

Part 18: Who God is not

Open with a time of silence. How in touch are we with our feelings about God? In working with Psalm 139, do we share David's apprehensive awe? Share in the group some of your experiences and prayers during the past week. (15 minutes)

Who God is not

What picture or image of God do we have in us that we respond to? If we consider where our first conceptions of God came from, we find that much of our early understanding was received from and shaped by those around us, initially our family and then later our friends and community.

We absorbed their underlying attitudes, their unspoken anxieties and their submerged fears. The responses and reactions they had to God, whether they acknowledged God or not, became a part of our sense of God.

This body of information with which we started was 'second hand'; we received it from others when we did not have the ability to check its validity for ourselves. As we grew and began to make our own decisions, we built on the understanding of God that we had already been given. We did not query this, since an unspoken rule was that one did not question God - there was an element of fear and mistrust in anything relating to God. There may even have been the fear that if we dared to question God, something terrible might happen to us.

And so there grew, for most of us, this awesome, fearful, distant God, who was unknown and unknowable. Part of a bishop's pastoral letter quoted in *Free to Believe* by Michael Gallagher may give us further insight:

'Some people carry around with them an image of God that is in fact superstitious. It is the image of the punishing puppet-master who has to be humoured and pacified in case he might pull the wrong string. Others picture him as a distant, inaccessible authority figure who is totally out of tune with the friendship held out to us in Christ. A surprising number of people look on God as a kind of clockmaker – a God of explanation for the universe but a God irrelevant to ordinary life. There are even those who only know him as a God of the gaps. He has no compelling existence until favours are needed or trouble strikes.'

Reflect for a few minutes on how your understanding of God was influenced by the formative people in your life, e. g. parents, relatives, peers. Journal your thoughts and share them with the group. (15 minutes)

Different input and experiences over the years have left us with the various images and senses of God that we now have. In a book entitled *The God I don't believe in*, Juan Arias ends with a list of false faces of God, all of which come from commonly held views of God.

As you slowly read through this list on your own, compare each picture with the one you have in you, and be very aware of any changes in your feelings or disposition. Some views you will know are not yours, but others may well linger with you. Where do your attitudes lie?



Make a note next to the ones you are not so sure of. Read the following on your own and reflect on it for 20 minutes. Juan Arias says:

'No, I shall never believe in the god who loves pain...
the god who condemns material things...
the god who flashes a red light against human joys...
the god who is angry and unpredictable...
the god who 'sends' people to hell...
the god who always demands 100% in examinations...
the god who does not accept a seat at our human festivities...
the god whom only the mature, the wise
or the comfortably situated can understand...
the god in whom there are no mysteries...
the god who is not greater than we are...
the god who does not have the generosity of
the sun, which warms everything it touches...
the god who is like a bitter old man...
the god who pounces on sinners...
the god who doesn't need humanity...
the god who doesn't care about Calcutta...
the god who despises human happiness...
the god who says, 'you will pay for that'...
the god who has no emotions...
the god who is a specialist in souls...
the god who would only reluctantly become a man...

No, I shall never believe in this god.'

Gently question your own picture of God and begin to accept and own any distortions you carry about God: 'Yes, this is the way I've seen you in the past' or 'Yes, I do have a fear of you, Father.'

Having reflected on this god of your perceptions, write your reflections in your journal and then share with the others in the group as you feel comfortable. (30 minutes)

At home this week

Stay with the work you've begun in this session. Review your understanding of God, identifying as much of the negative side as you can.

The exercise itself may cause you some anxiety, but take comfort in that God likes to reveal Godself and is not threatened by any negative misconceptions we may have. God would rather have us free of them, with the freedom to respond to who God really is.

In future weeks we will be looking at our positive experiences of God, expanding and building on them, so take heart.



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