When I was a minister at Canberra Baptist Church I hosted an inter-church youth service one Sunday evening. I can’t remember the overall theme but do remember a very hostile reaction from a parent of a couple of young people from another church because we had used the Robin Mann song ‘God Version 1.0.’ The six-verse song begins with the statement ‘I don’t believe in a God up in the sky who sits in heaven and never hears me cry’ and concludes with the following two stanzas:

I don’t believe in a patriarchal chief,  
A judge who never had mercy on a thief,  
The Lord and Master who must be waited on –  
God is mother-sister just as much as father-son.  
God is beside us, God has no other home,  
No other family, we are God’s flesh and bone;  
He-She is with us and with all humankind –  
Loving Her creation always occupies Her mind.1

The reaction was specifically focussed on these last two verses. I was told: ‘you just can’t talk about God as a mother or a sister – if this is what we are expected to say in worship then I don’t want any more of it.’

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We still live in a culture, particularly in the Church, that is predominately patriarchal. We are still surprised by any reference to God that is not clothed in masculine language. It is still largely the norm to find the leaders of our congregations and denominations (and therefore the primary representatives of God) to be male and the helpers to be female. I perceive the Anglican Church to be more progressive than my own Baptist denomination in this area, with women comprising around 20 per cent of ordained clergy nation-wide, although this figure differs across dioceses. The Baptist commitment to congregational governance can mitigate against greater equality in leadership since no higher authority can direct a church to accept a pastor that is not of the congregation’s choice; many of our congregations are still persuaded by the argument that the leadership of women is unbiblical. But there continues to be a degree of discrimination in the Anglican Church also according to research being conducted by one of my colleagues, Heather Thomson. The year 2012, the twentieth anniversary of the ordination of women as priests in the Anglican Church in Australia, was marked by a conference in Canberra. After hearing anecdotes of women’s experience of ministry, Heather decided to survey Australian women who have been ordained as priests, deacons and bishops. She has been surprised at the results of the survey which indicate many women still feel marginalised. Seventy two per cent of those surveyed indicated a need for change in perceptions and treatment of women, ranging from inequity in titles for male and female clergy to lack of inclusive language in liturgy, hymns and church documents. The exclusive use of male language for God is still a common experience according to many of the women surveyed. As one woman commented, ‘this is easy to achieve, and yet nobody polices it.’ Another commented that inclusive language is ‘an issue of justice ... not just a matter of political correctness’.  

**God-language is important**

The lyrics of the Robin Mann song quoted above are actually very much aligned with the biblical portrayal of God, particularly as God is spoken of in the Old Testament. Reference to God in the negative (God is *not* like ...) is characteristic of the Bible. The Law demanded that no image should be made of God (Exodus 20:4–6, Deuteronomy 5:8–10). Across the Old Testament traditions we find a recurring theme that God is beyond human knowledge and experience. The prophetic book of Second Isaiah in its opening chapter
asks, ‘To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him?’ (Isaiah 40:18). The Bible insists that God is not like a human being who vacillates, judges corruptly, or could turn away from the covenant (Genesis 18:25; 1 Samuel 15:29; Psalm 100:5; Hosea 11:9). When there are stories of biblical heroes coming into contact with God the writers are very reticent: Moses only sees God’s back (Exodus 33:23), Isaiah of Jerusalem sees God enthroned but only describes the skirts of the robes (Isaiah 6:1), Ezekiel sees a human form but speaks about ‘the likeness of the appearance of the glory of Yahweh’ (Ezekiel 1:27–28). Revelation claims that only in the future reality of a new heaven and new earth will God’s servants ‘see his face’ (Revelation 22:4). Even a couple of tantalising suggestions of closer contact than this convey the idea that looking upon God is dangerous – think of Hagar saying ‘Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?’ (Genesis 16:13); Jacob’s wonder at encountering God and surviving the experience (Genesis 32:22–32) or Gideon fearful for his life after meeting the angel of the Lord (Judges 6:22–23). Often, therefore, it is only in negatives that we can speak of God, reflected in Robin Mann’s hymn: ‘God is not like a watchmaker, a corrupt judge, a vacillating lover, a tyrant’. A well-loved nineteenth century hymn by Walter Chalmers Smith also uses negatives to capture the inexpressible truths of God’s appearance and character: ‘immortal, invisible … inaccessible … unresting, unhasting, silent as light’.

And yet despite this biblical and liturgical reticence both the Bible and our liturgies draw on a great variety of human and natural experience to describe God’s nature and action. Brian Wren offers the following list:

From … nature and the animal world come images of God as a sun, whose voice is like a thunder or a mighty torrent, whose spirit is like the wind, and whose justice and wisdom are like the deep ocean and an irrigating river. God is a rock, a spring, a shield, a fortress, or a devouring fire, who pounces on Israel as a panther, lion, leopard, or bear, carries them on eagles’ wings, and protects them like nestlings. From human life God is depicted as a potter, builder, farmer, shepherd, hero, warrior, doctor, judge, midwife, bird-catcher, woman in labor, king, husband, and father. In language drawn from the human body, God is said to
have a head, face, eyes, eyelids, ears, nostrils, mouth, voice, arm, hand, palm, fingers, foot, heart, bosom, and bowels.\textsuperscript{5}

It might have been against the law to make actual graven images of God but the Bible revels in a great variety of linguistic images. Graven images are fixed and final but linguistic images are intangible, fluid and open to the imagination. As many have persuasively argued, \textit{all} language for God is imagistic, or metaphorical.\textsuperscript{6}

\textbf{God-language is metaphorical}

Metaphors take two subjects and juxtapose them with each other. The two ideas (referred to as ‘tenor’ and ‘vehicle’) can be quite different so we should never understand the relationship between them as literal. There is a two-way relationship between the ideas. We understand the tenor via the properties of the vehicle but at the same time the vehicle can be modified by its association with the tenor. A simple example is ‘God is a fortress’. God is not literally a fortress but at the same time the statement is saying more than ‘God is a place of protection’. It also implies strength, solidity, timelessness and other qualities we may discern from our knowledge of a fortress. By using the metaphor ‘fortress’ for God, we also imbue a greater significance on a fortress: like God, a fortress can represent protection, longevity, strength and so on. We should note, of course, that the word ‘fortress’ might evoke meanings related to violence, battles and the hegemony of the upper classes – none of which (I imagine) we would want to be representative of God! So a key tenet of metaphorical speech is that there is both a ‘like’ and a ‘not like’ aspect to the comparison. God is ‘like’ a fortress in the quality of protection but ‘not like’ a fortress which has the potential to shut its gates to the poor and needy.

Metaphorical speech about God becomes more complicated when we use human metaphors. ‘God is king’ conveys the regal \textit{qualities} of power, majesty, leadership, protection, impartial justice and so forth rather than the particularity of a human male ruler. But because this is such a dominant metaphor it impacts on the way the human kings of the Bible are portrayed; if God is king then God’s qualities are the standard by which earthly kings are expected to function and, indeed, this image becomes the foundation for a messianic hope. If God is king, then kings are somehow god-like.\textsuperscript{7} A similar set of observations can be made about the metaphor ‘God as Father’.
The wonderful qualities implied in fatherhood: a giver of life; a relationship based on love, guidance, protection and care; as well as more sombre implications of justice and discipline can all be applied to our understanding of God. The two-way relationship inherent in metaphorical pairs results in human fathers becoming god-like. Although mothers can be ‘god-like’ in that motherhood also conveys qualities of loving, nurturing, caring and protection; we rarely hear the metaphor ‘God as mother’ used in our liturgies and preaching. Both of these examples must further be qualified by acknowledgement that not everyone experiences fatherhood or motherhood in these positive ways. This is a limitation of metaphorical speech in that, because it is so often grounded in our human experience, poor experiences affect our reception of the metaphor. God is both ‘like’ and ‘not like’ a father and also ‘like’ and ‘not like’ a mother. Despite these obvious limitations in metaphorical language for God, God the father is claimed by some to be an accurate description of God to the exclusion of God the mother.8

The difficulty comes, therefore, when some metaphors dominate language about God to the exclusion of others, giving rise to assertions that names such as ‘Father’, ‘King’ and ‘Lord’ are not metaphors but literal descriptions of God, divinely revealed. And yet what is the language of the Bible if it is not transmitted via human experience? Wren points out that our metaphors reflect our human experience of life.9 For example, a prophecy of Isaiah asserts ‘you have cast all my sins behind your back’ (Isaiah 38:17). Paul speaks of the Christian ‘forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, pressing on towards the goal’ (Philippians 3:13–14). Such images make sense to upright bipedal creatures with eyes in the front of our heads and this is the way the biblical writers imagine God also. The perspective of a bird with eyes in the side of its head or a sidewards moving crab would result in very different metaphors if such creatures had a perception of God. Even when we accept that all language about God is metaphorical, we have a challenging task when remaining committed to the Bible as the primary source of liturgy and preaching, while at the same time recognising the power of language to shape and slant our thinking. We have to acknowledge that the dominant metaphors for God in the Bible are masculine, specifically ‘King’ and ‘Lord’ in the Old Testament and ‘Father’ in the New Testament.

By way of response let us remind ourselves that the Bible itself asserts that language about God is dangerous – who can say they have seen God and live? – but it is also wonderfully diverse. And this should be reflected
in our preaching. Another important biblical principle is that self-criticism and innovation can be found within Scripture itself. At a time when triumphalist images of a conquering messiah were asserting themselves, an exilic prophet offered several poems of a ‘suffering servant’ (Isaiah 42:1–4, 49:1–6, 50:4–9, 53:1–7). The stern prophetic image of God judging Israel (Amos 2:4–5) gives way to another prophetic metaphor – this time of a compassionate parent who will never give up on the child of her womb (Hosea 11:8). Jesus transforms the picture of God as ‘Father’ by using the intimate term ‘Abba’ (Mark 14:36). And the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, is variously imaged to as ‘breath’ (Genesis 1:2), ‘fire’ (Acts 2:3), ‘dove’ (Matthew 3:16 and parallels) and ‘comforter’ (John 14:16).

**God-language in preaching**

Use of metaphor is an important aspect of the rhetoric of preaching as Linda Lee Clader notes: ‘Public speakers, poets, and other writers have always taken care to arrange language in ways that please the ear, arouse emotion, excite the imagination, or otherwise draw attention to something the author wishes to emphasize’.10 There is a distinction between preaching and teaching. Like a teacher, a preacher aims to convey information. But preachers also want to excite the imagination and inspire their listeners to be open to the Holy Spirit and to be transformed.11 The spoken word can be a powerful force that helps to shape understanding. Speaking words about God with the mantle of authority imbued in the preacher of the Word adds another level of responsibility. *How we speak about God is as important as what we say about God.*

**Wisdom traditions as resources for more inclusive God-language**

I have suggested that one way to ensure more inclusive ways of speaking about God is to highlight the variety of metaphors present in Scripture. Although these metaphors are spread throughout the canon, one neglected area that could be profitably used in this regard is the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament and wisdom traditions in the Apocrypha and the New Testament.

The genre of Wisdom is distinctive on a number of fronts.12 It is characterised by an experiential approach to faith, where observation of the natural world and human relationships is the means of revelation rather than a spoken word. Wisdom is a teachable skill but inherent in Wisdom is the need for discernment: reflecting on experiences good and bad, making
sense of them and choosing to follow in a particular direction. When discussing the qualities of Wisdom in a recent class, one of my students offered the following observation: ‘Knowledge is knowing that a tomato is a fruit. Wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad’! Unlike the secret lore of some other ancient near-eastern cultures, biblical Wisdom is egalitarian; it is available to all, from the royal courts to the family hearth. Arguably, this type of biblical literature is more readily used in worship than historical and narrative presentations of faith. There is immediacy in the way in which God is addressed in the Wisdom Literature, which includes praise, lament, pessimism, pragmatism and confession.

**Personified wisdom**

The Hebrew and Greek words for ‘Wisdom’ (ḥokmāh and sophia respectively) are feminine nouns so it is not surprising to find Wisdom personified in the books of Proverbs, Wisdom and Sirach as ‘Lady Wisdom’ (Proverbs 1:20–33, 4:5–9, 8:1–36, 9:1–6; throughout Wisdom; Sirach 24:1–34). Sometimes she speaks directly to the reader and other times she is described. Wisdom is a proper name, in contrast to ‘a foolish woman’ to whom she is compared in one poem (Proverbs 9:13–18). Wisdom, therefore, ‘acquires a divine dimension that transcends the essentially human sphere of the instructions’.13 In this tradition, ‘getting wisdom’ is the equivalent of ‘fearing Yahweh’ and indeed Wisdom is identified with the Torah itself (Sirach 24:23). Proverbs 8:22–31 places this feminine personification of Wisdom with the creator before all other things come into being. Whilst the monotheism of Jewish faith precludes an understanding of Lady Wisdom as a deity, Wisdom is certainly understood as a quality of God,14 leading to a theological equation between this figure and the Word of God (John 1:1) or the Holy Spirit. From our Christian Trinitarian perspective it is suggestive of a metaphor of God that includes the feminine within the community of God’s being.

**The mystery of God**

The Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament includes material better characterised as ‘anti-wisdom’. Ecclesiastes (Qohelet) is one such tradition and is often dismissed as a depressing, pessimistic book. Its catch-cry ‘all is vanity’ is an inadequate translation of the Hebrew word hebel which literally means ‘breeze’ or ‘breath’. Anti-wisdom describes situations in which traditional wisdom (a good life is equated with blessing) falls short of reality. This theme is further explored in Job but in Ecclesiastes different conclusions are drawn:
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rather than the angry ‘knocking on heaven’s door’ that we find in Job, the author of Ecclesiastes believes that true wisdom lies in accepting our limitations and recognising that God is ultimately unknowable and God’s ways are inscrutable. Despite a lot of searching of life’s experiences, both positive and negative, the overall tone of Ecclesiastes is of humility and gratitude. By allowing God to be God, while enjoying the good things that have been given to us as gifts (Ecclesiastes 3:9–15), we are able to find and accept our place as merely human. Even so, we are encouraged to care for each other (4:9–12), be sincere in worship (5:1–2) and obedient to God’s commands (12:13). Ecclesiastes helps us to see that we worship a God who is mystery.

The God who can only be known through love

One of the great wisdom traditions, Job, is a complex book with two distinct parts (a narrative framework and a long series of poetic speeches). The relationship between these two parts is the subject of much debate but there is a common consensus that the climax of the book comes in the speeches of God (chapters 38–41). These give weight to the idea that God is holy, mysterious, surprising and unable to be reduced to any human formula. From the experience of suffering, Job questions the goodness of God. From a stance of observation, Job’s friends question the goodness of Job out of a world view that expects righteousness will be rewarded and unrighteousness punished. God’s speeches dismiss all these previous interpretations of God’s actions in the world, pointing out that God’s sphere of concern is far greater than human questions of justice and injustice. Even though God’s ‘answer’ is not an answer to the questions raised by Job and his friends, there is a critical point at which Job moves from mere knowledge about God to actual experience of God: ‘I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you’ (Job 42:5). By refusing to define God but at the same time affirming the mysterious presence of God, the book of Job is a wonderful resource for those who suffer – they do not always want answers but they do want the presence of someone who loves them. It also serves as a cautionary model for those of us who preach about God: all words about God are ultimately inadequate and we need the humility to recognise and accept the ‘not like’ of our metaphorical language even as we offer the ‘like’.

Jesus and wisdom

The themes of the Wisdom traditions of the Old Testament and Apocrypha are revisited in the person, ministry and teaching of Jesus. In particular,
Jesus himself is understood as personified Wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:30). His teaching, often formulated in the short, pithy sentences typical of Wisdom Literature, included observations of nature and human relationships as motivating arguments. Like wisdom psalms he challenged his listeners to choose between two ways of life (Psalm 1, compare Matthew 7:13–14). Jesus’ teaching, preaching and ministry of healing were open to all, from those with a high status in society to the outcasts. His prayers modelled the immediacy of address that is typical in wisdom traditions.

It is also important to note the freedom with which Jesus, a man in a patriarchal culture, challenged and overturned patriarchal views of God and faith. He accepted and commended women amongst his followers. In the face of messianic expectations he redefined himself as a servant, washing his disciples’ feet. He instituted key practices of the Church that relate directly to ‘women’s work’ in a patriarchal world: baptism (washing) and Eucharist (feeding). The predominant title for Jesus in the Gospels is Rabbi (‘Teacher’), an inclusive role and, indeed, Jesus is recorded as commending women as well as men for their willingness to learn (Luke 10:42, John 3:1–10, John 4:7–26).

Jesus’ parables, his most characteristic way of teaching, use metaphors for God that are diverse, imaginative and at times startling. God is a baker woman, a harried judge, a farmer, an employer who ignores industrial relations acts, a housewife, a shepherd, a fisherman, a bridegroom, a harassed friend, a dinner party host, a prodigal father. All of these examples are subject to the ‘like’ and ‘not like’ characteristic of metaphorical language:

[Jesus] puts metaphorical sign language at the centre of his preaching: the parables, which are an undogmatic way of speaking of God. They do not seek to bear witness to the way in which people have always thought of God. Nor do they seek to prescribe how people should always think of God. They aim to give impulses towards thinking of God in constantly new and different ways.17

**Preaching a many-splendoured God**

Preachers who are sensitive to the power of language to shape our image of God will be open to the following suggestions as they prepare their sermons.18

1. **Make use of the variety of vivid biblical God-images.** Sometimes
these will clash with each other but that is to be welcomed as a reminder of the mystery of God, unable to be confined within our images. Such variety will contribute to the ‘impulses towards thinking of God in new and different ways’. Sometimes Scripture itself links different images together in a series of metaphors or similes, such as the ‘Lost’ parables in Luke 15. There God is a shepherd, a housewife and a father. Biblical imagery can be supplemented with our own experience or knowledge of the subject. The description of God as an eagle in Deuteronomy 32:11 can be enhanced with information about how an eagle pushes its young out of the nest to teach them to fly but hovers close by and catches any of her young who have not quite got the hang of it yet, lifting them back into the nest on her outstretched wings. And with ready access to technology we can make use of visual images from the natural world in the same way that biblical preachers used word images to convey aspects of God’s nature and ways of working in the world.

2. **Ensure that the liberating direction of divine activity is mirrored in our worship.** Within the restriction of the patriarchal culture in which it was written, it is remarkable to see how Scripture has a tendency to undermine and overthrow established structures. Jesus’ relationships and activities offer an exemplary model but even in the Old Testament we have an image of a God who chooses to work through the marginalised, who expresses unconditional love and acceptance of the covenant people but who also asserts the necessity to care for the outsider: the widow, orphan and stranger, the oppressed and excluded. Human kings are held accountable, human lords and judges are condemned if partiality is shown. Human fathers are portrayed as willing to forgo dignity to express love for their children. The covenant community includes the foreigner; the new Church community includes slave and free, male and female, Jew and Greek in equal standing.

3. **Allow the Trinitarian image of God to dominate our perspective and language, rather than allowing God as father/king to be the dominant expression in worship.** Wren speaks of God ‘not as a single, isolated being, the monarch, but as a complex, coequal unity in relatedness’. The interrelated community of equals implied in
Trinitarian theology is inherently inclusive, although we must still work hard to draw out this truth from the dominant masculine language of ‘Father, Son and Holy Spirit’. These metaphors, grounded as they are in the Church’s historic expressions of faith, are not easily replaced by other, more inclusive, ones. But using a variety of names for God alongside education of our congregations in the nature of God-talk will begin to break down the patriarchy inherent in our churches. Barbara Lundblad suggests that preachers ask themselves questions like this when preparing sermons: ‘Even if the liturgy printed in the worship book offers only male language for God, how can my sermon include more expansive, explicitly female images and metaphors?’20 Although the focus of this paper is particularly on preaching, we should also be aware of the influence that the words of prayers and hymns have in worship, ensuring that these are not dominated by patriarchal language.

4. A final suggestion in this section is influenced by the practice of one of the pastors at my own church. This preacher takes care to illustrate sermons with gender inclusive images – not only in relation to God-language but across the board. Sometimes these are surprising when used in places one might expect to hear the opposite gender, such as a female farmer and female marathon runner – examples from recent sermons. But the element of surprise invites the listeners to examine their presuppositions and reflect more fully on the example being offered. By having a balance of genders throughout the sermon, all can find themselves included in the theological and practical challenges offered.

Sermon preparation with attention to guidelines such as these requires imagination and creativity and may require stepping out of our comfort zones. But we have an excellent model in the activity of the God of the Bible, whose first act is creation. A variety of preachers and a multiplicity of images preached will demonstrate to our listeners what it means to be representing the image of God, in all its many-splendoured diversity!
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Endnotes

1. Lyrics and an audio version of this hymn can be found at Robin Mann’s website: http://www.robinmann.com.au/rs/7/sites/1178/user_uploads/File/Mp3/06%20God%20Version%201_0.mp3, accessed 20 September 2013.


3. All biblical quotations are taken from the NRSV.

4. Lyrics and an audio version of this hymn can be found at http://www.hymnal.net/hymn.php/h/14, accessed 20 September 2013.


7. This correspondence between heavenly and earthly kings is not restricted to the biblical witness. King James I of England asserted ‘Kings are justifiably called gods, for they exercise a manner or resemblance of divine power on earth’. See David Nicholls, ‘Deity and Domination’, *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 66, 1985, pp. 775–6.


17. Theissen and Merz, The Historical Jesus, p. 345.

