

Imago Dei – Image of God



***A series of prayer poems offered for
private and group reflection by
The Revd Bill Mahood
in 2010***

Foreword

As the Vision4Life Prayer Year approached, the Free to Believe Committee agreed that this could be a difficult year for those with a more open and progressive faith. Alison Micklem wrote that “through our e-mail exchanges, a body of material began to emerge and we felt it might be useful to share it”. That sharing is the booklet ‘Thoughts and Prayers’ and we are glad that it has been appreciated widely – even ‘across the pond’!

After receiving a copy of ‘Thoughts and Prayers’, the editor of REFORM asked if a series of its items could be used as articles in the magazine. Edited versions of some of these have appeared, including in the November 2010 issue one of those I had written, making reference to coincidence. One of those ‘coincidences’ then occurred! The Revd Bill Mahood, at present Convener of the Eastern Synod Pastoral Committee, used one of his prayer poems contained in this booklet as the opening devotions for the following committee meeting. After that meeting, having read my article in REFORM, Bill had a word with me and this booklet is now the outcome. Coincidence becoming action?

Bill had written this series of prayer poems recently. Reading these has been a mind-opening, reflective experience for me. He has brought together the recognisably ‘everyday’ through poetry and tied it to prayer, thereby bridging a gap that I sometimes sense to be missing in worship. Once again the Free to Believe Committee has felt it might be useful to share this material:

for personal private reflection . . .

for sharing in church newsletters . . .

for reflection in study or house groups . . .

for careful introduction and sharing in worship . . .

Bill is happy for the prayer poems to be used in all these circumstances, for “how can you copyright prayer?”!

I hope you also find that these prayer poems will open your mind to the image of God we see in those we meet; all we do and all we experience in the *busyness that happens around us* as we journey through the gift of *life in all its fullness*.

Linda Harrison, November 2010

Heathrow

I love airports.

I feel about airports
what I felt for railway stations
as a child.

I love watching people.

I love people's faces.

Maybe I am nosy, in truth I am,
but is it more than just nosiness?

I believe that when I look at someone's face,
when I look into their eyes,
I see the Image of God.

Today I waited at Heathrow Airport,
to meet my daughter, son-in-law and grandchildren,
returning from holiday in Canada.

I felt excitement while waiting for them,
longing to see them, to hug and greet them
and to hear their story.

As I waited I watched:
such a variety of people:
I could only guess at their stories.

**Lord, when I look at my family and friends,
into the faces of the people I love
help me to know that I see your image there.**

**When I look into the faces of strangers,
help me to see that we share a common image,
your image.**

**We cannot be just strangers.
We are held together in your love.**

Imago Dei - The Image of God

Wonder is our proper response to Genesis.

Wonder is the proper response to the *Origin of the Species*.

Wonder is the proper response to all that
helps us to explore creation.

**Lord God, in the beginning you called
all things into being.
You spoke and it was done.**

**Fill us with wonder,
wonder at the vastness of creation,
at the intricacy of the human genome.
Make us truly grateful for every exploration of
creation
that expands our understanding and enriches life,
that helps us to explore and fulfil your image in us**

**You spoke and called humanity into being.
You said, Let us make people in our own image.¹**

¹ Genesis 1:26

**You said, you say. Help us to see that your Word is
the eternal now, always in the present tense.**

We are made in your image.

**Help us to treat others with the dignity,
the value, the respect, that your image confers upon them.**

**May our life together enhance the Imago Dei in us.
We are in your image.**

.... know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit²
1 Cor 6:19

I have always found this an intimidating verse.

Truth to tell, I was a podgy child.

a photograph at 18 months shows me to be
remarkably like the Michelin Man –
a big smile and rolls, and rolls, of fat.

In childhood and youth there were enough remarks,
by family and friends, to ensure that I knew
I was no Adonis, nor ever would be.

With little or no sporting prowess, nothing encouraged me
to pursue physical fitness.

There were about 20 of us in the gym today.

all shapes, sizes, ages,
some seeking the peak of physical fitness and perfection,
a few, undoubtedly, seeking the body beautiful.

For some of us it is to do with health,

maintaining health, returning to health after illness.

All, hopefully, achieving a greater sense of wellbeing.

² 1 Corinthians 6:19

**Jesus, you say that you come that we may have life
in all its fullness.³**

**Help us to know that this fullness of life is about what
we are.**

**We do not want to divide ourselves into separate parts,
mind and body, soul and spirit.**

**We are a unity, one being, each made in the Image of God.
Hold us in you. As we develop each part of ourselves,
May we truly find fullness of life, at every stage of life.**

³ John 10:10

A little lower than (אלוה) Elohim

Psalm 8 asks a question:

What is man? What are human beings?

The answer is that we are made
a little lower than (אלוה) elohim.⁴

Over the centuries scholars
seem to have had difficulties translating this word, elohim.

Those translating the Hebrew Bible into Greek in the 3rd
century B.C.

translated it as, (ἄγγελοι – angeloi), angels.

Why? In the Hebrew Bible elohim is the regular word for God.

In 1603 King James ordered a new translation of the Bible in
English.

The scholars had available to them
the Hebrew and Greek texts of Psalm 8.

They chose to continue to translate elohim as angels.

Why? Why? Why?

I see the translators, separated by two thousand years, hard at
work.

All is well. Pages are being filled.

Then they come up short. Psalm 8. What is Man?

Such an audacious statement? Surely it is blasphemous
to say that mortals, sinful humans, are a little lower than God.

So it becomes angels.

Still a high position, one they seem content with.

⁴ Psalm 8:5

But the Hebrew says elohim, God.

Why, why, why are we so frightened to give to people
the dignity, the freedom, the value that is implied
when described as a little lower than God.

Is it because it is such an inclusive statement? There are no
exceptions.

To believe this means I must see in everyone the image of God.
No exception for colour or race, for creed or religion, for
gender or sexuality.

We are made a little lower than God.

We may be frightened by this.
It is better to shout alleluia.

**Lord God, you give us life
And purpose as your agents in the world.
Help us always to work for the dignity and freedom
of your children.
We are one, made in your image,
near to you because we are truly your family.**

Today was the start of the football season.

It is one of the new things that I have discovered in retirement,
an enjoyment of football.

Not being interested in watching one of the well-known
national teams,
even those relatively close like Ipswich and Norwich,
I support a truly local team, Debenham Leisure Centre
Football Club.

I know the players and managers and they know me.
I have a sense of belonging and serve as a committee member.
Match days are busy and I rejoice to be able to say 'we'
when talking
about 'our' performance. My family find it very funny.

We played our first game today and won 4 – 0.
The atmosphere after the match was good and jovial with
lots of banter.
It is the same at the end of matches that we lose.

No, the players and managers are not saints, not that I have
noticed anyway.
We probably get an average number of yellow and red cards.
There are the usual arguments and disagreements,
but the sense of mutual support and encouragement
within the team is strong.

What is done as a team is important but it takes its proper place in life.

We lose players, we gain new players but what makes DLCFC remains the same.

New players quickly sense it, become part of it.

Do I see the Imago Dei, the Image of God, here?

Most certainly.

The sense of community, of mutual support and shared enjoyment,

of reaching out for more, of giving one's best,

of making mistakes but not being obsessed by them,

of applauding the success of others and praising their efforts.

Lord God, help us to know what is important in our lives.

Help us to value all the things that motivate us,

the work that makes demands on us,

the hobbies and relaxation that help us to feel whole.

Enable us to give of our best and thus portray your image in us.

I'm in a hospital, visiting, watching.

I see people moving about
with purposeful stride,
engaged on important business.

I know this hospital.
I feel great confidence about this place.
I have benefited
from the confident stride and purpose of the staff,
from their skill and expertise.

Alongside this confidence and purposeful work
there is also much uncertainty and fear.

By its very nature a hospital is for patients.
The skills and expertise of the staff,
their dedication and long hours
are for the sake of those who are ill.

Sickness affects our sense of who we are.
We are no longer whole people.
We have lost our sense of wellbeing,
made greater by admission to hospital.

We feel isolated, alone, cut off from normal life,
from our community.

Busyness happens around us, for us.

We may appear to be the still centre of all this activity,
but often our minds are restless and far from still.

We are fearful, uncertain.

Such is the diversity of hospital life –

the staff – dedicated to their healing arts –

and the patients in whom all this activity finds its purpose.

Lord, when we are ill, when we are fearful

because of the weakness of our bodies,

when we no longer feel in control

of our health and wellbeing

help us to trust in you,

to rest in you.

In your stillness may we find healing and renewal.

I attended a funeral today,
a celebration of the 93 years
of Henry's life.

He had done and achieved much.

Mention was made of various jobs.

He was a faithful member of his church,

a caring and loving husband, father and grandfather.

He found time for Scouts, to be a church deacon and
much more.

There was always time for his beloved Norfolk Broads.

Was this the place where he was most fully at home,
most happy and contented?

Easter to late autumn, spent with his wife on their
boat on the Broads.

In such people and such events we see the Imago Dei,
the Image of God,

peace, contentment, at one with nature, at one with the
source of life.

And to be robbed of this by the cruel progress of Alzheimer's,
the last five years of his life in a nursing home, not
knowing his family.

What then do we say of the Imago Dei? Had it been
destroyed in him?

Should we begin to doubt that it was ever there, that it
has no reality?

We believe that God is love, his image will be seen in love.
It was there in the love of his wife and family,
in the care and love of those who nursed him every day.

It was there in the love of God who created him, who
remained with him,
walking with him throughout his life, every step of the way.

What is a funeral service?

A service of celebration of a life?

A rite of passage, marking a change?

A service of comfort for the bereaved?

Yes, all of these and more.

Catholic theology sees a funeral service as the final rite of
initiation.

We are baptised into the life of Christ. The funeral
service marks our
initiation into the joys of heaven and the full
presence of God.

**Lord God, in every step of life,
help us to journey with you,
help us to journey to you,
help us to journey in confidence and without fear.**

Leaving and cleaving⁵

The biblical view of marriage is this:

a man and a woman leave their homes and parents,
to cleave to each other.

Thus begins a new family unit. Two become one.

It is about love, about the future, about hope,
about reaching out to new possibilities.

We have just attended the wedding of our niece,
a civil ceremony in Greece, on the Island of Rhodes.

30 of us travelled to Greece,
knowing it was important to be there.

Both sets of parents, siblings, friends,
the daughters of the groom,
just a few years younger than the bride.

Past stories, sorrows, pains, fractured relationships,
the need for a new beginning.

**Lord God, in Jesus you offer us, always, new
beginnings,**

**a future with renewed hope,
with love and with confidence.**

**Help us in our relationships to learn from the past,
building on what we experience,**

**but never so bound by what has been
that the new is unable to flower.**

May we know your image is constantly renewed in us.

⁵ Genesis 2:24 Matthew 19:5 Matthew 10:7-8

As we walked in procession through the streets of Rhodes,
from ceremony to reception and celebration,
cars sounded their horns, people clapped and called
out greetings.

Strangers took photographs and held up their children
to see the bride and groom on their special day.

I noticed how many people then walked on, with smiles
on their faces.

It was not just about 30 people attending a private ceremony.
It was a public event within a community,
people being reminded of their own vows and
commitments,
knowing what is important.

**Lord God, teach us to value those things that bind us
together.**

**To live in community with shared values, hopes
and ideals.**

**Enable us to build each other up,
so that we may truly attain your image in us.**

I am come in order that you might have life – life in all its fullness.⁶

What do we mean by fullness of life?

Surely it will vary greatly from person to person.

For some it will involve having wealth enough to do whatever they want, whenever.

For others it will be about fame, being recognised in the street, opening the newspapers and finding one's photo there.

Or maybe about sporting prowess, achieving the pinnacle of skill and fitness, being a champion in a chosen sport.

Maybe something more ordinary.

Long life, time to enjoy what comes to us.

an enjoyable, full life day by day,

a modest amount of achievement,

enough years to make us feel we really have

lived to the full.

Ah, but none of us can guarantee that.

In all of this, fullness of life is defined by us, what we want it to be.

Maybe having asked the wrong question,

I end up with the wrong answer.

I need to start again.

Jesus said, I am come that you may have life – life in all its fullness.

⁶ John 10:10

It is about what God means by fullness of life.
not what we mean.

Three verses of Scripture are linked in my mind
summing up my beliefs.

We are made in the image of God.⁷

We are made a little lower than God.⁸

We are made for fullness of life.

They are about God and what God intends for human beings.

**Lord God, help us to reach out to you,
to respond to you at work in our lives.**

Whatever each day brings, may we trust in you.

**May each day be about fullness of life,
be they many or few.**

⁷ Genesis 1:26

⁸ Psalm 8:5

The Church of England is meeting in General Synod.

There are grave matters on the agenda.

Discussion will be intense and important.

Seemingly ordinary conversations will become important,
little chats over coffee or a late night drink.

Are they just chats?

Or a way of putting a viewpoint across,
of maybe changing someone's mind.

Is it lobbying – even in the community of the faithful,
maybe at the expense of the unity of the faithful?

The hot topic is the ordination of women to the episcopate.

Can women become bishops?

Should women become bishops?

Was this question not settled earlier with the decision
to ordain women to the priesthood?

Is this a re-run of old arguments,
to reverse history, or worse, to settle old scores?

God says, Let us make people in our own image.

God creates human beings in his own image:

in the image of God he creates them:
male and female he creates them.⁹

⁹ Genesis 1:26

.....there is neither male nor female, but all are one
in Christ Jesus¹⁰

**Lord, help us to understand the power of an idea
that has reached its time of fulfilment.**

**Help us to see that the thought, the purpose is yours,
in you we are one,
your shared image in us makes us one.**

**May we accept it joyfully, with confidence,
as sisters and brothers together.**

**As one people, your people, help us to achieve your
purposes.**

¹⁰ St Paul

I listened to the radio

with a growing sense of concern and dismay

The report predicted

a large number of defections

from the Church of England,

lay people, priests, and congregations

if A.B. is appointed a bishop.

While acknowledged to be suitable in almost every way,

he lives in a committed, loving relationship

with another man.

Let us make people in our own image,

says God.

Does our sexuality determine whether or not

we are made in the image of God,

whether the Imago Dei can be seen in us?

Is this the basis of judgement that some would make?

**Loving God, who makes no exception in the
out-flowing of your love,
open our eyes, open our hearts, open our minds.**

**Enable us to recognise goodness when and
where we find it.**

**May we know that it is a reflection of your goodness,
of your spirit at work.**

Call us to be part of that work, and to treasure it.

I conducted a Communion Service today.

No polished Communion Table.
no fair, white, linen cloth.

No pews for the congregation,
no church building and no stained glass.
Just the beauty and peace of an English garden,
grass, flowers, fruit and vegetables, and yes,
some weeds.

People had gathered at a family home,
bringing and sharing food,
walking and talking together,
playing games, cricket, rounders, bowls,
with much laughter and obvious enjoyment.

To finish the afternoon we shared Communion together,
in a big circle, with an odd assortment of garden chairs,
around a rather rickety table
covered with a kitchen tablecloth.

In the circle there were eight Downs Syndrome people.
It was their garden, their home,
where they live with their 'big brother', his wife and
children.

They are a family. Today they had invited their
larger family,
to share their home with them.

Morris West, the Australian novelist, described Downs Syndrome people as

The Clowns of God.¹¹ Not an insult, but a compliment, a reality.

God's gift to them is an innocence which will not be lost.

Everyone in that circle reflected the Imago Dei, the Image of God.

Together we were that image more fully than each of us alone could be.

We sang together and listened to the Scriptures.

We prayed and shared bread and wine,
reminders of how God shows his love
in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

I felt privileged to conduct the service, but felt the inadequacy of words.

My words were unimportant,
the actions spoke for themselves.

We were one with each other,
we were one with God.

¹¹ I gave this mite a gift I denied to all of you – eternal innocence. To you she looks imperfect – but to me she is flawless.....She is necessary to you. She will evoke the kindness that will keep you human.
Morris West *The Clowns of God* Book Club Associates: London 1981
Page397

The Eloquence of Theology¹²

What is theology?

Something done only in universities and theological colleges
by a special elite called theologians?

Do they by their wisdom, or maybe their holiness,
help others to a better understanding of faith,
to living with greater fidelity and grace?

Too often, we make theology 'academic' and remote,
the special activity of a small number of people,
removed from the concerns of congregations and the
living of faith.

The word 'theology' has a very simple definition, to speak
about God.

All those who speak about God are engaged in theology,
though often, rightly, unaware of this.

There have been occasions when I have looked at a
congregation and said,
you are theologians. I have enjoyed the surprised look
on their faces.

¹² Although this body (the Church) is called to the eloquence of theology and the urgency of human need, its formal words about itself are usually a drone of data concerning money and membership and meetings. Carl S. Dudley (Ed) *Building Effective Ministry* Harper & Row: San Francisco 1983 Page 79

But I have been very serious. They are the true theologians.
In their worship week by week they speak of God.
In the events of daily living,
in what they read in their newspapers and see on TV,
they speak of what they know of God at work in
God's world.

They are primary theologians, the front line of mission
and theology.

People working in theological colleges and universities,
are secondary theologian, systematisers
of the insights and experiences of the ordinary
people of God.

As a minister, working within a congregation, I am not the
great expert.

I am the one who leads, yes, but only as the one who
has knowledge and training,
there to help the people of God to be God's
presence in the world,
to help them to recognise that their insights and
experiences
are the real foundation of theology, of what we
know about God.

**Lord, whether we be wise or simple,
people of great experience or new to faith,
help us to know you in our daily lives
to speak of you at work in us
and in your world.**

**And we are put on earth, a little space,
That we may learn to bear the beams of love**
The Little Black Boy. William Blake

I read these words for the first time
in the cloisters of Norwich Cathedral,
part of an exhibition.¹³

I stood transfixed before them,
truly a charismatic moment.
The words seemed to enter deep within me.

I thought about them for a very long time.
I return to these words again and again.

The poem is now dated,
expressing an understanding and expression of race
no longer appropriate,
based, as it is, on limited experience and
understanding.

Yet, still, these words blaze with insight and faith.

¹³ I am amazed to find that it was June, 1979 that I attended this exhibition. These words have never left me. It seems as though I have meditated upon them again and again.

To bear the beams of love.

The Imago Dei, the image of God, God who is love,
God who loves.

Life is given to us that we too may love, that we may
embody love,
that we may love as God loves us.

**Lord, give us a little space, give us time, give us
opportunity,
to know your love.**

**As we experience human love and know it to be
a reflection of your love,
may we love in return, may we live in love.**

Our grandchildren have been with us for the weekend,

two four year olds and 2 younger toddlers.

They have so much more energy than me,
a greater sense of excitement, of readiness to try something new,
an expectation that anything is possible.

We have been woken early in the morning to read stories.
We have crawled around the floor building a track and playing with trains.

We have been in the sea together at Southwold.
We pushed them on swings, went up and down on seesaws and caught them at the bottom of slides.

We had fun together,
exhilarating, exhausting.

Jesus said: unless you become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.¹⁴

What a strange idea – to become like little children.
Surely it is a diminishing process that no sensible adult would want to engage in.

¹⁴ Matthew 18:3

Do I have to put away my education and learning?

Do I have to forget about my years of experience,
and, of course, the wisdom and maturity I have
gained in the process?

It sounds so strange. What was Jesus talking about?

What did he have in mind?

What did I say about my grandchildren? They have a
sense of excitement,

a readiness for new experiences,
a sense of expectation and of welcoming new
possibilities?

Lord, is this what you ask of me,

**a willingness again to be excited about life and
its infinite possibilities?**

**Can I find again the belief that in you I will
continue to grow and discover,
if only I am willing to reach out for it?**

Is that what it means to become like a little child?

**Truly to live each day to the full,
to allow your image to be restored in me.**

The Glory of God is man full alive. St. Irenaeus¹⁵

When leading worship,

I often ask people to pray silently for themselves
in all they will do during the coming week,
pray that their living may reflect God's glory,
be for God's glory.

I wonder if, unconsciously, I am using
the words and ideas of Irenaeus.

The glory of God is man fully alive.

Words from the 2nd century,
words known from my student days.

They speak of relationship between God and people.
We live in God's world, made in God's image,
truly fulfilled only when seeking to respond to
God's leading.

What does that mean for me?

¹⁵ The writings of Irenaeus (c115 – c202), an Early Church Father and apologist, were formative in the development of Christian theology.

I seek to walk through life with my eyes wide open,
 beholding the wonders of creation,
 seeing what is happening in the world.

I seek to walk through life with my mind wide open,
 knowing more of the variety and complexity of
 human life and experience,
 reaching out towards a greater understanding
 of what it means to be human.

I want to walk through life with my heart wide open.
 When I see joy I want to be joyful.

 When I see pain I want to be compassionate.

 When I see need I want to be part of the solution.

In my seeing, in my thinking, in my loving
 I want to be part of the whole human family,
 God's family.

**Lord God, open my eyes that I may see as you see,
 Open my mind that I may understand your purposes,
 Open my heart that I may love as you love.**

Help me to be fully alive that I may reflect your glory.

We may decide to live without God. God has decided from all eternity not to live without us.

Karl Barth¹⁶

Can this be true? God has chosen, from all eternity,
not to live without us.

I accept that at the heart of faith there is mystery.
There are limits to my knowledge.
I do not know the secrets of the universe,
of time and of eternity.

I am human and not divine.
Each day there must be a renewed act of faith.
I choose to believe,
I choose to live as a believer,
I choose to be a follower of Christ
in whom I see the perfect image of God.

¹⁶ Karl Barth was probably the greatest theologian of the 20th century. He sought to relate theology to the worship of the Church, to the faith and practice of ordinary Christian people.

Finding himself implacably opposed to the rise of Hitler and Nazism in the 1930s and dismayed by their ready acceptance by much of the German Church, he helped to organise the Confessing Church, an underground church opposed to Hitler. Deprived of his professorship he was deported to his native Switzerland.

After the war he helped rebuild the church in Europe. He was an inspirational leader of the emerging Ecumenical Movement while continuing his scholarly work and vast output of writing. Pope Pius XII described him as the greatest theologian since Thomas Aquinas – high praise indeed from a Catholic Pope about a Reformed theologian.

Is this just blind faith? I think not. It has a basis.

I consider the life, death and resurrection of Jesus,
events in a particular place, at a particular time,
testifying to the nature of God, from eternity to eternity.¹⁷
God activities are always in the present tense.

Late in his life, Karl Barth was asked
to sum up all that he had taught and written.
He replied: *Jesus loves me, this I know, for the
Bible tells me so.*

Was this a simpler way of speaking of God's choice,
from all eternity, not to live without us, to count us as his own?
Maybe both statements are equally profound.

In his love God sets his image upon us, throughout time,
and beyond time.

**Lord God, help us to know that nothing can ever
separate us from your love.¹⁸**

**May we not seek to separate ourselves from you
or live without you.**

You have made us in your image.

**Forgive us when we mar that image in ourselves
or ignore it in others.**

When we forget you, do not forget us.¹⁹

Let your image be seen in us.

¹⁷ *There was a cross in the heart of God before there was one planted on the green hill outside Jerusalem* C.A.Dinsmore *Atonement in Literature and Life*

¹⁸ Romans 8:30

¹⁹ *Lord God, thou knowest how busy I must be this day: if I forget thee, do not thou forget me.* Prayer of Sir Jacob Astley before the Battle of Edgehill, 1642. Quoted in Sir Philip Warwick's *Memoires*, 1701

Space for personal reflection:



christian
aid

The Revd William Mahood is now a retired minister living in Suffolk and very much active in the life and work of local churches and the Eastern Synod. Following training at Paton College, Bill ministered in Coventry; Muswell Hill; Rugby; Brinklow and St Ives. In the 1980s Bill was Director of Pastoral Studies at Westminster College and Moderator of the URC General Assembly in 2000/1.

*Images taken by Linda Harrison in and around Colchester, Essex;
Christ Church and Lion Walk Church*