

Imago Dei

My first night in the Intensive Care Unit was constantly punctuated by the sound of an alarm. I vaguely remember wondering about the lack of consideration on the part of the person disturbing my sleep. Next morning I discovered that I had been the culprit.

During the next three days I was aware of cool, gentle hands reaching out to me in care and compassion. The night duty nurse sat her long vigil at the foot of my bed, rising every now and again to adjust the dials on the equipment to which I was tethered, or to administer the frequent doses of intravenous medications.

I remember the same, competent hands reassuring, as I was trundled up and down corridors, in and out of lifts, to be gently placed onto x-ray and scanning devices.

During the two weeks in Recovery Ward, it was much the same. Concern, compassion - reaching out with a loving kindness that seemed to have come straight from the Fatherly heart of God.

And I wondered as I lay still plumbed and wired, where all this could be coming from. This was not a Christian group – indeed many of the nurses came from nations without any Christian heritage. Just over 100 years ago Kipling would have described these angels of mercy as *lesser breeds without the law*. From whence then this pervasive fragrance of the Divine? And as I lay, with the oxygen machine chugging happily in the corner, I began to realise that there was no mystery here. This was an expression of God's love for his whole creation.

The Bible teaches that the first humans were created in the image of God. “*Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature....* (Gen 1:26-27 Msge). Down through the centuries theologians have debated what this *Imago Dei* (image of God) actually means, because the Bible is not explicit. Most agree that humanity would originally have mirrored the nature and character of God (if not His powers). Thus Adam and Eve were morally perfect, with characters reflecting the compassion, mercy, grace and love of the Father.

When “*Sin came into the world through one man, and his sin brought death with it. (And) as a result, death spread to the whole human race...*” (Rom 5:12 GNB), that *Imago Dei* was marred, distorted, but not completely destroyed. Noah was subsequently told that murder was a capital offence because it was still an assault on the image of God,” *Whoever sheds human blood, by humans let his blood be shed. Because God made humans in his image reflecting God's very nature*” (Gen 9:6

CEB). James says that when we speak ill of someone, we curse the very image of God” *With our tongues we bless God our Father; with the same tongues we curse the very men and women he made in his image*” (James 3:9 MSGE)

We retain a strong echo of God's morality, with conscience that discriminates between right and wrong, and even though that moral compass may have been skewed by sin, it remains hard wired into all mankind as the image bearers of God. When we applaud the enactment of laws that protect the innocent, when we are repulsed by evil, or warm to goodness, we are reflecting the moral discernment of God which all humanity retains as His image bearers.

C S Lewis said “*There are no 'ordinary' people. You have never talked to a mere mortal*”. G Campbell Morgan in his book *The Crises of the Christ* puts it this way. “*By the act of sin, the likeness and image of God in man was not destroyed but defaced*”.

So my hospital experience was the light of God's essential goodness, reflected from a fractured image of the character, compassion and grace of the Father's love. Those cool comforting hands that reached out in concern and care were the hands of God on earth, in so much as He originally designed humanity to care for one another¹. And of course those from whom the light of God's love and compassion shines most powerfully will be drawn into vocations of caring for fellow humans – nursing for example

Theologians, usually with a Reformed perspective, speak of *Common Grace*, the Divine beneficence by which God sustains His creation (Heb. 1:2-3) and makes provision for all His children, not only the redeemed. Although fallible instruments of His common grace, civil governments are called “*ministers of God*” (Rom. 13:6). Some of our most beautiful music has been bequeathed by men of depraved lives – surely a triumph of God's sovereign grace within His image bearers.

In thinking about these things, I am reminded that hospitals were originally invented by the Church as an expression of the *Imago Dei* – for the sick, not just the saved. And all such institutions, be they Christian, secular or “other”, penetrate the darkest corners of human suffering and misery with the light of love and hope because, “*The Lord is good to all: and his tender mercies are over all his works*” (Psalm 145:9).

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¹ This is not to imply that there were no believers among my carers