"Bring Many Names"

Brian Wren

Genesis 1:27 states that God created humankind male and female, in God's own image. In Hebrew, "image of God " and "male and female" are in exact parallel, showing that femaleness-and-maleness together are image-of-God: not one more than the other, nor one without the other.

In Genesis 1, the meaning of "image of God" is elusive, though many have tried to define it. At its simplest, it suggests that God gives us glimpses of the divine nature in each other, and specifically in our gendered-ness. It follows that, at their best, "femaleness" and "maleness" give us insight into God, so that there are truths about God, to express which we need language and metaphor drawn from female and male experience.

The second and third stanzas of "Bring Many Names" explore that thought, taking care to reverse, rather than follow, stereotyped views of "masculinity" and "femininity." Having made that reversal, I find that women whom our stereotypes make invisible, become visible to me in the hymn: including the mathematicians, planners, and inventive geniuses who happen to be female, and my mother, one of whose truthful (and pre-feminist) proverbs is, "a woman's work is never done."

By reversing the stereotypes the warm, caring father of stanza three is revealed as precisely the generous, loving, caring Abba, to whom Jesus prayed (Matthew 6:26, 7:11).

Since human life is not static but lived in stages (growing, changing, maturing, aging) Genesis 1:27 also suggests that we may get glimpses of the divine throughout the human life story. For Christians, this is a familiar truth: at Christmas we celebrate the compelling presence of God in a newborn infant without speech or reasoned thought. In the Bible, Daniel 7:9 depicts God as the white-haired Ancient One (compare stanza 4) while the youthful impatience of stanza five is modeled from the prophetic declaration of God's impatience with injustice, compromise, and untruth (e.g., Isaiah 1:13-17, Amos 5:21-24). The "old, aching God" of stanza four is also the epitome of wisdom and endurance, "calmly piercing evil's new disguises," so "wiser than despair."

The hymn begins by inviting us to a carnival of different word pictures of God. As in any carnival, some floats may delight, others annoy—if but one of them reveals the God of Jesus Christ to you, then perhaps the carnival is worth attending. We "bring many names," following the biblical pat-

Bring many names, beautiful and good,
celebrate, in parable and story,
   holiness in glory,
   living, loving, God.
Hail and Hosanna!
bring many names!

Strong mother God, working night and day,
planning all the wonders of creation,
   setting each equation,
   genius at play:
Hail and Hosanna,
strong mother God!

Warm father God, hugging every child,
feeling all the strains of human living,
   caring and forgiving
   till we're reconciled:
Hail and Hosanna,
warm father God!

Old, aching God, grey with endless care,
calmly piercing evil's new disguises,
   glad of good surprises,
   wiser than despair:
Hail and Hosanna,
old, aching God!

Young, growing God, eager, on the move,
saying no to falsehood and unkindness,
   crying out for justice,
   giving all you have:
Hail and Hosanna,
young, growing God!

Great, living God, never fully known,
joyful darkness far beyond our seeing,
   closer yet than breathing,
   everlasting home:
Hail and Hosanna,
great, living God!

tern, whereby the mystery of God can never be captured, and hardly even be named, yet is glimpsed and felt in a diversity of "parables and stories": shepherd, judge, potter, mother, father, midwife, king, servant, rock, wind, water, fire, builder, architect, woman seeking a lost coin, etc.

At the end of the hymn, we try to express the inexpressible by speaking of the divine as "joyful darkness far beyond our seeing" (transcendence), yet also "closer than breathing" (immanence) utterly trustworthy, our "everlasting home."

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