

Dear People Whom God Loves,

CONSEQUENCES OF OUR IMAGE OF GOD

As I see it, the way we think about or image God has a profound effect on our personal life and the way that we relate to other people.

When we think of a king we easily think of power. Indeed having as much power over people as is humanly possible. Power of itself only means the ability to do things. However, when we think of power over people it adds a new dimension. It means the ability to coerce people to do what we want. It is the power of force.

When a person who is benevolent has such power, the harm done is lessened and some good may be accomplished. There is however a dark side.

First of all, any person (or any institution because it is made up of people) has only a limited knowledge of what is good.

The second darkness goes deeper... Power is addictive. It feeds our ego needs. When our ego is inflated our vision is distorted. We will be drawn to feed our ego even though we know of the harm we are causing. We insulate ourselves from the pain we are causing. This is part of how the disease of addiction works.

Third harm: The darkness easily becomes more subtle. We can become attached so strongly to what we want, that we confuse what we see as true and good. From this perspective, we think we know the whole truth and think we are acting from goodness.

We need to pursue truth and goodness. Reality is what it is. We need to be open to seeing reality as it truly is. We also need to humbly acknowledge that even when our vision has much truth and goodness in it, we never have the full vision of reality that God has. This leads us to believe that when we hurt people that we are doing it for God and therefore what we do is good. Most of us will not go to the extreme of suicide bombers but we easily do it in less drastic ways.

I see this entrenchment in my version of reality in myself and I think that it is common in most of us. I think that for most of us it is a case of blindness rather

than ill will. At the same time, I don't see it as total blindness because there is a hidden understanding that I am on the wrong track.

When I notice that I am resisting and not letting in any information that challenges what I believe, I am slipping into that trap. When my belief is deep, I have more flexibility and have no problem with hearing perspectives different from mine. When my belief is only strong, I close out any contrary information.

This is why I think that thinking of God as a king up there or out there, who is the power of force, easily is damaging to us personally and to others that we harm.

Perhaps this is what Jesus meant when he was talking to his disciples. MK 10, 42-44.

"Jesus summoned them and said to them, 'You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wants to become great among you will be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first will be the slave of all.'"

I can ask myself: how can any group of people or institution survive without rules and laws? I tell myself: they can't. Are we then caught between two bad answers? Must we choose between chaos and authoritarian rule? I don't think so.

I draw my answer from a different image of God. God is indeed all powerful. The crucial point is that in my image, God is not the power of force. God is the power of love. I JN 4, 8b. "God is love".

Notice that I see something deeper than saying God loves us. I see it saying: To be God means to be love. Love is who and what God is, that non-material, non-physical spirit source of our and all created existence. God is other than us and not only is sustaining us in existence but also surrounding us and living within us. Also mysteriously, God is working to draw all creation to a good conclusion. While love doesn't always prevail in the short run, it does in the long run. That is why I like to use the word Love when referring to God.

When I think of God as Love, I reflect in the love that parents have for a child. It is both soft and firm. Parents set boundaries for children and allow freedom

within those boundaries. This allows children to grow and develop humanly. They are neither stifled nor living in chaos.

I see the same pattern in the universe and in us humans. Boundaries and freedom - though I don't equate human freedom with the freedom in the rest of the universe.

Evolution is an example of freedom within boundaries in the universe. The dynamics of evolution allows various things to take place (freedom) but not everything can take place (boundaries). With faith I see Love involved in a way that is mysterious, subtle and patient. I see Love drawing the universe through all the turmoil to a good conclusion that I can't even imagine. Because Love allows freedom lots of "bad" things happen. Remember God as Love is the power of love and not the power of force.

We humans are also an example of boundaries and freedom. We humans have free will and are able to make choices (though all our of our choices are not as free as we might think.) At the same time there are limits to what we are able to choose. Boundaries and freedom. This means that we can make bad choices.

Our freedom is different from the freedom of the rest of the universe because there is a moral dimension. We are able to have insight into moral goodness and moral badness. That makes us different. At the same time I think that our insight is cloudy. We will never have perfect insight but we are called to grow better at it.

Wouldn't it be simpler if we didn't have freedom? Perhaps simpler but not as good. We are called to be lovers. We are made in the image and likeness of Love. No freedom -no love. I think it would be silly for a bunch of robots to be hugging each other. Being free presents us with challenges but being able to love makes it worthwhile. Again I see love working in and through our human mistakes and sins to draw us to a good conclusion. I think that is what Fr. Karl Rahner meant, when he said "we have to believe in hell but we don't have to believe that anyone goes there".

We are called to be lovers. This means that we are called to be drawn into love and to draw others into love. We can't be forced into love or scared into love. We can only be loved into love and to love others into love. I don't think anything else really works.

From what I know of Jesus, he didn't tell people to get their act together and then he would accept them. He accepted them and loved them. That embrace enabled them to be transformed and become lovers.

These are the reasons that I find it helpful (and for me personally) to image God as Love.

Smile, God Loves You,
Father Clay