

What it Means to be Human: Created

Genesis 1:1-2:3

To begin with I have a quote from a famous story. I wonder if you know where it's from?

*Two households, both alike in dignity,
In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,
From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,
Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.
From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life;*

It is of course from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*! What I've read out to you comes from the very beginning of that famous story, and because these words are at the beginning they have a special function. First of all they tell us where the story is taking place: *It's in fair Verona where we lay our scene*. Secondly, we're given the context that drives the storyline *Two households, both alike in dignity, from ancient grudge break to new mutiny*. Two households that hate each other, the Montagues and Capulets, and their hatred has recently erupted again! Things are tense! And then most importantly of all we are introduced to the main characters: *From forth the fatal loins of these two foes A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life*. From these two families will come two lovers: Romeo and Juliet. And so right from the beginning we know what this story is going to explore: how is it going to work when two young people from warring families fall in love? The answer, of course, is *not very well!*

Here in church we think about a certain story every week. It's not a made up story, it's a true story. It's a story that has been going on for a long time, and it's still going! It's the greatest story of all time, I'm talking about the story of God and his people. It's a story that is laid out for us in the Bible, and what we are going to do over the next couple of months is to take a look at the very beginning of this story, Genesis chapters 1-11.

Now these are some of the most important chapters in the whole Bible. Why? Because like the opening of any other story they help us understand everything that's going to follow. It's in these chapters that we understand something about the stage upon which the story is set; the stage of course is the world that God has created. It's in these chapters that we're introduced to the main characters. And these chapters also establish the context for the ongoing story. In fact, the whole rest of the Bible can be understood as a reaction to what happens in these chapters. So Genesis 1-11 is vital for understanding the rest of the Bible. What I'm planning to do over the next couple of months is to focus our attention on just one element of the Bible's beginning. Our focus will be on the role that we play as human beings in this story. What does it mean to be human in the world that God has created? It's a question that is becoming more and more complex as human identity and behavior becomes more and more flexible. It used to be that much of our human experience was beyond our control, things tended to be determined for us. Now we can change our careers, we can change where we live, we can even change our gender! And so it

seems appropriate from time to time to go back and remind ourselves of our place in the story. What's the role that we're meant to have? How are we designed to function? What obstacles are we humans needing to overcome? These are all questions that the Bible's opening can help us answer.

So Genesis Chapter 1 is our starting point, and this is a chapter that has caused lots of disagreements. It's a chapter that speaks about the creation of the world, and Christians have argued, sometimes quite aggressively, as to whether it's a factual account of that creation, or whether it's metaphorical or something in between. My own conviction is that this chapter is not meant to be a scientific account, rather as the beginning of the Bible story it's main purpose is to introduce us to the main characters and the main themes that they'll be wrestling with. Asking Genesis to inform us of scientific processes is a bit like going to a play and expecting the actors to explain how the set was constructed. The actors will certainly make reference to what we see on stage, the set will certainly form part of the story, but if I'm really interested in the set I'm going to have to pick up another book, perhaps a book about set design. In a similar way I don't think the Genesis story tells us everything there is to know about the world we live in; we need to complement the Bible with the findings of science.

But the Bible does tell us about the relationship between God and humanity. In Genesis 1 God is introduced to us as the creator! God is the great designer, the great artist, the great inventor who fashions out of nothing everything that we see. Back in the ancient world this was a radical idea because many religions worshiped things that we see around us: the moon, the stars, the sun. But Genesis is saying "No, No, No, God made all these things. The objects which we might think are powerful are actually themselves subject to God's power. He's the one who has determined where they sit, he's the one who has determined their behavior", and then at the end of the list of all these things that God has created, we read that humanity finds it's place among the rest of creation.

Genesis 1 is a very humbling piece of literature to read, especially because we humans can be very proud creatures. A survey conducted among funeral providers in the UK found that the most popular single piece of music chosen for funerals was Frank Sinatra's *I did it my way*. When it comes to summing up a person's life a good proportion of people will choose an anthem that celebrates our independence and our ability to rule our destiny.

But Genesis 1 suggests that the reality is very different. Like the rest of God's world, we only have a place because of his design. Colossians chapter 1, which we heard in our second reading, it goes so far to say that God is the one who is holding things together. We might assume that God has nothing to do with us, but the Bible suggests that God has *everything* to do with us. He made us, he's placed us, he's sustaining us. I actually think it says a lot about God's patience with us that he continues to feed and provide for us even if we are ignorant of our dependence upon him. The story goes that when Gough Whitlam was asked what he would say

when he met God, his response was to say “I shall treat him as an equal.” Genesis suggests that a more humble approach is appropriate, an approach which recognizes our dependence upon him.

So here’s the first thing we learn about what it means to be human. Our place is among those things God has created; we are dependent upon him whether we realize it or not.

But it’s also true that *within* the creation we do have a special place. We see in Genesis chapter 1 that human beings are created on the final day. At the end of each day’s creating God reviews his work and sees that it is good, but you notice in v31 that after he has created humans he sees that his work is *very good*; we humans might only be creatures but we are the pinnacle of all creatures. And not only that, but we are the only creatures who are made in God’s image. God says in verse 26 Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness. Now, if the fact that we are creatures stops us from becoming too arrogant, the fact that we are creatures *in God’s image* saves us from the other extreme. God created us for an extraordinary purpose: to reflect his divine nature. To see a human being is to see something of God himself.

How is it that we humans are created to reflect God and his nature? Well, two things becomes apparent in Genesis 1. First of all we humans are given the task to rule and bring order to the world. Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground. Just like God assigns places to created things like the sun and the moon, so too we humans are given the task of assigning places and purposes to the other creatures we find here on earth. The fact that we are the most dominant species on the planet is not simply the chance product of evolution, it’s because God has made us to reflect something of his power. We rule the earth because God himself is a ruler.

We get another angle on this in v28 God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. In other words, “stamp your authority over it, bring order to it.” Since moving to Waitara I am now the caretaker of a rather large yard, and so it’s become a common thing on the weekends for me to reflect God’s image by getting that yard under control. If I have a few weeks off then the weeds spring up and things get a bit wild. Now the benefit for me for all my hard work is that the yard looks nice, but for others, subduing the earth is necessary for the production of food and to harvest the resources we need to attain a reasonable quality of life.

This is what our working lives are all about. Going to work each day is a way in which we reflect God’s character because as we see in this opening chapter, God himself is a worker; he brings order to the world so that it’s a place of blessing. So our farmers bring order to the land in order to bring us food, our health professionals bring order to our bodies to heal us from disease, our finance people bring order to our money so that it can benefit us, our teachers bring order to our minds to help us learn and develop so that we can go on and govern the world in

other ways. This is part of our role as human beings, like God, it's our job get working; to take control of the world and to get things done.

But of course, sometimes we get a bit too heavy handed in how we exercise this authority. Sometimes the idea of human rule has ended up with damaged environments. This is why we need to remember the other aspect of what it means to be made in God's image, we see it in verse 27: So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. To be made in God's image is to be made as a relational person. God himself exists as a relational being. The Holy Trinity is a relationship: Father, Son and Holy Spirit existing together, relating with one another. And so as image bearers of God we are incredibly social animals. Here it's mentioned we are made as *male and female*, the husband and wife relationship is what's in view; but relationships extend beyond that into family and friendship networks.

Bearing God's image means living in community, it means being mindful of the relationships and people we have around us, and so living selfishly, including the greedy misuse of the environment, that actually works against what it means to be reflecting God's character. Yes we are powerful, but it's power seeking to serve the people around us.

It sounds good in practice but we often fall short of this noble calling, don't we? Designed to reflect something of the divine but we exhibit the opposite. This is where we need to move from the Old Testament to the New. The key to us fulfilling this calling as divine image bearers is found in Jesus Christ. Our second reading, Colossians chapter 1, names Jesus as the image of God. We could say that he is clearest image of God that the world has ever seen. God was pleased to all his fullness dwell in him, Paul writes in v19. And in the Gospels we read of Jesus exerting authority in the world, but always with a view to serve the people he had around him. So if we want to really nail this image-bearing role that we have, then adopting Jesus Christ as a model is the right way to start.

But friends, the New Testament offers us much more than a model, the New Testament speaks of each of us receiving a renewed ability to reflect this image. It takes a work of God for us to fulfill this high calling we have as humans. The work of Jesus on the cross forgives our failure to reflect God accurately, and the work of the Holy Spirit restores God's image within us. In 2 Corinthians 3:18 we're told that we're being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

When I was younger I spent some time learning the trumpet. I remember my trumpet teacher instructing me, "whenever a profession trumpet player comes on TV, drop whatever you're doing and watch what they do and how they play. Listen to the way they hit those notes, look at the way they hold their instrument." He was telling me to find and copy the right models. Not bad advice! But imagine if the spirit

of those trumpet players could somehow possess and dwell within me, how well would I be able to play then? Pretty well I would imagine.

The crazy thing is, when it comes to taking up our role as divine image bearers, that's exactly the type of help the Bible offers. If we allow it, then God himself will dwell within us to help us reflect his image. In fact, that's the only way we ever hope to reach our potential it's the only way we can truly fulfill this calling we have as human beings. Will you allow me to lead us in prayer, inviting God to recreate his image within us?