Images of Jesus

Teacher Background

In the Old Testament many images are used to portray God and God's relationship with human beings. God is firstly creator; the creative breath that draws life out of the primeval waters, the creative word that orders the universe (Genesis 1). God is lawgiver, instructing humans in the ways that lead to life (Exodus 20). Ultimately God will judge all according to their deeds (1 Samuel 2). As we make life's journey, God is there as a shepherd to guide us in safe ways (Psalm 23), as a protector from harm (Sirach 51), and as our avenger of those who do us wrong (Psalm 99). There are tender images. God is the potter who lovingly fashions us as the clay (Sirach 33); the mother who cannot forget the child of her womb (Isaiah 49); the lover who comes in search of the beloved (Song of Songs 2). There are also other images such as the light and cloud that lead Israel on its exodus (Exodus 13), fire that consumes the pleasing sacrifice (1 Kings 18) yet does not burn the bush in Moses' presence (Exodus 3).

In the New Testament the unique revelation is of God as Trinity. No image satisfactorily portrays the relationship between Father, Son and Spirit that preserves their distinct personhood yet expresses their unity. But the very names given to the persons of the Trinity are themselves powerful images. Father speaks of God as source of all life, as nurturer, as loving protector. The Son is the perfect image of his Father, and the Word through whom all creation comes into being. The Spirit is the mutual love of Father and Son, communicated to us as life-giving gift.

Scripture uses various images and titles to describe Jesus and his mission. He is a prophet continuing to call people to conversion and denouncing injustice and oppression where he meets it. He is Messiah (Hebrew) and Christ (Greek), God's anointed one sent to be saviour. Throughout his ministry he is recognised as a teacher who speaks with unaccustomed authority. The image of king is frequently used. Jesus surpasses his ancestor David in that his kingdom is eternal and embraces all people of every age. He is also the priest par excellence, offering perfect sacrifice to God on our behalf; and the unique mediator between God and humanity, being himself both God and human.

During the medieval period many monastic writers depicted Jesus as maternal. Perhaps the most striking example of this can be found in the writings of Julian of Norwich. Julian is convinced that Jesus loves us more intimately and intensely than what even the best of our human loves, which Julian takes to be the love of a mother for her child, can suggest. Jesus, then, is our mother, the mother of our divine life, loving us more tenderly and passionately than we can appreciate.