

More thoughts on addressing God – *Robert Cotton*

In my previous article for this Bible Journal, I was starting to explore how we address God; in particular, I was investigating the connection between male-ness and God. Is male-ness an essential attribute of God? If so, then we should have no hesitation to call God ‘Our Father’. Indeed, it would largely be wrong to use any other form of address. On the other hand, some would claim that any language chosen to address God can only be based on cultural preferences which change from country to country, and from age to age. In this opinion, Jesus teaching us to call God ‘Our Father’ is important, informative but does not rule out other names and titles – provided that these cohere with Jesus’ teaching about God as the one who is passionately and intimately concerned about us.

In between these two ends of the spectrum is a fair amount of middle ground. I write as someone who treasures the Lord’s prayer very highly indeed, and yet who has also felt the limitations of always beginning my favourite prayer with a male image. This does not necessarily mean that I want to start the prayer “Our Mother”; rather, at moments when I am truly focused on God in prayer, I naturally want to use a different sort of language (if I have to use words at all), such as ‘God of grace’, ‘Eternal Wisdom’, or ‘Holy One’. You will notice that these three examples are “gender free”, yet these titles have the disadvantage of not conveying the personal quality of God’s love. The God we learn about in the Bible is not limited by human personality, but is also never less than personal. How can we find expressions that point us towards this loving, caring, deeply personal God (so far removed from the sort of god that Plato described, which is rational, logical, pure, unembodied spirit – but no “personality”)? All the traditions that contribute to the variety of books in the Bible were, by and large, male-dominated in terms of social and spiritual culture. So it is not surprising that nearly all the images, as well as the titles, of God are coloured by male-ness: such as King of Kings, or Good Shepherd. And yet, even within the biblical material, there are passages that point us beyond: for example, when Jesus likens himself to “a hen gathering her brood under her wings” (Matthew 23.37).

These thoughts were occasioned in part by the first talk I gave in the New Start course where I was identifying four distinctive traditions that contribute to most of the Old Testament books. And, in part, I have been led to reflect further by using a new translation of the Bible each day in Morning Prayer; this is called the Inclusive Bible. In this the translators set out to ensure that all references to humans were inclusive and balanced: human referring to both men and women. But they also aimed for more than that: they wanted to avoid exclusive titles for God, thereby freeing the reader from the expectation that God and male-ness are essentially linked. Note: this is NOT saying that male language for God is inappropriate; rather that by using male language alone, we blind ourselves to some ways of experiencing the breadth and depth of God’s presence.

The key question is: how do we speak in an inclusive way about God at all, without de-personalizing God? For the word ‘God’ itself is not personal – which is why many prayer will begin ‘Almighty God’ or ‘Father God’. The word ‘God’ on its own is a bit of an omnibus word: you can pile a lot of ideas into it. In our culture today, I reckon that many people “believe in” God, but the sort of God they believe in is far removed from the Christian story of a passionate, righteous, faithful, glorious God who has a bias for the poor and a longing to restore the fallen.

The new translation, the Inclusive Bible, tackles this key question in a novel way by frequently using the name ‘Yahweh’. This is faithful to some of the Old Testament

translations for that is what Abraham and succeeding generations called their God. But, as I read this translation, I feel the novelty because the translators time and again use a name (Yahweh) and not a designation (God). By using a name, we are naturally drawn into relationship with the one named because that is what a name does; a name does not describe, it addresses, beckons or calls on someone. Speaking personally, I do not often use the word 'Father' for my dad, I call him dad, daddy or John. The former is a description, the latter three words begin a relationship – and the sort of relationship that is essentially personal.

But also, this is more than a personal one-to-one relationship. When I address a prayer to Yahweh, I am binding myself into the history of all others who have thus addressed 'the Holy One'. 'Yahweh' is not my pet name for God; I am stepping into a continuous tradition with a spiritual community reaching back over hundreds of years. For me at the moment this gives an added dimension to my reading and praying.

One of the dangers of this approach is that the use of names can become exclusive. You will have experienced that, no doubt, when you hear nick-names being used. If you know someone's nick-name, you are a few steps closer in a relationship. If you don't, you can easily be being excluded by an inner circle who know the jargon. Of course, it was this dynamic that led the early church intentionally to drop the name Yahweh, because they wanted to preach a message about Jesus/God that was understandable and acceptable to gentiles who were not familiar with the Old Testament stories.

In the New Testament we can read about these new Christian communities struggling to find the right language for God. No longer was it sufficient to call God 'Yahweh' (or any other of the names previously used in Temple and Synagogue worship) for they had seen in the life of Jesus new aspects of God which could not be contained in those names. So, we read in Paul and others of new titles: God is 'God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' or the 'God who raised Christ Jesus from the dead'. These are rather long names! But the authors are striving to say that you cannot refer to God without referring to Jesus and his resurrection.

So what choices do you make as you address God in prayer? I imagine that much of the time you may choose fairly traditional titles and names, which has the great advantage of placing ourselves in an extended community of prayer. I wonder how comfortable you may feel with varying the name you use: instead of beginning prayers with 'Almighty God' (probably the most commonly used title in the prayer book), how about trying 'Gracious God', 'God of eternity', 'Spirit of hope', or 'My way, my truth, my life'? I sometimes use 'Holy One'. In doing so, I am acknowledging that God is awesome and demanding, and beckons me as well into a life of holiness and truth.