

1. Made In the Image of God

Date: 28.7.24

Location: St George's, Battery Point

Series: Being Human

Texts: Genesis 1:26-31, Romans 5:12-19, Matthew 22:15-40

When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,
what is mankind that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them?¹

Like ancient king David, have you ever looked into the vastness of space and wondered, what are we as human beings? It's a question we all face when we stare in the mirror. Who am I? What does it mean to be human?

It's a question our culture is asking and it seems increasingly anxious about. The rise of AI challenges our supposed uniqueness. What does it mean for our humanity that there are computers smarter than us? There's a bunch of people who think that we will one day be able to upload our minds onto the cloud, and in this way live forever. Is our humanity just our consciousness? Are our bodies, that are messy and get sick and grow old, a problem to be overcome? Looking elsewhere we're giving increasingly complex and conflicting answers to what had once been simple questions, "what is a man?" "what is a woman?" We face this question on a personal level, as we struggle to get our spiritual and physical and emotional health in sync, if we ever do! Some of us never feel at home in our own skin. Socrates famously said, "to know thyself is the beginning of wisdom". What's true for individuals is also true for us collectively. Questions of how we should treat others in a society, and how should I live, rest upon the prior question of what is it to be human? It's hard to know what we are to do, if we first do not know what we are and what we are made for.

Today we're starting a new sermon series on Being Human. While the Bible is a book primarily about God, it also has a lot to say about who we are as human beings. While this series will by no means be exhaustive, my hope is that we will absorb something of what the Scriptures teach about who we are. That this in turn will give us a sense of security in a complex and changing world. Grounded in who we are before God we will be able to navigate the moral and personal challenges we face. The first 5 sermons give an overview of what the Bible says about being human and then we'll consider 3 case studies. If you're not a Christian, welcome! My hope is that you will find that the Bible is not some fusty old relic,

¹ Psalm 8:3-4

but contains vital wisdom for navigating life, even if you disagree in part. And who knows, you may even be won over!

As human beings, we are born, grow old and then die. It's the basic storyline of our lives. The Bible itself outlines a 4 part storyline to this world, from Creation, the Fall, to Redemption in Christ and the New Creation. Erik Varden, in the book we're reading for Deeper Conversations writes, "The Church ... permitted me to read my banal and sometimes squalid life into a narrative of redemption that not only reaches back to time's beginning but [also] remembers forwards, into eternity."² Our task this morning is to trace the outline of that 4 part story, and to see within that story the outline of our own humanity. So let's get under way!

The philosopher Blaise Pascal once wrote,

What a Chimera is man! What a novelty, a monster, a chaos, a contradiction, a prodigy! Judge of all things, an imbecile worm; depository of truth, and sewer of error and doubt; the glory and refuse of the universe.

The glory and refuse of the universe. It doesn't take much of a look out the window to see this is true. Last year we went to the Louvre in Paris. I was captivated by a marble statue of winged victory from Samothrace in Greece from the 2nd century BC. The work is so fine you can almost see the skin beneath the sheer folds of her tunic. Think of people like Mother Theresa, who spent a lifetime living with and caring for the poor and outcast in India. Human beings are capable of extraordinary beauty and goodness. And yet, at the same time, we are capable of the most appalling wickedness. Our greed, pride, selfishness, fear, envy and hatred drive us to harm and destroy. It's so easy to say that evil people are over there busily doing evil deeds, and to say that we are the righteous, that we have clean hands and a pure heart. And yet if we are honest with ourselves, we know that is not true. And sometimes that impulse towards destruction turns in on ourselves. We are, each of us, the glory and refuse of the universe, at the same time.

Made in the image of God

Pascal was of course reflecting on the account of humanity that we find in the opening chapters of the Bible. There, right on page one, at the climax of the account of the creation of the world we read those astonishing words,

So God created humanity in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;

² Erik Varden, *The Shattering of Loneliness*, Bloomsbury, 2018

male and female he created them.³

Historian Tom Holland reminds us in his superb book *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind*, this is where the idea of universal human rights comes from. He writes,

That every human being possessed an equal dignity was not remotely self-evident a truth. A Roman would have laughed at it. ... The origins of this principle—as Nietzsche had so contemptuously pointed out—lay not in the French Revolution, nor in the Declaration of Independence, nor in the Enlightenment, but in the Bible.⁴

If you take nothing else away from this sermon, take this: that *you* are made in the image of God. In the words of Psalm 8, *you* are crowned with glory and honour. You are fearfully and wonderfully made. Right after creating humanity in Genesis 1 we read these - “And God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.” You are very good. God delights what he has made. He delights in you. Your fundamental worth and value comes not from your ability, your race, your beauty, your wealth, your education, what you or anyone else thinks about you. It comes from the fact that the God of the universe has made you in his image. That he knows you and loves you. And what’s true for you is true for others as well. Those with disabilities. The very old. Whatever your sexuality or gender. Whatever colour your skin. Those in the womb. Every life is precious and worth protecting.

Just what it means to be made in the image of God has been debated through the ages. That its meaning is not settled points to the mystery of our own humanity, even as it points to the mystery of God. But let us reflect for a moment. In the world of the Ancient Near East, kings were the image or the icon of the gods, representing their rule on earth. But here in Genesis it is not kings who bear the image of God, but all people. That sense is present in Genesis 1 as humanity is given the task of ruling over “the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” This is not domination, as we, so suspicious of authority, would have it. Rather it is rule after the pattern of God’s own loving care for the world he has made and sustains. The picture switches in Genesis 2 to that of a priest and gardener, where the man, *Adam*, is placed in the garden to work it and take care of it.

What else do we notice from these accounts? That we are creatures. We are not God. We are dependent upon God. Our existence is the gift of God. We are *made*. We are not self-made. Poetically in chapter 2 we read “the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.”⁵ We are of

³ Genesis 1.27

⁴ Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 494

⁵ Genesis 2.7

the dust of the earth. Crowned with glory and honour, yes, but of the same stuff as everything else in creation. And we experience the same frustration and groaning as the rest of creation, infertility, disability, sickness, death. Second, we are made for relationship. Relationship with God, with each other, and with the rest of creation. Unlike the animals, we are addressed personally by God.

“And the LORD God commanded the man, ‘You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.’”⁶

We are creatures of God’s Word. We find life and nourishment as we hear and trust and obey the voice of the God who made and loves us. We were made to walk with God.

Death came to all people, because all sinned

That idyllic state is not how we experience life. In our second reading from Romans we read, “Death came to all people, because all sinned”. The idea of “sin” has been out of fashion for some time in our culture. And yet, it is simply how the Bible answers the question “What is wrong with the world?” There is a story, possibly apocryphal, that the *Times* newspaper in England once asked its readers to answer the question, “What is wrong with the world today?” The Catholic writer GK Chesterton wrote back, “Dear sir, I am. Yours GK Chesterton.” Whether or not it’s true, the story makes the point that if we are to take seriously what is wrong with the world we need to start with ourselves. The word “sin” literally means “falling short” and was used in archery or javelin. Paul writes earlier in Romans, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”.⁷ We all fall short of the glory for which we’re made.

Chapter 3 of Genesis is a compelling description of the common human experience. An uncanny voice whispers seeds of doubt, “Did God really say?” We doubt God’s goodness. We doubt that he loves us. We doubt that his Word is true. We doubt that he is trustworthy. We begin to resent him. We think he is withholding something from us. We become envious. We desire to be our own masters. We swell with pride. We turn away. We grasp for what we should not, even equality with God. We disobey. And what do we find? Relationships are broken. We no longer trust each other. We’re ashamed. We hide. We try to cover ourselves. We twist the truth. We shift the blame. We point the finger. We become angry. We fight. We steal. We break faith. These are not the things that make for life and peace and wholeness and a flourishing human society. And so we find ourselves cast out. Alienated from God and

⁶ Genesis 2.16-17

⁷ Romans 3.23

from each other and from the rest of creation. Having turned away from the source of life, God, we fall back towards death, disintegration, disorder, nothingness.

There is within each of us and within every human community a reaching up towards life and glory and a falling down towards darkness and death. We recognise we are moral agents, responsible for the decisions we make, the things we do. Like our father Adam, we're culpable for our treason against God. We stand under the sentence of judgement. And yet, at the same time, we know ourselves also to be victims of systems and forces that are bigger than us and that enslaves us. We are not able to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. Not that we don't try! Fixating on things in this world that we think will save us. Building our own little towers of Babel that we think will reach the heavens. And there is something comically and tragically absurd about this. I remember a scene from the Simpsons where Homer finds that he has inadvertently walked into a tar pit. When Marge offers a rope, Homer says, "Nah, that's ok. I'm pretty sure I can struggle my way out. First I'll just reach in and pull my legs out. Now I'll pull my arms out with my face."

This is the paradox we find ourselves in. Broken mirrors, at points reflecting our Creator, at others wounding what we touch.

The grace of the one man, Jesus Christ

But this is not the end of the story! God you see is not finished with humanity. He has compassion on his wayward children. Into the mess of our humanity has stepped the new Adam, Jesus the Christ. As we read in Romans 5,

But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!⁸

We participate in and perpetuate Adam's trespass. But God's gift is greater than our failures. What is his gift? (that is what the word grace means) What is his gift? It is Christ, God come in our flesh. God come to rescue us from the mire of our sin that pulls us down. God come among us to break the chains and set us free from slavery to sin and the fear of death. In Jesus our alienation is overcome, and we are reconciled, from being God's enemies we are made his children. Christ has come to heal and restore us broken image bearers. How does Jesus accomplish this? St Paul tells us - through his obedience, his one act of righteousness, namely his death on the cross.

We'll look at this more next week, but at the heart of the Bible's account of being human is the figure of Christ on the cross. There we see the inhumanity and depravity of humanity

⁸ Romans 5.15

such that when God came among us we rose up to slay him. And yet, at the same time, we see the immeasurable self-giving love of God humanity, for you and for me even at our worst. It is here that we encounter the immense power of God to refashion our hearts such that we are able to walk in the footsteps of Christ to love God, to love even our enemies, because he first loved us.

At the resurrection

Jesus' death is followed by the start of the Bible's 4th act - the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. In Jesus' own resurrection we see the pattern and foretaste of what God will do for us and for all creation - raise us to a life beyond the power of death and all that leads to death.

I find it so interesting that in Matthew 22 we see Jesus discussing with his opponents these themes of what we are as human beings, what our destiny is and how we are to live. In the first encounter Jesus asks about the Roman coin "Whose image is on this?" His comment, "So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's," asks the question: if the coin bears Caesar's image, what bears God's image? You and me. We bear the image of God. This is who we are as human beings. We belong to God. And so Jesus' call here is at least this - that those who bear God's image are to give their lives to him.

The second encounter revolves around the promise of the resurrection, when God makes all things new. Here I want to focus on Jesus' words in verses 31-32.

But about the resurrection of the dead – have you not read what God said to you, **32** "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"? He is not the God of the dead but of the living.

This is the hope that God offers us. That death is not the end. He is the God who gives life. He is the one in whom we find life. The future he has for us, the glory that awaits us, that draws us forward, is to live in his presence and to see his face. We do not yet see him. But this is our hope. And to be human is to wait and to long for that day.

We have seen that we are creatures of the Word. We live in response to God's call on our lives. Jesus' final encounter in Matthew 22 centres on that call. And what does Jesus say that call is?

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." **38** This is the first and greatest commandment. **39** And the second is like it: "Love your neighbour as yourself."

To love God and to love your neighbour as yourself. This is how we are to live as human beings. What this will look like we shall see over coming weeks.