

THE FACE OF GOD

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IN THE OLD TESTAMENT, the *anawim*, or little ones, were especially favoured by God. These people were on the margins of society and in today's terms were the unemployed, the dispossessed, widows, orphans, disabled and others. They were those whom society has rejected, and it was among these people that Jesus spent much of his time.

Even today we have such people in our society, and whilst more could be done to help them, at least today in Australian society in contrast to Jesus' time, we try help them through such means as Centrelink payments (income security), government programs (e.g. the housing department) and various church and charitable services.

Yet the question remains, in our modern urbanized society and especially in a large city such as Sydney, if we were to gaze upon the face of God, to see Christ in our midst so to speak, what would it look like? It is this question which this paper will hope to answer, at least for myself.

I believe the answer to this question, 'What will the face of Christ look like?' will be different for every person. For Nancy Eiseland, a Uniting Church minister who is herself disabled, the image of the resurrected Christ who is disfigured or disabled through the marks of the cross on his body is extremely liberating. For someone like Jean Vanier who founded the *L'Arche* communities, the unconditional love he has felt from its core members over the years has been a major inspiration in his life. Likewise, for Henri Nouwen, the person of Adam whom he cared for over many years had a profound effect upon his life and led him to write a book about this remarkable individual who did nothing special. Yet in doing nothing Adam profoundly affected the lives of all around him.

As a person who has worked with people

with disabilities for around fourteen years I can certainly resonate with what they are saying. I myself over the years have felt and experienced this unconditional love and acceptance of clients at times.

In particular, I would like to recount the case of a young child I worked with when I was new to the disability field. Danny was a young child approximately four years of age. He had mild autism and some very challenging behaviors such as hitting his head against the wall when he was angry. He could talk, but using only simple and single words. As such his mother was very tired and frustrated with caring for Danny and did not know what to do. To make matters worse her partner had just committed suicide. It was the time of the 1987 Wall Street crash, her partner had been heavily leveraged on the stock market and when the stock market crashed they had lost everything except his life insurance policy. This would be just enough to cover their debts and pay the house off.

So here we see an image of a mother who is suffering. She has the burden of caring for this child with special needs which she is just barely coping with. Coupled to this is the grief of losing her partner whom she loved very much and the practicalities of just putting a roof over their heads. It is a cup of suffering and a large cross to bear. It is an image of desolation, something no one should need to contemplate yet alone experience. Yet it is these emotions we find echoed in the passion of Jesus in not only the Garden of Gethsemane but in the carrying of the cross. She did not want to drink of this cup, but for the love of her son she went through the hell of her own passion and came out of it resurrected and a transformed person.

Like Jesus, she felt very abandoned at her passion by those around her. Yet if we read John's Gospel carefully, we see that Jesus is

not totally alone. As Jesus dies he is supported at his last moments by the presence of Mary his mother, Mary the wife of Clopas, Mary Magdalene and the Beloved Disciple (Jn. 19:26). Likewise, this woman felt at this time very alone like Jesus but she wasn't. To help her through this process was a social worker who journeyed alongside and opened doors to places she did not know existed. It was this gentle supportive presence, almost like the wings of an eagle, which helped the mother to endure and continue—wings carrying her through this very difficult time.

It was these wings that brought Danny to where I was working as a support worker at the time. She left him with us in our care for a period of time so that she could sort out her own issues. It was a place which had predominantly female staff who cared for Danny in a very gentle manner. Many of these women felt deeply for Danny's mother and in their own way suffered with her. That is, their hearts were moved with passion or compassion and they realized that the best way to help her was to care for Danny as they would care for their own children. In this way we saw that God was present in these women not only in a compassionate way, but also incarnated as a mother.

In particular, there was a male worker who worked part-time and was there for four hours of an afternoon Monday to Friday. This person was a stable male figure in Danny's unstable life at this time; a person who in many ways became a surrogate father for this child who had lost his own father tragically; a person with whom Danny formed a special bond and he would call out for him at night and during the day.

Then as we reflect upon how God was present in this tragedy, let us not forget Danny himself. At first he was very angry, confused



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and it was hell to work with him. However, over a period of time he changed and calmed down. In fact towards the end of his stay with us he would often hug the staff. In him you could see and feel the unconditional acceptance of this child who came to know those around him. He trusted those around him without reservation. Even now, many years later, I can still hear his still small voice in my mind calling out—a voice, which is small, gentle and inviting, and keeps calling me back to work with people with disabilities—a voice similar to what Samuel heard when he was first called to serve the Lord in the Temple (1 Sam. 3:1-9).

So let us return to answer the question which was asked at the start of this paper, which is, in an Australian urban context, what does the face of God look like? For me, I find Christ present in the mother who was suffering the loss of her spouse. I find Christ present as the supporting social worker helping the mother through the crisis. I find Christ present as a mother and a father caring for a child. I find Christ present in the face, unconditional love and acceptance of a child. A God who is relational and who is present in every person I meet. A God who supports us in times of despair and is incarnated into the people we meet and into the very structures of Australian society.

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Please note that some details such as location of residence, names, etc have been changed to protect confidentiality.