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## What does your God look like?

Thu, 2020-04-23 11:09 -- Administrator



*Cristo Negro (Black Christ) - Iglesia de San Filipe - Portobelo, Panama*

**Genesis 1.27** ?So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them.?

**John 14.9** ?Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.?

What does your God look like? I suspect that for many of us, God looks either a bit like us, or a bit like what we think power looks like.

I might suggest that God looks like Jesus. After all, Jesus says that if we have seen him, we have seen the Father. So by this understanding God is male, able bodied, articulate, a teacher, and a preacher, he is someone who leads others, and challenges preconceptions? But can you see what?s happening here? I?m describing my God after my own image. I?m emphasising those attributes of Jesus that match the things about me that represent power.

This is entirely the wrong way round: after all, we are made in God?s image, not God in ours. If we make God in our image, we commit the sin of idolatry because we end up worshipping either ourselves, or the things that we most value and admire. If we make God in our image, we deify ourselves and exclude those who are ?not like us?. And if my inclusion results in someone else?s exclusion, whether that is on the basis of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, mental health, wealth, or ability; and as long as I accept that privilege without

taking action to address the situation, I am not only participating in violence against others, I am also diminishing my own self before the God who makes all people in God's own image.

So, what does your God look like? Do you find that in your imagination, God looks a bit like you? Or maybe your view of God looks like what you have been conditioned to think of as powerful?

If you're a woman, you may still see God as male, and a feminist critique would suggest that is a function of the patriarchy, normalising maleness as power, and inviting us to deify and worship it?

If you're a person of colour, you may still see God as White, and a racial justice critique would suggest that this is a function of white supremacy, normalising whiteness as power, and inviting us to deify and worship it?

If you're a person with a disability or impairment, you may still see God as able-bodied and mentally healthy, and a disability rights critique would suggest that this is a function of ableism, normalising the able-bodied as power, and inviting us to deify and worship it?

If you're a person living with economic disadvantage, you may still see God as wealthy, with glittering golden churches built by people with guilt complexes, and a Liberation Theology analysis would suggest that this is a function of religion as a mechanism of oppression, normalising wealth as power, and inviting us to prostrate ourselves before it?

But here's a thing: there is a way out of our idolatry. The crucified God invites us to nail all our false images of God to the cross; to see them, and the privilege and power that sustains them, die; and in their place is born a new humanity, of equality and justice.

So can we give up our deified images of power? Can we learn to worship God as God is, rather than as we have constructed God? This will be painful, because it invites us to encounter God in places we would not expect to find God. It requires us to set aside our preconceptions, and our investment in what is, and to encounter God not in power but in weakness, in prejudice, and in the 'other'. It means we have to ask difficult questions, of what it might mean if God doesn't look like *me* at all, what if God *doesn't* look like power? What if God looks like a refugee, or a person with no home and no money, or a disabled person? What if God is a person of colour? What if God is not male, or straight, or mentally well?

And of course, in Jesus, God is all these things:

- Jesus was not a White European, he was a Middle-Eastern Jew
- He bears in his body the marks of the crucifixion, his hands and feet wounded for all eternity
- He was the homeless, penniless refugee, whose childhood was spent on the run and whose adult life was spent as the one who had nowhere to lay his head
- He was unmarried and childless, defying the gender and sexual norms of his day and known for associating with those whose own sexual history was at best ambiguous
- He experienced periods of great psychological trauma, from the overwhelming pressure of people, to tears of grief at the death of a friend, to the devastating loneliness of Gethsemane
- His sweat in his mental anguish was like drops of blood, as his torment took its toll on his physical wellbeing
- He was tempted in every way just as we are.

And Jesus tells his disciples that if they have seen him, they have seen God. So, what would it be like for us

to give up on our idolatrous images of God, made either in our own images, or cast to deify strength and power as we experience it in our lives, society, and world? What would it mean for us collectively as the body of Christ to embody a more broken, excluded, and reviled image of God?

The starting point for a journey into greater inclusion isn't a greater understanding of the marginalised and the oppressed; it is a greater understanding of ourselves and our own capacity for sinful idolatry. It is not for us to tell others that our God is their God too. God is *already* the God of the person of colour, and the person with the physical or mental impairment. God is *already* the God of the woman as well as the man, as well as the person of non-binary gender. God is *already* the God of the LGBTQi community, just as God is *already* the God of the homeless and the God of the economically disadvantaged.

The problem here is not God as revealed in Christ; the problem is with me, and maybe with you too, as we uncritically and unthinkingly deify our version of normality, creating God in our images of power. The journey to inclusion starts when we realise that the image of the Black Christ, the female Christ, the gay or trans Christ, the homeless or disabled Christ are not idolatrous perversions but actually are authentic representations of the diversity of the body of Christ.

So, to return to my question: What does your God look like? Does God look like you, or like what you think power looks like? Can we learn to see God in all those that have been made in the image of God, and can we learn to see each of us, whoever we are, in our images of God? In Christ, God includes all, absolutely. And as the people of Christ, we are called to be the body of Christ in all its diversity.

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*Written by Simon Woodman, based on a [sermon preached at Bloomsbury Baptist Church](#) [1] to mark it becoming an inclusive church.*

This was followed by a sermon series inviting people who represent the various marginalised and excluded groups to preach. See the sermons below.

Rosemarie Davidson-Gotobed: <https://soundcloud.com/bloomsbury-1/ethnic-inclusion> [2]

LGBT Inclusion: Four stories from Pride 2019: <https://soundcloud.com/bloomsbury-1/pride-sunday-2019-stories-of-inclusion> [3]

Disability Inclusion: Revd Glen Graham: <https://soundcloud.com/bloomsbury-1/2019-08-04-glen-graham> [4]

Gender Inclusion: Revd Beth Allison-Glenny: <https://soundcloud.com/bloomsbury-1/2019-09-08-beth-allison-glenny> [5]

Economic Inclusion: Revd Lynne Cullens: <https://soundcloud.com/bloomsbury-1/2019-10-06-lynn-cullens> [6]

Mental Health Inclusion: Revd Karen Stallard: <https://soundcloud.com/bloomsbury-1/inclusive-church-series-mental-health-inclusion> [7]

Trans Inclusion: Revd Dr Karl Rutledge: <https://soundcloud.com/bloomsbury-1/revd-dr-karl-rutledge> [8]

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## Links

[1] <https://baptistbookworm.blogspot.com/2019/04/what-does-your-god-look-like.html>

[2] <https://soundcloud.com/bloomsbury-1/ethnic-inclusion>

[3] <https://soundcloud.com/bloomsbury-1/pride-sunday-2019-stories-of-inclusion>

[4] <https://soundcloud.com/bloomsbury-1/2019-08-04-glen-graham>

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[7] <https://soundcloud.com/bloomsbury-1/inclusive-church-series-mental-health-inclusion>

[8] <https://soundcloud.com/bloomsbury-1/revd-dr-karl-rutledge>