

You get to meet some interesting people working here. I was perhaps more pleased than I expected to meet John Culshaw last year. He is an impressionist, and I first heard him on *Dead Ringers*, the radio comedy where he voiced a number of characters. He's on the telly too, and has mastered the art of getting a tone of voice, a phrase, and a mannerism, that makes you know exactly who he is impersonating. The person could be summed up by that one thing, and you didn't have to go much further.

Last year I also got to meet Tim Piggott-Smith, the actor. He was playing Charles, Prince of Wales, in a film to be broadcast at Easter on the BBC. I asked him what it was like to play a known person, not like an impressionist, for laughs, but in order to give people a deeper understanding of them. He said it was important not to impersonate the surface, but to give enough of that to enable people see the motivations underneath. So, when you see the film, you'll see there is the odd mannerism, and the voice is close enough, but it's not a caricature. Imitating Charles went a lot deeper than his voice.

The Letter to the Ephesians invites us to imitate God. It's an amazing command. In much of the rest of the New Testament *mimesis* is used about imitating people. Paul goes so far as to say that people should imitate him, but only insofar as he imitates Christ. It's helpful to look at great examples of faith and try to emulate them: by doing what they do, and understanding how and why they go about it, we learn about the God they follow.

But imitating God...that's another category all together. Thankfully, I think, the New Testament gives us some hints. Imitating other faithful followers is one such. Look out for people, and indeed whole churches, doing good things, and get under their skin (like Tim Piggott-Smith does with Prince Charles, not like John Culshaw does with Boris Johnson). A successful church might have a fabulous programme of events. Just impersonating the programme won't work. Imitating by understanding the motivations will.

What might be the process of imitating God, though? Paul says that he imitates Christ. John 5. 19 tells us that Christ does what he sees the Father doing. We believe, in Michael Ramsey's words, that God is Christlike, and in him there is no unChristlikeness at all. So looking carefully at Jesus and imitating him is the best we can do to imitate God. Where do we see Jesus? Jesus said to one follower in Luke 11. 28 that we will be blessed when we hear the word of God and keep it. We have the words of Scripture to learn from and to act out.

The Bible is both guide and a challenge. To read it in order to be imitators of God is to start by asking God, by the Spirit, to interpret it to us. There are difficulties in applying words written thousands of years ago to the present day, and we need wisdom. But we need faithfulness too, and we should determine to hear the voice of God in what we read. Scriptures are normative in a way that other writing is not – all else is commentary, though that doesn't stop a critical reading of the Bible itself. Other people's faithful and critical reading will help us too.

Being invited to be imitators of God also asks the question about what we are imitating if it's not God. The New Testament writes long lists of the bad stuff, which all derive from selfishness, greed, abuse of power and unfruitful sensuality. It's not that money, things, sex and authority are bad. They are capable of being badly used. The darkness we are asked to

avoid is not summed up by individual actions, but by their motivation. To imitate God to to live for the sake of others, not for the sole gratification of the self. Ephesians asks us what we are giving our mind and thinking and imagination and bodies and time to.

“Be imitators of God”, says Ephesians 5. 1, “as beloved children, and live in love as Christ loved us”. Sometimes my son answers the phone and people think it’s me. He’s had some interesting conversations as a result. To be an imitator of God is to display our family likeness, to do what we see our Father doing. We will live out our calling as we seek the light, as we love as Christ loved us, as we aim to please God, not fulfil unfruitful motivations. It’s a battle.

And when it’s tough I’m inspired by those, like a brilliant actor, who think themselves into a role. That’s a start. And it goes deeper, for in the end our calling is not to do an impression of a Christian, but to become one, to reveal what we already are as children of God.

By imitating God, says Ephesians 4. 13, we will fulfil our call to “grow into the stature of the fullness of Christ”. My deepest prayer is that, by God’s grace, people will see not us doing an impression, but Christ in us, for his names’ sake. Amen.