

As God's one true son, he was the most feminine man who ever lived; a person of amazing enduring grace. For me as a Christian, Jesus of Nazareth remains the litmus test for any Interfaith concept of God we would embrace.

Through him God is revealed so clearly and fully. In him we find both the authentic fatherhood and the motherhood of God, the brotherhood and sisterhood of God, the female friendship of God and the male mateship of the most holy God.

### **GOD IS ALWAYS GREATER THAN WE THINK**

The truly rounded God is found as we journey in faith: From Abraham and Sarah to Ruth and Isaiah, from Hosea and Gomer to Mary and Joseph; from Bethlehem to Galilee, from Golgotha to the empty tomb, from a breakfast with a risen Lord on the shores of Galilee to the fiery love-energy of Pentecost.

I say again, we can never speak adequately of God. Nor can we ever conceive God as a single image in our mind. God will always be greater than we think. But that greatness includes both those rich virtues that we tend to see as either male or female.

In Christ we have the call and the saving grace to become more like this very God as we love, respect and serve one another in the days ahead. May it be so for each one of us!

**Amen!! Thanks be to God!!**

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*A Message from Mark!*

## **A Truly Rounded God**

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**Scripture: Hosea 11:1-11**

One night during a violent thunderstorm a mother was tucking her young son into bed. She was about to turn off the light when he asked with a tremor in his voice, "*Mummy, will you sleep in here with me tonight?*". The mother smiled and gave him a reassuring hug. "*I can't sweetie*" she said. "*I have to sleep in Daddy's room*". A long silence was broken at last by his shaky little voice: "*The big sissy!*"

In many of my sermons, the image of God I have most often worked with is masculine, although I am gradually learning to be more inclusive! In our reading for today from Hosea, the dominant metaphor for God is feminine. God is spoken of as a mother cherishing her child, then lamenting when that child grows up to be totally rebellious. Thousands of mothers in Australia, and millions around the world, can totally identify with that motherly heartache.

Let us hear the thrust of Hosea again, in a freewheeling translation:

*When Israel was a little child, I loved him,  
And I set him free from slavish dependence.  
Yet now the more I call his name  
the more he runs away from me.  
He sacrifices everything for false values  
and burns himself out for the world's idols.  
Yet it was I who taught my child to walk.*

*I used to carry him till my arms ached.  
He does not remember how often  
I tended his wounds and healed him.  
I first led him with training straps,  
the bonds of a mother's true love.  
I was the person who shared his pain  
and I still bear the yoke of his burdens.  
It was I alone would bend down to him  
and lift him up to suckle him.*

Hosea recognises the mother-like nature of God and today I want to celebrate with you this aspect of the nature of God. The female qualities of God are most precious.

Hosea and Jesus of Nazareth are the people who best express those qualities. They have what I suggest is a rounded understanding of God.

### **A MASCULINE GOD?**

Like many of you, I grew up with the notion of a masculine God in my head. After a brief period of teenage rebellion, when I ventured as far as the Baptists, I returned to the Christ of my home church like a desert creature thirsty for water.

But still, at that early stage it was a male God. Even as my concept of God expanded massively to encompass, underpin and outreach the immensities (and the awesome intricacies) of the universe that were unfolding through the discoveries of modern science, my concept of God nevertheless had a masculine tone to it.

That does not mean that I visualised God as some kind of cosmic grandfather. I knew very well that God was too "Other" for any such crude visualisation. But in my prayers I used the "God our Father" words a lot, and that inevitably tinted my thought with maleness. (I am utterly convinced that one cannot use words in that way without them shaping a certain feeling about the nature of God.)

### **HOSEA TO JESUS**

The God whom we worship, is indefinable. Far more wonderful than we can ever speak or conceive. Yet what we have come to know we should treasure and celebrate with undiluted joy! Hosea showed a new breadth of understanding. He pictured God as a mother bending down to embrace and suckle her child, Israel. A mother who cries out when her child grows rebellious: "***How can I give you up!***"

Yet Hosea was torn between this new insight into God and the old authoritarian idea of a God who seemed ready to condemn and cast Israel aside. In his prophecies he swings between light and gloom.

Jesus inducted us into a deeper understanding. He revealed a God of tenacious love who will never surrender the human family. A God who was willing to suffer crude humiliation and extraordinary pain for humanity. A God for whom the travail of a cross was the way of redemption and new birth.

Please don't get me wrong, but to me, Jesus seems to be one of the most feminine men who ever lived. By that I do not mean he was what is sometimes labelled "***effeminate.***" He was strong and daring, robust in thought and deed. As well as being insightful; intuitive, and compassionate, he was as tough as a mother's love, and as enduring as a woman's tenacity.

Jesus regularly spoke of his God as the intimate "Abba." He was using the affectionate Aramaic word of a child for his daddy; expressing the more tender and nurturing side of a father rather than the authority and power of traditional male stereotype. That does not mean he was a soft touch. The scene in the temple when Jesus "***cleansed***" it, also helps define the nature of Abba.

Jesus reflected God more truly than any other person; no doubts on that score. As well as the male qualities, he also revealed those feminine qualities which eternally belong to God.

It is significant that it is so in our aboriginal communities. Where loss of faith and hope among the men have led to tragic degradation, it is the women who struggle to hold things together. They themselves are often abused and violated, yet they hang in there, caring and hoping and fighting for a better life for all.

Men may still occupy the up-front positions on community councils or on government sponsored boards, but the real strength lies with their women. They are the dependable ones in the community, the real innovators and hope bringers. Whatever your politics, I sense that Australians are the richer for our having our first woman Prime Minister, and I hope she gets a mandate to let us see what she's got.

Women understand that new birth involves travail. They cope when many men become frustrated, angry or fall into a heap. They hold on to the dream when others may settle for the mediocre.

### **THE BEST OF MANHOOD AND WOMANHOOD**

Our God is awesomely complete. The God of Christ Jesus, and the God of the prophet Hosea, has the best of human qualities in supra-abundance. The best we see in both manhood and womanhood flows from God our creator, sustainer, and redeemer.

Because of my earlier studies in the late 1970's, and the way God used them to begin to open my narrow mind, it is no surprise to me how the gender revolution continues to shake the church. From the late 1960's and 70's, advocates of the feminine nature of God came into the mainstream of Christian thinking.

I am indebted to woman Biblical scholars and theologians like Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza (<http://www.hds.harvard.edu/faculty/schusslerfiorenza.html>) and Mary E Hunt (<http://www.his.com/~mhunt/marye.htm>) who have taken a leading role in recent decades. Things I was groping towards, yet partially blinded from seeing by my own maleness, they have made explicit.

Looking back now, I see that my notion of God was far from being well rounded. It was a lop sided view of our Creator, Redeemer and Inspirer and I was the poorer for it.

### **A FEMININE GOD?**

Things gradually changed over the years. In the mid 1990's during my Masters studies at Sheffield University, where I explored parenting as contemporary mission, I was able to wrestle more intently with feminist biblical scholars who opened up for me a wider window to the feminine aspects of God. This set my mind expanding and my thoughts dancing with glee. If humanity is the handiwork of God, made to reflect something of the nature of the divine, then female qualities issue from God's own nature.

This insight brought a wonderful enrichment in my spiritual experience. My wife, my mother, grandmother, my daughters, my women friends and those other robust women who confronted, needled or nurtured me, all reflected the glory of God. Wonderful! The God I now love and worship includes (yet goes far beyond!) the best I have experienced in womanhood.

### **FEMININE STRENGTH**

I think I saw then, and still see, woman as being stronger than man. Generalisation? Yes, of course all generalisations are dangerous. Not all women can be classed together, no more than all men can be so categorised. Many men have their female side, and many women have their masculine side.

Yet there seems to be a tenacity in much womanly loving. A painful nurturing and creating which exceeds that of many (maybe most) men. There is a profound strength and courage and complex embracing of hope. Women (another dangerous generalisation!) seem more willing to suffer for those whom they love. Resurrection-like, they rise up from disasters. And they don't easily give up.