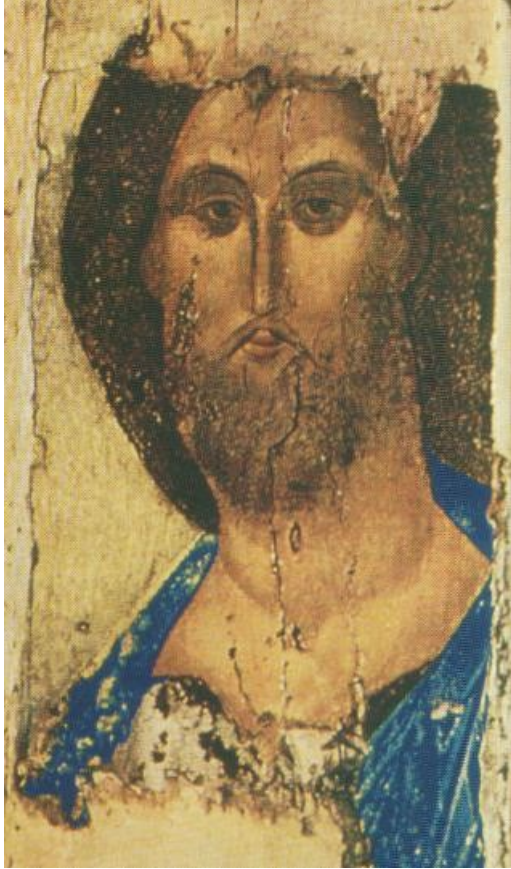


The Mystery of the Broken Mirror



**Unwrapping Christian Faith
and becoming who we really are**

Tony Luke

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I. Unwrapping the Parcel

Allow me to introduce you to the concept of "dits". I can guarantee that you will never have heard of "dits" before, since it was a word coined by my older son when he was making his first efforts to talk at the age of about eighteen months. Like all of us, he was engaged in the mammoth task of trying to make sense of the complex environment of people, objects, activities, sounds, colours, smells and sensations which surrounded him. He was beginning the lifelong process of sorting, ordering and categorising information which would come his way. He was learning to compare and contrast new experiences with previous ones, making mental notes of similarities or differences of shape, texture, sound and colour and assessing whether they aroused positive or negative feelings in him. Somewhere in this process my son invented and articulated for the very first time the concept of "dits". "Dits" was for him any object which swung open when pulled, be it a door, a window, a hinged lid or a gate. He would point to the object in question with a look of awestruck recognition on his face, at the same time exclaiming to a delighted audience that expression, which, for him summed up the essential qualities of what he had discovered - "Dits!"

Sadly perhaps, "ditsness" is now only fondly remembered by my son's adult loved ones, because his vocabulary has long since widened to include many more categories. He learnt long ago to distinguish between door, window, lid and gate. Even "car" was eventually expanded to include such subcategories as Peugeot, Volkswagen and Vauxhall, estate car, hatch-back and coupe. The childlike world of "dits" is gone forever.

From the moment of our birth if not before, for who knows what information we receive and process whilst still in the womb, we begin the process of sifting and sorting, relating new experiences to remembered ones, naming and describing. We put the world around us into mental and verbal pigeonholes, some of which are

shared and inherited categories given to us by the language and culture within which we are growing up; others are our own personal categories, attitudes and prejudices which serve to forewarn us of what might be pleasant or unpleasant, dangerous or helpful, good or bad, to be embraced or avoided. At some point, hopefully, we widen the concept of good and bad to extend beyond that which is simply good or bad for us and begin to formulate the idea of shared and universal values.

In this light, we can understand certain aspects of the creation myths in the book of Genesis: Adam naming the animals, Adam naming his wife, the human desire to possess the knowledge to distinguish between good and evil, the fruit which brings about the loss of innocence and introduces moral responsibility.

There seems to be an innate human need to categorise, to "give a name" to life's experiences, formulating words and concepts to be the pigeonholes in our sorting-office. As we mature, age and experience teaches us that words and categories not only have to expand and subdivide in order to accommodate different shades of experience, but also that the edges blur, blend and overlap, challenging the artificial categories we have imposed. Natural historians thought they knew what constituted a mammal until they encountered the duck-billed platypus. Furry - yes. Milk-producing - yes. But egg-laying? And with a beak? Just as well it has no wings!

For years it has been a joke in my family that I am colourblind, This accusation is not intended in the obvious sense of driving through red traffic-lights and stopping at green ones, but in the sense of how I describe certain colours. Some shades of orange, for instance, seem to me to be bright red. What others regard as purple seems quite blue to me. The artist in me knows that, in between those points on the spectrum we call yellow and red, there is an infinite variety of possible mixtures and shades. Where orange ends and red begins is literally anyone's guess. We make our own subjective decision. It may well be, of course, that all eyes see colours slightly differently, but that does not necessarily make me colour-blind, My brain just categorises in a different way. I rest the case for my

defence! In this way words and categories can be restrictive rather than descriptive. How inadequate the word "green" is to describe the colour of a woodland in summer. To dismiss it all as green does an injustice to the variety of shade and colour contained within creation.

Words and concepts are nothing more than convenient parcels, which enable us to impose an order of sorts and so make sense of the world as we experience it. They are also useful tools in the business of communication. To put it bluntly, if I want the decorator to paint my walls in magnolia emulsion, there needs to be an established convention about what constitutes walls, magnolia and emulsion, so that I do not end up with a red, glossy ceiling! Language is the tool of convention. Without an accepted agreement about meaning, language fails to communicate. We are aware of the parcel, but the content eludes us. Some language is designed specifically with this aim in mind, to exclude all but the initiated. We call it jargon.

If there is for me an apparent confusion over the boundaries of the parcel marked "orange", how much more confusion is to be found when one moves into the realm of more abstract ideas such as emotions, qualities and values. The word "love", for example, is a parcel which contains a whole range of different emotions. I may say that I love my wife, my children, my parents, my dog or a glass of malt whisky, and all those statements will be perfectly true, yet the emotion conveyed by that word "love" will be different in each case. Sometimes it is necessary to change the parcel in order to make the meaning clear. In the modern world, the word "love" tends to be understood predominantly in romantic or erotic terms. When speaking of the Christian understanding of love, the meaning is therefore often better conveyed by words such as "compassion" or "service".

So we come to the main purpose of this book: to explore the reality contained in the parcels which we call Christian belief or doctrine. It should be clear by this point that all language has profound limitations. The problem with traditional religious language

in a post-Christian era is that the conventional understandings, which enable communication to take place, have in many cases been lost. Fewer and fewer people are familiar with the culture in which much of the mystery of Christian faith is parcelled up, with the result that Christian language becomes little more than inaccessible jargon, effectively excluding people from realities which are of the profoundest importance for their lives.

A few years ago I introduced a sermon on Christmas morning by holding up a beautifully wrapped Christmas present, I admired the wrapping, and openly decided that it was much too splendidly packaged to spoil by opening it. Instead, I was going to pack it safely away with the Christmas decorations so that I could admire it again next year. The purpose of my momentary insanity was to reinforce the idea that most people treat Christmas in this way; admire the packaging but forget the content. Indeed, for many the package becomes the content.

Sadly it does not stop at Christmas. Even those who regard themselves as thoroughly familiar with Christian language and belief act and speak as though believing in and admiring a package is all that is required. We should rather see the packaging as an invitation to open it and discover the content, namely the mystery we call, in English, God. This is the reality; a reality we have to encounter and be encountered by. The words and concepts we use to describe and communicate this encounter can never be a substitute for the encounter itself. Christian doctrine and language are not ends in themselves but invitations to discover and live in the reality which they seek to describe. If this book serves no other purpose, let it issue a plea that we unwrap the parcel and let the Mystery we call God encounter us all.

2. Naming the Mystery

I vividly remember one of my mathematics teachers telling the story of Flatland. He drew some flat people, the inhabitants of Flatland and their flat-mates (his joke, not mine) on the board, explaining that, not only did they have left-handed and right-handed people, but also left-facing and right-facing folk too.

The limitations of their lifestyle should be evident. They had terrible trouble talking to one another, because they could only talk face to face with those of their fellow-citizens whose faces pointed in the opposite direction to their own. Right-facers could only engage in conversation with their fellow Right-facers, if one of them was prepared to stand on his or her head. This was the source of endless arguments, into which Left-facers would become involved as referees and go-betweens.

One day an alien came into the mad world of Flatland. He claimed to have come from a world with three dimensions, whatever that might mean, and had some very peculiar habits. He seemed to be able to face both ways, though not of course at the same time. Certainly he seemed to be able to decide at will whether to be a Right- or Left-facer. He also had this alarming habit of disappearing God-knows-where and reappearing again, a habit which was particularly infuriating if you were talking with him only to realise that he had somehow removed himself to the back of you without going round in the usual way. Moreover, he had this knack of making bits of himself disappear. One minute he was shaking your hand, the next minute he had no hands at all or was tapping you on the back of your head whilst still standing in front of you. Very curious! They thought he was some sort of angel, because they could not understand what was meant by another dimension.

Unlike the Flatlanders we are used to three dimensions and our primary contact with the three-dimensional world of our experience is through our senses. We see, touch, hear, taste and

smell our environment, and, based on the evidence of our senses, we name and categorise its contents in the way we described in the first chapter, Notwithstanding the fact that our senses often play tricks on us, some would say that the evidence of our senses is the only information about the world on which we can rely. Everything else is subjective and impossible to verify. This is surely a case of "Flatlander syndrome", allowing our limitations to restrict our understanding. In fact, if we stop to think about it, we already live in a kind of fourth dimension of experience; the dimension of time. As well as being aware that an object occupies three-dimensional space, I am also able to observe change that takes place in that object from one moment in time to another and sequence those changes in my mind. It is interesting to reflect how people down the ages have sought to capture and reproduce these dimensions of our experience. Paper, canvas and photographic film have enabled two-dimensional "stills" of our environment to be produced. The advent of the "movie" allowed those images to change and interact in the dimension of time. Achieving the same effect with the third dimension has proved more elusive. Until the age of computer graphics came along we had to be satisfied with the use of perspective in graphic art and the offerings of sculpture to reproduce that third dimension. Now the age of "virtual reality" is upon us are we at last truly master of our own dimensions?

Art, however, from primitive cave-painting to computer-produced moving graphics, is not simply engaged in the task of treating faithful and lifelike reproductions of the world around us. The artist seeks to interpret his or her perceptions of the world and arouse feelings in the beholder. In this way the artist makes use of the given dimensions to touch deeper aspects of human experience. The artist reminds us that we relate to the world around us in ways which go beyond space and time alone. We experience much that is of great significance to us through our emotional and intuitive senses. How I feel about a person goes beyond how they look, what their voice sounds like and whether they suffer from body odour, though any or all of these things may effect my feelings about them. The old saying, "beauty is in the eye of the beholder", serves as a reminder that though the image of light which enters two different

eyes may be identical, the inner responses to that image will almost certainly be different. The relationship between a person and their environment is as much determined by emotional responses as by sensual ones. In that respect, seeing is not believing, for we cannot "see" beauty, love, happiness, peace, hope and a whole range of emotions and conditions in the same way I can see my hand or feel the wind on my face. We nevertheless know when they are there or when they are not there and this presence or absence makes such a difference to our lives.

Ideas such as "Unwrapping the Mystery of God", "the Encounter with God" are very difficult for most of us to understand. After all, we consume enough of our mental and emotional energy trying to come to terms with that more immediate mystery we call Life. Bringing God into the equation seems to make things more complicated than they already are. It is perhaps for this reason that, just as many people endeavour to cope with life by living at a distance from their feelings, so many prefer to suppress their innate faith in God. In this respect we differ from the Flatlanders. They had no conception of another dimension; it was completely beyond their experience. We humans already believe almost instinctively that life is somehow more complex and more mysterious than our limitations allow us to fully experience. Moreover, it could be argued that we often make a deliberate choice to restrict our perception, to "blind" ourselves to the mysterious enormity of reality in order to cope with the more immediate demands of life.

Here we stand at the very threshold of faith. Faith recognises the mystery of life, recognises the limitations, often self-imposed, of our perception of reality, and gives the mystery a name. Naming the mystery enables us to make a response to it. Like Moses on the mountain confronted by the presence of the mystery of God in the burning bush, we need to name the mystery:

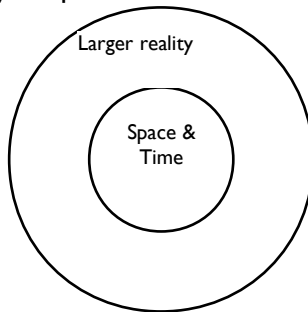
"If I go to the Israelites and tell them that the god of their forefathers has sent me to them, and they ask me his name, what shall I say?" God answered, "I am what I am. Tell them that I Am

has sent you to them" (Exodus 3, v. 13)

Like Jacob in the desert, we awake from sleep and look at the familiar and quite ordinary scene around us with new enlightened eyes, the eyes of faith:

"Truly the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it! How fearsome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, this is the gate of heaven!" (Genesis 28, v. 16)

In order to perceive reality and experience life fully in all its dimensions we need to be aware of the presence of mystery, of that which is present but beyond us. In other words, in our perception of reality we are drawing a larger circle which contains the circle of the immediate reality of space and time:



The diagram represents what is true in human experience; that our immediate experience is part of a larger mystery, a mystery which contains us, but which is not itself contained or containable! The inner circle is an artificial one; it represents only our limited human perceptions. To see beyond the inner circle requires "vision", a new and unrestricted way of seeing.

That concept of "vision" recalls one of my favourite modern Christian hymns, which is based upon an ancient Irish prayer and begins with the words: "Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart." Those words always intrigue me because they have a double meaning, and both meanings have something important to say. The

words are an invocation to God, praying that God may ever be present to my sight and also that I might see in the way God sees. "Vision" can mean both what I see and the way in which I see. As I seek to observe the mystery of God I discover that God is to be found on both sides of the circle; God is in my very act of seeing, as well as the object of my sight.

So we have encountered the mystery, or the mystery has encountered us. We have caught a glimpse of God or God has directed our glimpsing and as an act of faith we have "named the mystery". It is the ultimate act of naming, the end and goal of the process on which my young son embarked with his concept of "dits". Some people would argue here that, in naming the mystery, they would prefer not to use God-language at all. Like the great English poet Wordsworth, confronted by the mystery of reality, they would perhaps prefer to speak of:

"Wisdom and Spirit of the Universe! Thou Soul that art the eternity of thought, that givest to forms and images a breath and everlasting motion..." (The Prelude, Book I, vv, 401-4)

Whether we use traditional God-language at all, we need to be aware that these words are still only packaging; what matters is our awareness of and encounter with the reality, the desire to know and to be known.

3. The Making of the Mirror

Allow me to tell you about Alfie and the stars. Alfie was a next door neighbour of mine quite a number of years ago. One late autumn evening he and his wife and a few other friends had come round for dinner. After we had served the coffee I noticed that Alfie had gone outside to smoke a cigarette, so I joined him in the back yard, only to find him standing gazing at the stars. It was one of those crisp, cloudless night skies, when, even in a town, the stars seem to sparkle especially clearly. After a short time of gazing silently at the stars together, Alfie said "That's God, you know" then turned and went back inside the house. Alfie was no great theologian or even the sort of person one would normally think of as the religious sort - he was a hairdresser by day and by night used to play lead guitar in a rock band; but he recognised the presence of the Creator within the majesty of Creation. If we picture once again the circle diagram of the previous chapter, Alfie recognised that God is to be found on both sides of the circle, both within and beyond Creation.

Spiritual awareness is one thing, but it is another to claim, as most religions do, that this greater reality, which contains us and yet is not contained by us, also created us and is still creating us. In other words, that this greater reality is not simply an atmosphere like the air we breathe, but is dynamic, living and active. Moreover, it is the testimony of people of all faith traditions down the ages that this greater reality is not only active but also personal and able to encounter us. Our experience of God is never akin to a spectator sport; once we have seen God, we are never able to remain as casual observers. The astronomer observes the stars in order to plot them and try to understand them, Alfie is brought face to face with the presence of the Creator as he reflects on their beauty and the vastness of space. He names the mystery behind what he sees.

Once we have taken the step of faith and named the mystery, it seems that we are embraced by the one we have named and we discover ourselves as creatures. Alfie, as he gazed at the stars, was caught up in an experience which he named as God. Just for a moment he was "taken out of himself". How often we use phrases like that to describe how we feel when we experience something incredibly beautiful or awe-inspiring. We feel at once incredibly small and insignificant and yet caught up in something vast and mysterious. No longer self-contained worlds in ourselves, as we so often think we are; we discover that we are a part of something bigger and more wonderful, something filled with the very life and being of the One who Encounters us.

This experience is described in the Psalms:-

"O Lord, our Lord,

how majestic is thy name in all the earth !..

When I look at the heavens, the work of thy fingers,

the moon and the stars which thou hast established;

what is man that thou art mindful of him,

and the son of man that thou dost care for him?" (Psalm 8)

Or in a well-known passage in Kenneth Grahame's "The Wind in the Willows", Mole and Rat come unexpectedly face to face with "the numinous", with the divine presence within creation:

"Then suddenly the Mole felt a great Awe fall upon him, an awe that turned his muscles to water, bowed his head, and rooted his feet to the ground. It was no panic terror - indeed he felt wonderfully at peace and happy - but it was an awe that smote and held him and, without seeing, he knew it could only mean that some august Presence was very, very near.... 'Rat!' he found breath to whisper, shaking. "Are you afraid?" "Afraid?" murmured the Rat, his eyes shining with unutterable love.

“Afraid? Of Him? Oh, never, never! And yet - and yet - O, Mole, I am afraid!” Then the two animals, crouching to the earth, bowed their heads and did worship,”

(The Wind in the Willows, Chapter 7)

Mole and Rat, like Alfie and the vast majority of human beings down the ages, experience themselves as creatures. We define ourselves in relation to Another, who is beyond us and before us. The Other, by contrast, is self-defining.

We are beginning to discover possible answers to some massive questions, such as "Why creation? Why did God create? What is the universe for?"

If God is a self-defining Reality, then God cannot be other than God. Therefore God did not choose to create; rather, God could not be God without creating. This dynamic, living and active reality we call God is innately creative. God can be or do no other. "I am who I am". The nearest we get to that in our human experience is in the likes of a Mozart or a Beethoven, who cannot but write down the music which is in them, however much it may pain them at times to do it. God cannot but bring to life the creativity which is God's.

We can draw lessons here from our experience of human creativity in all its forms. Why do we draw or paint? Why do we write poetry or stories? Why do we sing or make music? Why do we design and plan and build? Why do we experiment, investigate and try to improve upon what we have already achieved? There seems to be an inner compulsion or longing that we objectify in all these activities. It is as though we cannot cope with the force of the emotions within us without giving them expression in creative ways. I know as a teenager I used to write lots of poetry, most of which seems now very pretentious and immature, but which at the time helped me to deal with the jumble of emotions faced at adolescence. Human creativity in all its forms, from a musical symphony to a matchstick model of the Houses of Parliament, is nothing less than the human spirit trying to be heard, giving voice to its aspirations and fears. It is a sobering thought that if this voice struggles to make itself heard, if creativity is suppressed, the human

spirit will more than often express itself instead in destructive ways.

We must not, however, allow our understanding of God the Creator to be limited by our human experiences of creativity. The creation myths of many cultures and religious systems, not least those of the Bible, have tended to portray God as the divine Architect. Like the human designer who completes his project and is able to sit back and observe it, so in Chapter One of the Book of Genesis God finishes creating and rests on the seventh day. It is impossible in the twentieth century to conceive of creation as having been completed. Everything from the concept of evolution to the Big Bang shows a universe and a world in a state of constant change. Creation is always in the process of becoming. Our understanding of God therefore must be of one who is present and active in the processes of creating and recreating, and in the cycles of birth, death and rebirth, which we see at the heart of the creative process. If the spring flowers and the newly hatched chicks are celebrated as signs of new life at Easter, why not look also into wider Creation and celebrate the exploding "supernova" out of which new stars and planets are born?

A tentative definition of Creation might be made along the lines of; Creation is the mystery and creativity of God made visible; the outward and visible and evolving form which expresses and communicates the inner being of God. If we accept this definition, there is something "mirror-like" about creation. Just as Alfie and the writer of the Psalm were able to look at the stars and see God shining back at them, so to the eyes of faith the whole of creation is a sort of mirror in which God's own image is seen reflected.

That word, "image", expresses a very important idea. It is there in the first chapter of Genesis. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, it is used to mean the carved or created images that people made of their gods, but in Genesis, it is used in a particular way:

“And God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, . . . So God created humankind in his own image, . . . male and female he created them.’ (Genesis 1 v v. 26 & 27)

If the whole of creation is likened to a mirror in which God's image is seen reflected, then the Biblical tradition argues that this is particularly true of the human race. There is something special about humanity which reflects the image of God.

The problem with the mirror-analogy, however, is that it is a very passive idea of "image". When I move my right hand, my reflection in the mirror moves his corresponding hand, but the reflection has no independent existence, for it is merely a trick of light. Though I may see my reflection, I cannot step beyond the mirror and encounter it in the way I encounter my wife or in the way God seems to encounter me. In short I can only have a relationship with something or someone who has an existence independent from me. I interact with my fellow human beings, my cat or even the fly I am desperately trying to swat in the kitchen window in a different way from the way I relate to my shadow or my reflection in the mirror.

One of the questions human beings ask again and again when they think of God is: "Why does God let this happen?" "Is God really in control?" Is God in control of Creation or does Creation have a life of its own?

Some years ago I was fortunate enough to visit Hollywood and witness some of the special effects which the film-makers are able to use. I witnessed such life-like wonders as simulated earthquakes, blazing fires, torrential rain and floods and collapsing bridges. Thankfully all these special effects were carefully planned and controlled. Someone, somewhere, was sitting in a console pressing buttons which set the events in motion. Is that our picture of God? Is Creation like some cosmic special effects show, where God plans the programme in advance and presses all the buttons? If so, where does that put us? Are we simply God's toys, part of the big game which God is playing, puppets dancing only when God pulls our strings?

If we answer "Yes" to those questions, then our picture of God is drawn in certain ways. God either has to become some sort of impersonal life-force or energy, somewhat akin to electricity, which simply causes everything to happen irrespective of the consequences, or God becomes some despotic and unfeeling personality, content to play around with creation for personal amusement. Neither of these come anywhere near the understanding of God in the Christian tradition.

I recently asked a group of young people the question; "Why did God create us? What were we made for?" The answer of one girl sticks in my mind because it is at once so childishly simple and yet so profound: "Because God was lonely," The fact that every human person has experience of loneliness, suggests that there is an inbuilt human desire for relationship, to know and be known, to love and be loved. Indeed, it could be argued that we are only able to discover ourselves in relation to others. Good relationships enable us to become more fully what we already are - There is really no such thing as an "individual" person. We are always part of the wider creation and constantly in relationship with it. If this aspect of human existence is part of the divine "image" within us, it can help us to understand the nature of God and the purpose of creation. God is no more "individual" than we are. If God is personal, then a significant part of what it means to be personal has to do with living in a relationship. Put simply, when Christians use the slogan "God is love" they are talking as much about God in relationship as about the inner character of God. Whatever we mean by that word Love, one thing is clear: love has no meaning apart from a relationship. To stand up and say "I love" is an unfinished statement; there has to be an object to the love for it to have any meaning.

In that sense, God cannot be "lonely" in the way in which we experience loneliness, because "existence in relationship" must be right at the heart of the divine being, but it does point us to why we cannot conceive of an automatic, controlled universe. It is impossible to have a relationship of love with what is controlled. I cannot force anyone to love me; it is a free response, arising out of a growing relationship. God created a universe which would be

able to interact and respond to its Creator. What life-forms may exist in other solar systems and galaxies, which may already be worshipping the Creator, we can only speculate upon. What we do know is that on this planet we call Earth, we human beings along with the rest of Creation have been worshipping the Creator throughout our brief history. We know too that part of what makes us human is this capacity to love and the need to be loved and this inbuilt freedom which makes love truly possible.

Creation is the greatest risk of all. The Mirror comes into being; God's very life and being are reflected in Creation. The "image", however, is given a life and freedom which will enable it to interact with its Source. Like every parent who wishes his or her child to develop into full maturity, God's love had to let go. Creation is therefore the great divine "Letting-go", the bringing into being of something "other" than God, so that God's love could truly have an object, and so that what was created could respond in love to the Creator. God risked everything to begin a love-affair which still continues and still waits to be fulfilled.

4. The Breaking of the Mirror

If Creation is an outworking of the creativity of a God who exists in relationship, and if Creation is intended as a "mirror"¹ in which God's image is reflected, then we would expect an existence based on relationship to be right at the heart of the divine purpose behind creation. Moreover, if humanity in particular is created in the image of God, then we must have a special place in this purpose. In order to illustrate this, allow me to introduce you to the Gingerbread man!



Not really a gingerbread man of course, but a figure who represents all of humanity; every man, woman and child who has ever been and ever will be, I have had to draw him/her like this precisely because the figure has to represent both male and female, A stick-man would not suffice either because this particular character has to have an inner life, as we shall see in due course.

The figure as it stands at the moment is incomplete because at the moment he/she stands as an individual. The truth about human existence is that we exist in relationship, and for this were we created. The first and most important relationship is between ourselves and the Creator; between the image and the source of

that image. We can represent this diagrammatically as the upward relationship, a sort of umbilical cord between Creator and creature, a channel through which Life flows and we respond with thankful love, The movement from God to us could be summed up by that very important Christian word "grace", which means the overwhelming generosity of God towards his creatures. Our response can be described as "worship", which is not only what we do when assembled in Church, but about the offering of the whole of what we are to God.



We were not created to be solitary individuals. God could, I suppose, have created one lonely soul to have poured loving attention upon, but in thinking in that way we are already guilty of conceiving of God as some great superhuman individual. If the truth about God's being is that God is relationship, that relationship is right at the heart of the divine being, then humanity could not reflect the divine nature as a solitary individual. Humanity only reflects the divine nature when living in community, in relationship. So, in one of the Hebrew creation stories in Genesis 1, God "created humankind in his image, male and female he created them." Man is not the image of God, nor is woman the image of God. Only together in relationship are

they reflecting the image of God. This is a very important truth to grasp and which we have too often neglected at our peril. I cannot on my own, reflect the image of God, nor can one sex or one race on its own reflect the image of God. We can only reflect the image of God when we represent humanity in its entirety and accept responsibility for one another. This is the horizontal relationship on our diagram, the relationship of human beings with one another. In most religious traditions, not least the Jewish-Christian one, these two relationships are bound closely together like two sides of the same coin. Jesus adopted the tradition of the Jewish Rabbis in his summary of the Law:

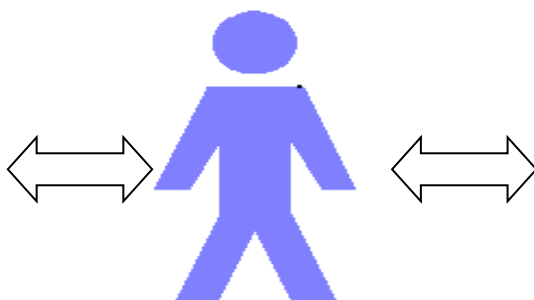
"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind. That is the greatest commandment. It comes first. The second is like it: Love your neighbour as yourself. Everything in the Law and Prophets hang on these two commandments."

(Matthew 22, vv, 37- 40)

They are linked even more starkly by the writer of the First Epistle of St. John, who clearly has Jesus' summary of the Law in the back of his mind, so that what follows serves like a commentary upon it:

"We love because God loved us first. But if a man says 'I love God', while hating his brother he is a liar. If he does not love the brother whom he has seen, it cannot be that he loves God whom he has not seen. And indeed this command comes to us from Christ himself: that he who loves God must also love his brother." (1 John 4; vv, 19 - 21).

So we can represent this relationship on our diagram:



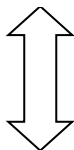
The third relationship is one which has been neglected for too long in the Christian tradition. It is the relationship with the rest of creation, with animal and plant life and the environment. The two Biblical creation stories in the Book of Genesis offer two different models here. In Genesis 1, Adam is given the command,

"Fill the earth and subdue it, rule over the fish in the sea, the birds of heaven, and every living thing that moves upon the earth." (Genesis 1; v. 28)

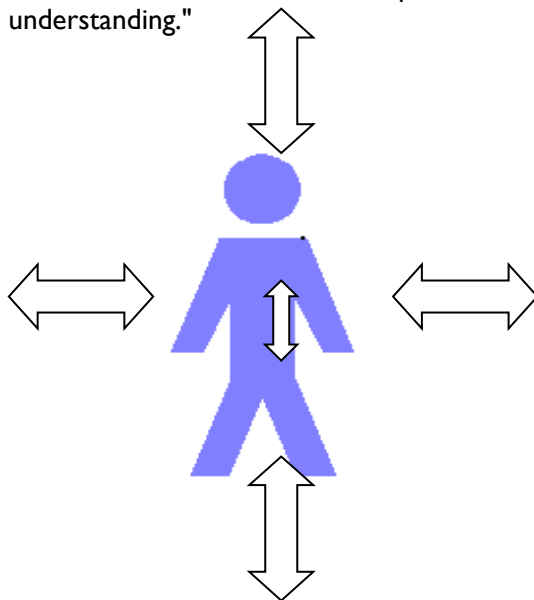
This model is one of human domination of creation. Genesis 2 offers a different model, that of stewardship;

"The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and care for it....." (Genesis 2; v.15)

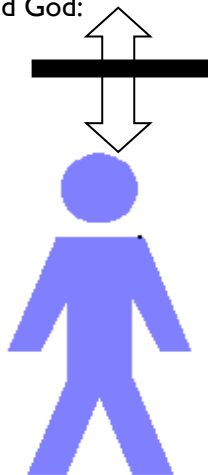
Sadly, the former model seems to have been the dominant one in much of human history. Living in relationship with creation and exercising a God-entrusted responsibility for it seems a natural extension of the relationship we are intended to have with our fellow humans and a more complete reflection of the image of God. So we can add this dimension to our diagram:



The fourth relationship is the hardest one to define and flows from all the others. It is what happens to the inner life of the human person when "self" is transcended and the other relationships are working as God intends. The key word here, which best describes what we wish to describe is a Hebrew one: "Shalom". Shalom is of paramount importance in Jewish and Christian thinking. Usually translated as "Peace", it, in fact means far more than we normally mean by that English word. A wonderful example of where words fail to do justice to meaning! "Shalom eleichem", "Shalom be with you" is a traditional Jewish greeting, and it means more than the absence of war and conflict. It is a positive quality, meaning wholeness, completeness, harmony, life in all its fullness. It therefore has to encompass justice and responsibility. In short, Shalom is the outworking of our diagram, it is the quality of existence which ensues when the relationships are working as they should. It is an outward expression of the wholeness of life, which God wills for human society and indeed the whole of creation. It is also a description of the inner state of the human person when those external relationships are characterised by Shalom. The fourth relationship is therefore the relationship with our inner selves, which God intends should be a sense of peace, that "peace which passes all understanding."



We have been painting, what is, of course, an ideal picture. Our diagram represents the "mirror" of God's life and being as it is reflected in creation, but it does not represent the reality of the world as we experience it. We experience the mirror as a broken one, in which the image of God is reflected but only in a distorted and patchy way. The breaking of the mirror is caused by the breaking down of those relationships. Just as the relationship with God was seen as the umbilical cord through which life and grace flow, so the breakdown of that relationship cuts off the flow, with the result that the life of humanity and the whole of creation suffers and distances itself from the divine purpose. This is what Christians mean when they talk of "sin". Sins are not a catalogue of wrongdoings; they are rather the symptoms of the disease. Sin is a state of being, a condition in which we find ourselves. We can represent it on our diagram as a breakdown in the relationship between ourselves and God:



How does this state of being come about? If we take the easy way out and blame the situation on some external force of evil, as many Christians have done down the ages, then the poor devil acts as a

very convenient scapegoat, but we are still left with the question of how God could have allowed evil to come into being. Is it not more realistic to regard evil as a divine absence rather than a malevolent anti-God? An illustration of this might be our experience of light. Light is a positive energy which radiates from a source. Darkness on the other hand, has only negative existence; it is the absence of light. When light comes to a place, darkness no longer exists. In the same way, God's presence fills the universe, except where that presence is resisted and deliberately excluded. In such situations, evil can become a living presence through the life of people, activities and institutions which actively work against the presence of God. Why, however, does God allow this to happen?

We discovered a clue at the end of the last chapter, which might help us understand what might be happening. I described God's creative act as a great risk of "letting go". God gave the gift of freedom so that we creatures might freely respond in love to our Creator. That gift was, however, a dangerous risk, though perhaps a calculated risk. Our planet, and no doubt the whole universe, operates according to certain natural laws, which scientists are hardly beginning to understand, but seem to work without the need for God to intervene. If God continually intervened, that freedom which was invested in creation to change and develop and evolve would be stifled and creation would be a mere static snapshot of God's majesty instead of a changing drama. In particular, we humans have been given the choice of how we respond to God and relate to our fellow human beings and the rest of the environment. Sin therefore is nothing less than a denial that our relationship with God is the determining factor in our lives. It is the denial of the "image of God" in ourselves and the setting up of a false "image," a false conception of self to replace God as the determining factor. The inner relationship with ourselves becomes an idolatrous one; we make an idol out of "self", a "self" made in our own image and the relationship with God becomes broken.

This breakdown in the relationship between our false selves and the source of our true being in turn affects the other relationships. Rather than seeing ourselves as responsible and dependent

members of the human community, we regard ourselves as individuals with needs and desires which we want to fulfill, even at the expense of the rights of others. Moreover, we project those desires onto larger groups to which we may belong; groups of gender, race, class or national identity. In this way we delude ourselves that we are taking responsibility for one another when we are actually drawing circles within the human community which exclude in order to include. The "self", whether it be an individual self or a group identity is set over against others, who are not "self" or who are "them" rather than "us". This innate sinfulness affects us in ways we are often too blind to realise. It was brought home to me powerfully but quite innocently by some members of a local community into which I moved some years ago. As I went around the parish, getting to know a variety of people, I kept hearing the same refrain: "You'll like it here. People are nice round here." That experience made a big impact upon me. For a start, though the speakers usually mentioned "they" to refer to the fellow members of their community, I was aware that they really meant "we". Furthermore, what does that word "nice" mean? It is such an empty word, used to mean something like "what I consider to be acceptable." It only has meaning when used as a yardstick to exclude others who do not measure up to my standards, those who presumably are "not nice" to know. I am not trying to be superior, because the same tendency is to be found in all of us. It seems that the concept of "nice," "acceptable" or "respectable" is really defined by our own idea of ourselves. The false image of "self" which we carry with us and worship is used as a standard by which others are included in our circle or stand condemned.

The third relationship, that of ourselves to the wider creation, is also affected. Rather than seeing ourselves as an intrinsic part of creation, we set ourselves apart from it as a superior "special case". Once again we have drawn a circle, which includes human beings, but which excludes animals, plants and the environment. It is interesting to note that we use the same reasons to justify our exploitation of the natural world that we once used for to justify slavery or the subjugation of women and children and which were there in a milder, less obvious form in the "nice/not nice"

distinction. We regard ourselves as belonging to a superior form of life, therefore the rest of creation is intended for us to use as we will. The mainstream Christian tradition, by over-emphasising humanity as made "in the image of God" has contributed to the growth of this attitude of dominance over creation, which has been so much a feature of the Western world. We need to re-root the "image of God" in the whole of creation with ourselves as part of it and not make humanity a "special case." The domination view is well expressed by that famous Testimony of Chief Seattle in 1854.

"One portion of land is the same to him (the white man) as the next, for he is a stranger who comes in the night and takes from the land whatever he needs. The earth is not his brother but his enemy, and when he has conquered it he moves on. He leaves his fathers' graves behind, and he does not care. He kidnaps the earth from his children. He does not care. His fathers' graves and his children's birthright are forgotten. He treats his mother, the earth, and his brother, the sky, as things to be bought, plundered, sold like sheep or bright beads. His appetite will devour the earth and leave behind only a desert.....Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth. If men spit upon the ground, they spit upon themselves. This we know. The earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the earth. This we know. All things are connected like the blood which unites one family..... man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it."

Interesting from our point of view is how Chief Seattle sees this breakdown in the relationship between humanity and the rest of creation to have come about as the result of idolatry, the belief that God can be "owned":

"One thing we know, which the white man may one day discover - our God is the same God. You may think now that you own him as you wish to own our land, but you cannot."

He goes on to add a third commandment to the summary of the

Law, no doubt deliberately echoing it:

"Hold in your mind the memory of the land as it is when you take it. And with all your strength, with all your mind, with all your heart, preserve it for your children and love itas God loves us all."

The command to love has been broken in all three relationships with the result that the inner relationship of the human person with him- or herself becomes broken and confused. We lose self-respect and self-esteem, preferring to worship a false image of ourself rather than love the person whom we really are with all our faults and weaknesses. The importance of self-love was emphasised by Jesus when he taught "love the Lord your God and your neighbour as yourself." Instead we have lost that inner peace and are prone to feel anxious and insecure. We have turned from God and have turned instead to idolatry, to worshipping false images of ourselves and human society. The Mirror of Creation becomes broken. The image of God is still there to be seen but in a distorted, fragmentary way. The cracks and stains on the mirror loom large. One has to look hard and intently to see the reflection still present behind them.

5. The Mending of the Mirror

"After John had been arrested, Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the good news of God: 'The time has come; the kingdom of God is upon you; repent and believe the good news.'
(St. Mark I; vv.14-15)

With these dramatic words the writer of St. Mark's Gospel describes what he would seem to regard as the essence of the message of Jesus. Placed right at the beginning of his forthcoming description of Jesus' ministry, he surely intends us to understand it as a sort of 'manifesto' or summary of what Jesus' ministry was about. At the heart of Jesus' teaching in the first three Gospels is this concept of the Kingdom of God, or, more accurately translated, the Reign or Rule of God. The Kingdom of God, according to the teaching of Jesus, was no longer simply a future hope; a longed-for time when God would vindicate his exiled and oppressed people, but a reality which had come upon them in his own person and ministry: "The Kingdom of God is upon you."

The response to the coming of the Kingdom of God is to be one of repentance and faith: "Repent and believe the good news." In other words, "Turn around, change direction and turn back to God." The call which Jesus makes to us as he proclaims the Kingdom of God is therefore a call to mend the relationship which had become broken between God and humanity. There was, however, nothing new about a call to repentance. The prophets in the Old Testament repeatedly pleaded with the people to turn away from their sins and idolatries and back to God. Indeed, in the time of Jesus, John the Baptist summons people into the desert to repent and be baptised in the Jordan. What is especially significant about Jesus' ministry is the way in which he proclaims God's initiative in this matter. God not only asks for repentance but pledges his forgiveness, a forgiveness which is declared by Jesus in a way which some of his hearers regarded as blasphemy. Again and again, in the Gospel

stories, Jesus says "Your sins are forgiven. Go in peace. Go in Shalom."

The Christian tradition maintains that Jesus represents the initiative of God to heal the broken relationship between himself and humanity and restore the image. The call to repentance and the proclamation of divine forgiveness is at the heart of what is meant by the coming of the Kingdom of God. God's rule is revealed in so far as God takes the initiative to bring forgiveness and healing to the broken mirror of creation.

If we refer once again to our diagram in the last chapter, we can see that the primary message of Jesus relates to the restoration of the broken channel of communication between ourselves and God; the so-called upward relationship.

Furthermore, Jesus has much to say about the link between our relationship with God and the sideways relationship with our fellow human beings. Jesus commands his followers to take the initiative in restoring the balance. In the Sermon on the Mount he tells them to "turn the other cheek" when someone strikes them (Matthew 5; v.39), to "walk the extra mile." (v.41) to "love their enemies" (v.43) to "pass no judgment and you will not be judged." (Matthew 7; v.1) In the Lord's Prayer and the commentary which follows it, Jesus makes their forgiveness by God conditional upon their willingness to forgive others: "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." (Matthew 6; v.12) "For if you forgive others the wrongs they have done, your heavenly father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, then the wrongs you have done will not be forgiven by your Father." (Matthew 6; vv. 14-15)

Peter asks Jesus, "Lord, how often am I to forgive my brother if he goes on wronging me? as many as seven times?" Jesus replies, "I do not say seven times; I say seventy times seven." (Matthew 18; vv.21-22) and reinforces his teaching with the story of the Unforgiving Servant, (vv. 23-35)

Nor is it just grudging forgiveness which Jesus demands from his

followers; rather he commands a positive sense of responsibility and care for the welfare of one another.

"When I was hungry you gave me food; when thirsty you gave me drink; when I was a stranger you took me into your home, when naked you clothed me; when I was ill you came to my help, when in prison you visited me.....I tell you this: anything you did for one of my brothers here, however humble, you did for me." (Matthew 25; vv.35-40).

There is an identification here between Jesus and his suffering "brothers", an identification which he calls on people to make. In caring for others we are caring not only for Jesus but also for part of ourselves. Jesus is calling on us to include others within our circle of compassion and responsibility; to include rather than exclude, to "love our neighbour as ourselves."

However we may choose to describe the person of Jesus, we cannot deny the importance of his message, a message which he embodied in his ministry of healing and forgiveness. It would be hard to deny that the inspiration of God lies behind this extraordinary life and ministry; which is another way of saying that God took the initiative in the life of Jesus. The Kingdom of God therefore is God's initiative to heal the brokenness of his creation. If we look at the world around us and more particularly at human society and recognise that they are in something of a mess, then God takes responsibility for the mess and seeks to renew creation, to mend the broken mirror, to restore the image.

There are some Christians who regard God's initiative in Jesus as a sort of divine rescue-helicopter. The world is so totally evil and God so far removed from it, that the mission of Jesus becomes a divine rescue line coming from above. The Church in this model are the fortunate "saved" who manage to get hooked on the line and rescued from the turbulent waves. The role of the Church is to get more lost "souls" on board at all cost. I have oversimplified, but this has been a common way of understanding "salvation", that is God's initiative towards creation.

The word "save" is often used in our English Bibles to translate a word which can mean either "save" or "heal". In fact, it is worth noting that the English noun, "salvation" has contained within it the root word "salve", which is a healing ointment. In the light both of Jesus' ministry and our positive understanding of creation as bearing the "image" of God, a healing model of God's activity towards creation might be more justifiable than this divine rescue mission. Jesus proclaims the Kingdom of God, the dynamic healing and renewing presence of God within creation. Far from existing at a distance from creation, God has been at work within it throughout the ages.

This work by God from within is given a name in the Christian tradition; namely the work of the Holy Spirit. The process of healing and renewal which God brings to creation is not some supernatural, unfamiliar experience. The cells in our bodies and in other forms of life reproduce and renew themselves. When I cut myself I take for granted that the wound will almost certainly heal itself. When I prune my clematis, it seems to produce even more flowers. Even my ashes will one day fertilise the ground in which they are buried. We witness the continual cycles of death and rebirth which take place through the seasons and through the life-cycles of all living creatures, ourselves included. The wider universe no doubt could teach us even more, as stars die and new ones are born, but all surely reveal the inner working of the divine Spirit.

We ought not to be surprised therefore that God's initiative to renew and heal the disease at the heart of human existence and restore the divine image should take us through the process of death and rebirth; Death and Resurrection to use the Christian terms. As the early Christians reflected on their experience of Jesus, the one who shamefully suffered and died and yet rose again, and tried to make sense of it, they saw that Jesus' death and resurrection prefigured the way we are all called to go in order to find healing and wholeness of life.

As St. Paul writes:

"Christ was raised to life - the first fruits of the harvest of the

dead. As in Adam (read, our sinful nature) all men die, so in Christ all will be brought to life."

(1 Corinthians 15; vv. 20 and 22)

"If we thus died with Christ, we believe that we shall also come to life with him..... In the same way you must regard yourselves as dead to sin and alive to God, in union with Christ Jesus." (Romans 6; vv. 8 and 11).

"Moreover, if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells within you, then the God who raised Jesus from the dead will also give new life to your mortal bodies through his indwelling Spirit." (Romans 8; v. 11)

Creation is healed and renewed through death and resurrection; the image of the creator is restored. Through spiritual death and resurrection human life is renewed after the image of God. The false "self" is dethroned and the true image is reborn in the human consciousness. Death and resurrection are not once and for all events but daily experiences in the life of creation, individuals and society. New life is born when all that stifles the truly human spirit is overcome and the image of God within us is allowed to grow and blossom. The Kingdom of God comes where creation is healed, where the broken mirror reflects, even if only dimly and partially, the image of the Creator.

The Christian Church has no monopoly on the Kingdom of God, it is present and active wherever and through whomever the image is restored. Where there is worship and faith, peace and justice, love and freedom, there the Kingdom of God is to be found and there the broken mirror is repaired.

6. The Image of the Unseen God

At the age of 22 I spent some six months working as a care assistant in a hostel for homeless men. This marked an important turning-point in my own understanding of Christian faith and life, for I had just left University, having graduated in theology, and was full to the brim with ideas of what I thought Christianity was all about.

One Sunday morning, during a service at the Hostel, I remember standing up to read these words from the First Letter of St. John :

"My dear children, let us love one another, since love comes from God and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Anyone who fails to love cannot have known God."

(1 John 4; v.7)

After reading the words I looked around the room at the group of shabby-looking men who were sitting there, the majority of whom suffered from mental illness of various kinds. The thought entered my head: "What am I doing? What am I saying?" I realised the futility of using words which have no content. What was the point of using that word "love" when it had little or no meaning for those casualties of life who were hearing it? Most of them had experienced very little of love in their lives, with the consequence they had little feeling of self-worth or self-love. I understood then something which had been puzzling me for weeks, namely why they always assumed I was being paid for what I was doing. In conversation with me, they seemed unable to take in the fact that I was working as a volunteer at the hostel. In their mind, what motive other than financial could a clearly educated young man have for working in a place like that? They thought in this way because love was for them an empty word and they considered themselves as

people without value to anyone.

Over the next few weeks the penny began to drop, as I began to realise that the only way for them to understand love was for love to be shown to them. I was going to have to "flesh out" love, make it visible and real in my daily actions and dealings with them. Preparing their food, sharing their conversations, listening to their stories was comparatively easy. Cleaning the toilets, taking flea-ridden clothes to the launderette or cutting the long in-growing toe-nails of a man who had not changed his socks or washed his feet for what smelt like weeks if not months was, needless to say, much harder. For the first time in my life, however, I began to understand the ministry of Jesus and why he spent so much time caring for the outcasts, the lepers and cripples and all the people who felt they were worth nothing to anyone, least of all to God. That concept of "incarnation" or "taking flesh" became real to me. I saw why it was at the heart of the Christian understanding of Jesus. What I was doing there at that hostel by making love real, visible and tangible was a dim reflection of what God was doing in Jesus. This is what St. John describes in the famous Prologue to the Fourth Gospel:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God..... and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." (John 1; v.1 and v.14)

He uses the expression "Word" to mean "the self-expression of God's own being." In other words, God in Jesus was making God's own nature and presence visible and tangible. To return once more to the mirror analogy, Jesus is a polished mirror in which the image of God is truly and perfectly reflected. St. Paul writes to the early Christian community at Colossae, using words which seem already to have been found in one of the very first Christian hymns, written just a couple of decades after the time of Jesus:

"He (Christ) is the image of the unseen God and the first-born of all creation, for in him were created all things in heaven and on earth." (Colossians 1; vv. 15 - 16)

Listen carefully to what those early Christian followers were saying as they sought to make sense of their experience of Jesus. That man Jesus, who had lived and worked among them, was not only the perfect image or reflection of God, but also the perfect human being, who was true to the very purpose of the whole of creation, namely to reflect the image of God. The mirror of creation may be cracked, broken and tarnished, but in Jesus the mirror is once more crystal clear. Notice, however, what they were not saying about Jesus. The mirror did not drop from heaven. Jesus was no demi-god or heavenly space-invader. Of human flesh and blood, born of a human mother, he was as much part of creation as you and me. He was, to quote St. Paul once more, "the first-born of creation", a foretaste of what the whole of humanity and the whole of creation is destined to become. The new mirror, the new creation, has to be an intrinsic part of creation, but recreated in its former glory.

The Christian understanding of the person of Jesus becomes a teasing conundrum in so far as we regard God and Creation, divinity and humanity as separate existences like oil and water which we try in vain to mix together in one jug, or like two building-blocks which we somehow glue together in one person. Such mental gymnastics miss the point. The person of Jesus, the true mirror, "the image of the unseen God" and "the first-born of creation" invites us to review our understanding both of God and of human nature.

Our understanding of God has changed because God has been given a human face. In Jesus, God has been found so-to-speak with hands dirty, immersed in the mess of creation. Far from being the remote fatherly figure of childhood imagination or even the grim unfeeling chess player of popular thinking, who moves the pieces on the board but remains conveniently aloof, God is seen taking responsibility for the mess which creation has become and works from within to recreate it. God takes the initiative in restoring the image. The most powerful image of God is that of one who becomes powerless and empty. The crucified man on the cross reveals a God who suffers with and through his people. The broken

body of the crucified Christ speaks to us of a God who identifies with the broken mirror of creation, who takes responsibility for it and shares the brokenness. What more powerful symbol of divine love can there be than the tortured body of the crucified Christ, the perfect mirror, broken by sinful humanity and yet still continuing to love and pray for his persecutors?

"Father forgive them, they do not know what they are doing." (St. Luke 23; v. 34)

The broken, suffering man on the cross, who sacrifices his life for the healing of creation, is therefore the true image of God.

There is a Jewish proverb which runs: "If God lived on earth we would all throw stones at his windows." The cross helps us to understand that facet of human nature. We find it hard to cope with what Jesus represents. When we look in the new mirror of Jesus Christ, we see at once both the true image of God and the true nature of humanity and it is too much for us to face. Our own failings, our own inadequacy, in short our own brokenness is revealed too sharply by contrast. What else could we do than try to break the mirror once again? The dying and rising of Jesus Christ shows that the new mirror is unbreakable. The image of God in humanity cannot be destroyed. In this way Jesus reveals the destiny of humankind and of all creation, for the same miracle can take place in our lives and in the experience of the whole of God's creation. God's kingdom, God's Shalom, God's healing of the brokenness, will indeed come. The destiny of the universe and of every human being is to be restored in the image of God. Christ is neither a divine space-invader, nor a unique human being, but the pioneer, the forerunner and foretaste of what will be universally true - "the first-born of all creation."

Or, as St. Paul says elsewhere:

"If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has passed away, behold the new has come." (2 Corinthians 5; v. 17)

7. Enlarging the Mirror

We have been reflecting together upon the ways in which the earliest Christians began to interpret and put into words their experience of Jesus. They began to parcel the mystery in order to make sense of it. This was the beginning of Christian theology; the attempt to interpret and rationalise the new experience of God which had come to them through Jesus. They began a process which has often seemed to me rather like a game of dominoes.

It is as though God has placed the "double six" of Jesus in the midst of the table and calls on us to continue playing the game. Just as the number of spots on one domino will dictate the sort of domino we place next on the table, so the questions we bring to our experience of Jesus will determine where the answers take us. Furthermore, our life experience and culture will affect the sort of questions we ask and how we formulate the answers.

For example, one of the first statements of faith which seems to have been made about Jesus by his first disciples was that this man was the Messiah, the Christ, the King for whose coming Israel had been waiting and longing. St. Peter puts it in these words in his sermon in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost:

"The whole house of Israel can be certain that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." (Acts 2; v. 36)

A statement like this would raise another immediate question, namely: "How was it then that he died like a crucified criminal rather than reign as King in Jerusalem?" Answer: "This was no accident, but part of God's plan." Question: "For what purpose?" and so on. The domino game did not however branch off from the centre in one direction alone. Once the Christian message was being interpreted for non-Jewish ears, the concept of Messiah

became meaningless and other terms were introduced such as the Logos or divine "Word" of St. John's Gospel. The domino game continues to this day and both the questions we raise and the answers we seek to give will be heavily influenced by our own culture and experience. What is significant, however, is that this has always been a community exercise. It was a group of disciples whom Jesus gathered around him to be first-hand witnesses of his ministry, death and resurrection. They in turn passed on their experiences to communities of followers. It was in the community of faith, which we call the Church, that the experience of Jesus was retold, rehearsed and formulated. It was from within the community of faith that the writings of the New Testament were transmitted, treasured and ultimately written. Just as the Old Testament books are testimony to the developing faith of the people of Israel over more than seven hundred years, so the New Testament proclaims the faith of that emerging Christian community, the Church. It is all too easy to forget that we are only able to discuss the person of Jesus today because the Christian community has kept the experience of Jesus alive down the centuries. It has kept the experience of Jesus alive through the writings of the New Testament and in the celebration of Baptism and the Eucharist. Not for nothing did Jesus command his followers to "Do this in remembrance of me." The encounter with Jesus is renewed and proclaimed afresh every time the Gospels are read, the bread broken and the wine poured. Christian faith is a community faith before it is an individual relationship with God.

It goes without saying, of course, that the Church has accumulated much extra baggage on its journey down the centuries. Like all human institutions, it adopts the culture and prevailing philosophy of the age. It can do no other, for it has to live and communicate and apply the faith in the society in which it finds itself. The Church takes upon itself structures which sometimes help its work but sometimes prevent it from being true to its real purpose. It is all too tempting sometimes to want to turn our back upon the Church, regarding it as a man-made complication, and retreat instead into a little private world shared by me and "my God." There is, of course, no such thing as **my** God. God cannot be

privatised. If the gingerbread man of Chapter 4 teaches us anything, it surely teaches us that all the relationships need to be working in harmony if we are to discover that wholeness of life, Shalom. Shalom is not a personal warm glow in the heart, but a shared experience, something which has to be enshrined in our life together in community. The task of the community of faith is to embody this truth, however imperfectly.

When reflecting on the nature of the divine "image" back in Chapter 3, we discussed the difficulty of regarding the human person simply as an individual. We can only truly be ourselves in relation to others and above all in relation to the Other of God. In relationships we become more fully what we are. The "image" of God is revealed in the interplay of human relationships to God, to the rest of humanity and to the wider creation. The mirror does not have one face but a myriad of complementary ones. We only truly reflect the mirror image of God when we represent humanity and indeed the whole of creation in its entirety.

That is the purpose of the community of faith: to enlarge the mirror. The Church is a provisional community; a sign that the mirror of creation is both broken and being renewed. It is called to reflect the image of God to the world and bring together the shattered shards of broken creation into the healing presence of the Creator that they might be reshaped and remade into the New Mirror.

As a community of men and women, the Church fails again and again to live up to its calling and constantly needs to be renewed and refocused by the Holy Spirit of God. In this, the Church is no different from the rest of human society. If the Church were itself perfect it would no longer serve any purpose, for it is not a sign of perfection but a sign that the "image" of God constantly needs to be healed and restored. Too often the Church has been happy to collude with wider society which sees the Christian community as a sort of hot-house for specialist flowers, a club for the spiritually-minded or, even worse, a sort of moral watchdog which expects perfection and condemns those who fail. From time to time the

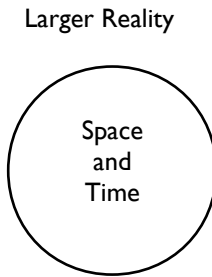
Church has adopted any or all of those roles, but in doing so misses its true vocation. Like Jesus on the cross, the Church has to be broken and vulnerable. It has to hurt where people hurt and be honest about its failings. It has to rejoice where people rejoice and celebrate Life. The Church should point beyond itself to the Christ, the true image of God. It is a sign not of perfection, but of the truth about human nature; that the "image" in us needs day by day to be healed and restored.

The Church is a sign of community, a reminder that the "image of God" is worked out not in the individual "self" but in relationship. The Church, the community of faith which centres its life on the truth about God revealed in Jesus, is a community which symbolises the true nature of the whole of creation, which is that we are in the process of becoming. We are in the process of becoming what we already are. The Church is both a human community and, as St. Paul calls it, the "body of Christ." We are created in the image of God and the image is being renewed in us. The mirror is broken and yet still reflects. The reflection is imperfect but will be restored.

8. Image and Reality

At this point it may be useful to return to an earlier diagram and develop it further.

In the second chapter we reflected upon the immediate world of space and time and also upon the larger reality which lies beyond it:.



Our awareness of the immediate reality comes to us largely through the medium of our senses and emotions. Our appreciation of the larger reality is more intuitive. This does not mean, however, that the larger reality can be simply identified by the word "God", and the reality of space and time by the concept of "creation". The boundary between the two is, as we discussed earlier, one of perception. It is imposed by our human limitations. In order to transcend this limited perception of reality we need to "see" in a new way, to recognise that the world of space and time is part of a larger reality, from which it is not separated, but which both contains and permeates it. This new way of looking is described in the words of Jesus to Nicodemus, as recorded in the Fourth Gospel:

"Unless a person is born over again, he will not see the Kingdom of God." (St. John 3; v.3)

The same demand for a radically new way of perceiving reality occurs in some of Jesus' parables and in the response he expects his hearers to make to them:

"He who has ears to hear let him hear."
(e.g. St. Matthew 13; v.43)

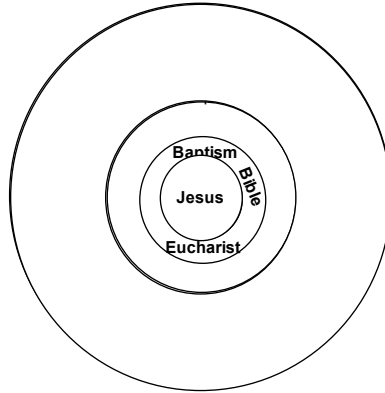
Jesus seems to be inviting people to hear in a way which goes beyond simply hearing; even beyond hearing and mentally understanding. He invites them to hear and perceive a reality in their midst, namely the Kingdom of God. This reality evokes faith and response.

If the Biblical understanding of creation is correct, that the whole of creation is like a mirror reflecting the presence of the Creator, then God is perceived as being present on both sides of the circle; within space and time as well as beyond it. Moreover, as beings who live within the limitations of space and time, as well as instinctively reaching out to something beyond it, our first contact with the divine will be through our senses and our emotional response to sensual experience. The raw stuff of all religious experience is the closeness we feel to God in certain circumstances such as, for example, Alfie looking at the stars, hearing a piece of music, falling in love, the birth of a child or even the death of a loved one. On the inner circle of our diagram we can begin to fill in concentric circles to describe the variety of ways in which the presence of God impinges upon our world of space and time.

On the outer rim we may wish to place our experience of natural creation. Creation serves as an invitation to recognise the presence of the Creator. Within the next layer of the circle we may wish to put human relationships: our experience of parenthood, marriage, friendship, community spirit, love, affection, sexuality and belonging, - or even the absence of any of these. Love in all its forms invites us to recognise the source of a universal, but profoundly human

What we are exploring here is an understanding of life and creation, which has usually been referred to as "sacramental". A sacrament is something within the physical world of space and time which enables us to encounter the presence of the larger reality which is the fullness of God. A sacramental view of life recognises that within the broken mirror of creation the divine image is reflected in a myriad of ways.

We discussed in an earlier chapter the Christian experience of Jesus Christ as the new and perfect mirror, "the image of the unseen God and the firstborn of creation." On this analogy Christians would wish to place Jesus Christ at the heart of the circle as being the sacrament of sacraments, the one who supremely sums up the true purpose and goal of creation and the presence of God within and beyond it. The majority of Christians would also wish to place the Sacraments of the Church (with a capital S!), in particular, Baptism and the Eucharist, at the heart of the circle too, as the sacramental ways given by Jesus to the community of faith, by which his continuing presence among the community might be recognised and celebrated. It is our Christian faith that through the physical action of being washed with water, the life of the baptised becomes bound up with the life of Jesus Christ. Through the physical sign of being fed with bread and wine, Christians encounter the life-giving presence of the risen Christ and are strengthened and renewed by him. Through the physical elements taken from within creation, the reality of Christ meets us afresh. Christian people would also lay great emphasis on the Scriptures, particularly the Gospels, as those written texts through which the person and reality of Jesus is made known and proclaimed to the world. Such is our faith. We could represent this on our diagram in this way:



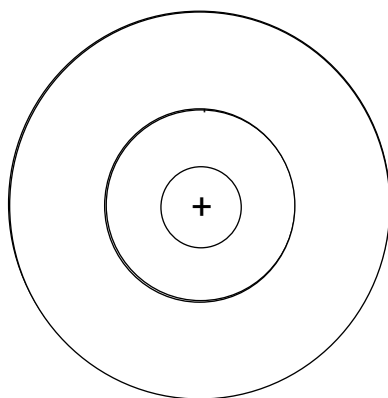
The diagram is not completed yet, however, because the life and death and resurrection of the man Jesus and faith in his continued presence in the Church is not the whole picture. If it were, the Church would have good reason to believe it had a "monopoly" on Jesus.

We have, however, already said much more about Jesus, that he embodies in his person, and supremely in his dying and rising, the healing of creation, the restoration of the Kingdom of reign of God and the mending of the mirror. According to Christian teaching, this truth is not a once-off phenomenon experienced during the thirty-odd years of the earthly life of Jesus of Nazareth, but a universal truth about creation. For this reason, Christians claim that the Christ is the "Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end." (Revelation 21; v.6) The Christ is the universal meeting-place where the two realities of time and eternity meet and conjoin. The Christ is the source of the renewing, recreating energy which we call the Holy Spirit, through which the mirror of creation is being constantly restored after the image of the unseen God. The Christ, if you like,

is the creative blueprint at the heart of creation, out of which creation sprang and which was revealed supremely in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, the "Word" which was "made flesh and dwelt among us". (St. John I; v. 14)

To use another analogy, the Christ is like the sound at the heart of the universe, like an object in a ripple tank, the source of all the ripples and echoes of the divine presence which we perceive throughout creation. The Christ is the centre-point, the hub of the universe.

At the centre of the circle diagram, therefore, we can place the Christ, the Eternal Word of God, God's Creative Impulse, the Alpha and Omega, the true Image or any other words one might use in order to attempt to describe this reality which lies at the heart of things.



For Christians this reality is revealed supremely in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. The reality is more than Jesus but is focused in him. In Jesus the reality meets and transforms us. The man Jesus dies and rises as a sign that death and resurrection are the means whereby

creation is renewed. It is through dying and being recreated that the Christ, the creative source, the image of God at the heart of creation, is renewed and restored in all the multiplicity of outward forms which embody this Reality in the world. Creation discovers its healing by returning to the Source. The mirror is repaired by focusing upon the true image at the heart of it and by allowing that image to heal the brokenness and recreate itself anew.

When I look in my mirror it is easy to tell which is the real me and which is my reflection. If a friend joins me I can still distinguish between the reality of my friend and the reflected image. Last year, however, I visited with my family a fairground "hall of mirrors" and, frankly, the experience was mind-blowing. I knew where I was because I was inside looking out, but it was impossible to distinguish which was really my daughter, out of the many thousands of images unfolding in all directions before my eyes.

In a similar way, with our limited human perceptions, we all too easily confuse image and reality in our apprehension of God. The creature reflects the reality but is not the reality. St. Paul discusses this in his letter to the Romans:

"Ever since God created the world, his everlasting power and deity, however invisible, has been there for the mind to see in the things he has made." (Romans 1; v .20)

However, instead of allowing creation to move people to worship the Creator, St. Paul describes how humans tend towards idolatry:

"They exchanged the glory of the immortal God for a worthless imitation." (Romans 2; v.23)

Idols are not solely statues or physical objects which we bow down and worship; they are anything which we honour in the place of God. They could be money, possessions, success or self-fulfillment, in short anything which becomes the focus and motivation for our lives. Idolatry has yet even more subtle forms than these. Idolatry is

also taking the image of God captive; parceling God in a neat package and paying homage to the parcel or concept rather than to the mystery which it tries in vain to contain. Or, even more insidiously, we engage in idolatry when we seek to restrict where the image of God is to be found or dictate where it is permissible or not permissible to look for God. All too often Christians have sought to claim a monopoly on the work of the Holy Spirit, insisting that God only works through the Church or that there is no truth to be found in cultures or religious traditions other than our own. This is both spiritual racism and, as I have attempted to show, idolatry. An idolatrous faith recognises the concentric circles on the diagram, but seeks to restrict the areas in which God can truly be found.

We cannot possess or contain God. We cannot claim to have a monopoly on the Christ, the divine image in creation, or to control the activity of the Spirit of God. It is we who are contained. We are caught up, along with the rest of humanity and the wider universe, into the greater life of God. For this reason we must be open to perceive the image of God wherever it helps us to discover and recognise the Great Reality.

9. God's Adventure through the Looking-Glass

Lewis Carroll's Alice embodies the dream of every child to be able to enter into another and more magical world, which for Alice exists on the other side of the mirror, the looking-glass. It is a recurrent theme of childlike imagination, which takes other forms in the Giant's Castle at the top of the Beanstalk, the world at the top of the Faraway Tree or C. S. Lewis' Narnia, the world beyond the wardrobe.

When Jesus tells us:

"Unless you accept the Kingdom of God like a child, you will not enter it", (St. Mark 10; v. 15)

perhaps it is this childlike sense of wonder which he has in mind, this willingness to believe, this instinctive sense that the world is more mysterious than it at first sight appears and having the humility to receive it. As we grow and "mature", the pressures of immediate life can all too easily squeeze out any sense of awe and mystery.

It has been my contention that the Christian faith invites us to step beyond the mirror by realising within our very selves the image of God which we see reflected in the world around us, in our relationships and above all in Jesus Christ. This experience of life and faith and this knowledge of our true selves invites us to reflect afresh on our picture of God. On which side of the mirror does God stand?

The traditions of Judaism and Islam and much of Christianity have tended, on the whole, to place God firmly on one side of the mirror. God is transcendent, wholly other, separate and distinct from the created world, which only dimly reflects the character of the Creator. Other traditions such as pantheistic religions and

certain eastern faiths have made God wholly immanent. There is no truth beyond ourselves and the created order, only the divine reality within the human person waiting to be discovered and released.

True Christianity, I contend, places God on both sides of the mirror. The relationship between Creator and creature which we described in our "gingerbread man" illustration is a visible outworking, a mirror-image, of a relationship which has existed within the being of God from all eternity. In traditional Christian language, this relationship is referred to as that between the Father and the only-begotten Son of God. It is a relationship between subject and object of love, between Love and the Beloved. This is the creative blueprint, which lies at the hub of creation, the Christ principle which lies at the heart of every human person and which was fully revealed in the life of Jesus. St. John hints at this in the famous Prologue to his Gospel, using the image of light:

"The true light which enlightens every man was coming into the world. He was in the world already, which had its being through him, and the world did not know him."

(St. John I; vv. 9 & 10)

The creative truth has been there always at the heart of every human person, though we are blind to recognise it. In Jesus, we see this truth fully revealed. The relationship of love within the very being of God is given outward and creative expression in the relationship between God and creation. For this reason, God has to be present on both sides of the mirror for God is still both subject and object in this relationship, which has existed within the divine being throughout eternity.

The Christian doctrine of God holds together the poles of belief: God is both beyond creation and within creation. God is at once the source, the image and the dynamic creative presence which seeks to renew and recreate the image ever afresh in the likeness of the Source. So Christian teaching speaks of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Just as a sculptor looks at a piece of wood or stone and sees in his mind already the potential shape which lies within it, so God sees the form of the Christ, the divine Son, the perfect image at the heart of every person. Just as the sculptor chisels away at the raw material to give form and shape to what he has seen, so the Spirit of God chisels away at you and me in order to bring into being that which we already are in the mind of God. If only we can allow it to happen! In Jesus the blueprint "took flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld his glory." The "fullness of Christ", as St. Paul calls it, is waiting to be worked out in us in that unique individual way which is ours alone.

10. Becoming what we are

"Jesus said to the woman, "Where are they? Has no-one condemned you?" She answered, "No-one, sir." Jesus said, "Nor do I condemn you. You may go; do not sin again." (St. John 8; vv. 10 & 11)

These words of Jesus are addressed to a woman who had been brought before him caught in the act of committing adultery. Unlike most of us, he seemed rather reluctant to act as judge. He rarely pointed the accusing finger. More often we see a Jesus who recognises people's brokenness and seeks to make them whole. Time and again to the broken people, wounded by life, Jesus declares forgiveness and healing, saying "Go in peace."

As I read the Gospel stories, I see two things, however, which Jesus roundly condemns, often with very strong language; namely self-righteousness and hypocrisy. Both are self-delusion and a refusal to face up to the reality about one's self. The self-righteous person thinks himself better than others, the hypocrite pretends to be what he is not. Both live a lie and delude themselves as they seek to delude others. By contrast, the really fortunate ones, according to Jesus, are the "poor in spirit", often translated as "those who know their need of God." (St. Matthew 5; v.3)

A true self-awareness is crucial for a life of wholeness, of Shalom. If we fail to know, value and love ourselves just as we are, we shall be unable to truly know and love God or our fellow human beings. If we have no positive self-image we will always define ourselves in a negative way over against what we are not. We will knock others down in order to bolster our own self-image. We will criticise others in order to justify ourselves. We will exclude others and keep them at bay in order to make ourselves feel safe. We will see strangers rather than friends in the people around us. We will fail to recognise the image of God in one another because we have been unable to recognise it in ourselves. The challenge of Jesus is that he calls us to be truly ourselves, to have an inner integrity of spirit by which we place a right value on ourselves and on others.

I should like to suggest a fourfold path which leads through self-awareness to God-awareness.

Firstly, we need to be aware. For so much of our time we wear masks and play roles in order to be able to cope with the emotions which are thrown up by the mere fact of living. For some of us the masks become so firmly fixed that they find it almost impossible to remove them. We make fun of the teacher who treats fellow-adults like pupils or the clergyman who is still preaching at the dinner-table, but every one of us wears a mask to a greater or lesser extent. They hide our vulnerability. We need to be aware of these masks and aware of what they are hiding: suppressed fears and anxieties, hurts which we have avoided facing up to and the real vulnerable self which lies within us, longing for love and fearing rejection. We need to be aware of all this and a first step on the road to self-awareness is the way of contemplation. All too often we hide from ourselves by occupying our time with words and actions, distractions and busy thoughts. For this reason, solitude and silence can be very hard to face. When we are quiet and alone we are forced to look into the mirror of ourselves and see what is there. What do we see? That broken mirror which is you and I. A unique and therefore infinitely precious facet of the divine image, but which is constantly stifled and smothered by that false image of ourselves which we carry and by the hurts and anxieties which cause us to deny that the image is there. Only by discovering our true centre can we begin to be healed from the centre outwards. Anything else, as psychologists would tell us, is purely cosmetic. We need to contemplate; look long and lovingly at the centre of our being. For less introvert personalities, such contemplation can be hard, but they will perhaps find the second strand somewhat easier.

The second strand in our path to self-awareness is community. We discover who we are in relation to others. Part of what I am has already been shaped by others, not least by my parents, my wife and those closest to me. The love and respect of others is vital to our health and to a healthy self-awareness. Without love we will feel unloveable and therefore unable to reveal our deepest feelings. There is nothing more healing and life-giving than the unconditional

acceptance of us "warts and all" by another person. There is nothing more damaging than criticism and an unwillingness by others to listen and understand. Part of the role of human community is to be mirrors to one another, to be people who are prepared to listen and seek to understand, people who will patiently hold the mirror which will enable others to see themselves reflected.

The third strand is that of "grace". "Grace" is one of those all-embracing shorthand words which Christians use, but which I would define as an "unexpected and undeserved gift or act of giving". Falling in love could be described as an act of grace, as could an unexpected act of generosity which makes us feel wanted and loved or a word which makes us feel appreciated and valued. It may be a flash of inspiration which helps us to see something which has long been puzzling us in a whole new light. It may be a sudden, unexpected awareness of the presence of God. We cannot make it happen or discover it in ourselves, it just happens. It is pure gift. It is like the sun coming out from behind a cloud or a person giving us a smile. It may last just a second, but in that second our life is put in perspective. We know we are an object of grace, that we have been given a gift which cannot be taken from us. The source of grace is God. It is as though we have been looking into a steamed-up mirror and someone suddenly wipes it. We can see clearly for an instant before the mist returns once more. We need to treasure such moments and feed our spirits from them.

The fourth strand, which unifies everything, is our awareness of the Christ. Jesus is called the Christ, the Son of God, because he was so supremely self-aware. When we read the stories and teachings of Jesus, we see a person who was utterly self-defining, or perhaps God-defining, which amounts to the same thing. He is not worried about the opinion others might have of him, because he does not rely on others for his self-worth. He does not need to criticise or judge others in order to build himself up. He has realised the image of God within himself and is able to act as the perfect mirror, which will enable others to discover the reflected image within themselves. In coming to Jesus Christ, we are returning home to our true selves. We are becoming what we really are.

As T. S. Eliot writes in the "Four Quartets":

"We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our
exploring
Will be to arrive where we
started
And know the place for the first
time."

In discovering Jesus, we discover ourselves. We call Jesus the Christ because he is who we really are.

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