

GENESIS 1:24-2:3
IN THE IMAGE OF GOD?

A couple of summers ago, my wife's cousin had her house broken into while they were on holiday. At first sight nothing was out of place; in fact everything had been put back as neatly as possible. It was only when they went looking for some important document, a passport etc, they discovered that it was missing, as were birth certificates, National Insurance numbers, everything that, legally, gave them their identity. Their identities had been stolen in what we now call 'identity theft'. This is just one example of an issue of identity and how we understand ourselves as human beings. We are not defined by these legal documents; our identity is bigger than that, but in order to function in our world, losing these documents is a huge difficulty; people pretend to be us, open bank accounts in our name and take advantage of that at our expense!

There are other examples that show just how big a question this is for people – “who am I?” We have a name, so in that sense know “who we are”, but in other senses it can be hard:

- the teenager (often a girl) who wrestles with the way she looks and wants to look like the catwalk models and is really unhappy with the fact that she looks different from that!
- the woman who spends her life looking after her husband and children and being defined by these: she is 'so and so's wife; so and so's mother' that she seems to have no independent value or identity and when that's gone, struggles to find her own sense of worth.
- The person who has spent 45 years working and defines themselves by work that they do: “I am an electrician; I am a doctor” so that when they stop working, their whole self-understanding is brought into question; who am I now?

There are three bible words that are the key to this whole huge question: “in our image”. These words describe every human being; we are made in the image of God. Before we try to understand what that means, let's put these words into their place in the story of Genesis 1. We said last week that Genesis 1 is written in praise of God the Creator. The man of faith looks at the world around him and marvels at the beauty and order of the universe and with the eye of faith sees that God made all of this. Genesis 1 is hymn of praise to God the Creator. Before there was chaos and emptiness and God has given that chaos a shape and structure and has filled the emptiness with the fullness of life and it is all good; everything is in its place, doing its job, fulfilling its purpose. So we have the sun, moon, and stars, the sky, the plants and animals and everything else that makes up the awesome world we live in and the universe around us.

The very last part of God's creation is us, human beings, the crown of creation. Science will tell us that on the grand scale of time, human beings have been on the planet for a very small proportion of the whole. So Genesis 1 tells us that the very last part of God's creation is human beings, us. We are part of the whole of creation; we share the planet with all the rest of the plants and animals that God has made; we share something of the same processes. However, we are unique in 2 ways from the rest of creation: first of all, only of us does God say: “*let us...*” (1:26f) All of creation bears something of the stamp of the character of God, but only of people does Genesis 1 specifically say that we are made in image of God. Secondly, we are given a job to do, to rule over the world and to look after the world that God made. We will see more of this next week, when we look at Genesis 2, but right at the start, we are given the job of looking after the world, stewarding its resources on God's behalf, for the good of the planet and the glory of God. All of this is very good, this pristine world

with perfect people. We are “*crowned with glory and honour*” acc to Psalm 8 because we are the crown of God’s creation.

This is who we are: “*let us...*” (1:26f) So we need to unpack this notion to see what it means. Let me say first of all what it does **not** mean. It does not mean that God is someone a physical man. I say this and it may sound odd, but some have understood this to mean that image is a physical characteristic that belongs to the male of the species and that for that reason men bear the image of God and women are lesser beings. It does not mean that and this is no excuse for men to dominate and domineer women in an abusive way. Genesis 1 is very clear that in our creation, men and women are equal and together share the image of God. So it is not a physical thing, it is not a gender thing, but is much bigger than both!

There are 3 ways in which image of God is part and parcel of our being:

1. We are made to love and be loved – again this is a subject to which we will return, but we have capacity to love and be loved that is unique. The Bible describes God in relationship, Father, Son, Spirit, 3 persons, but 1 God, acting in relationship with each other, that relationship of deepest love. People are made to love and be loved; it is simply part of our make-up, reflecting the love of God.

2. We can make moral choices – animals act on instinct by and large, though instinct can lead them to do some very ingenious things. People have capacity to reason things out and to understand that some things are right and others are wrong, to see the consequences of our actions, for good or ill. The other side of that coin is conscience, the part of us that knows we have done wrong and makes us feel guilty. Who teaches children to pass the blame for wrong doing? It is built in, it is the way we’re made, to reason things out, to know our mistakes and try to avoid the consequences.

3. We are made for relationship with God – the most powerful picture of this is in Genesis 3 where the writer describes the habit that God has of visiting the garden in the evening to walk and talk with Adam and Eve, to share time together, talking, walking, being in one another’s company. Again this is part of our being, that we have the capacity, even the need, to know God, to love God, to be loved by God, to have this relationship with God. When we have no living relationship with God, part of our humanness is missing; yet this desire is behind all of the searching for meaning and purpose that people make in something ‘other’, whether religion or something else.

All of these combined bring the image of God to us as human beings; “no matter who I look at, no matter where..., every person is created in the image of God as much as I am.” (Francis Schaeffer) The image was spoiled in Genesis 3 with the Fall and the entry of sin into the world, but the image is still there; the image of God is still part of our being human, it has not gone away. It is there in every human being. I am a complete human being because I have capacity to love and be loved, I can make moral choices, I can live in relationship with God. My being a complete human being does not depend on being good looking (thankfully!) or being successful in my job, or being wealthy, or being healthy, or being well-thought of by other people, or graduating with first class honours, or having a big car. I am already a complete human being because I am created bearing the image of God.

Francis Schaeffer is right; this is true of everyone, no matter who I look at. It is true of my grandson who is only 1 week old and can’t do anything other than be loved and looked after, but these capacities are there in his little being. It is true of the elderly person who is no longer aware of what day of the week it is and the name of the people who visit him or her and has lost the capacity of rational thought. True of people who have a disability of some kind: I came across this yesterday in a

magazine, written by a woman whose daughter has serious cerebral palsy: "A person's worth is not about what they can do. Clemmie (her daughter) proves to me that you don't have to do anything, to achieve anything, indeed to walk, or talk, or dance or sing in order to be utterly perfect, fascinating and loved. The literature we give our children can surely reflect more fully that their worth is in being, not in doing." (Third Way, April 2010, p.11)

Because of this every human being is to be treated with dignity and respect. Human life is a valuable thing because every human being carries with him or her the image of God. Society reflects that in some ways by the way it treats people who take away life, who commit murder; let the seriousness of that never be lost. This is also at the heart of some of the biggest issues that we have to tackle in our society around the beginning and end of life: can we reasonably create human embryos to do research on them, because at what stage do they become real people? This is also a factor in the debate that still goes on about abortion. It is also a factor in issues at the end of life: can we support the practice of euthanasia or not? How do we treat a human being who bears the image of God? There are no easy answers to these questions and Christians will come to different opinions, but it is all given some focus by the reality that every human being bears the image of God and should be treated with dignity and respect by the very reason of being human.

The ultimate honour God pays to human beings is that He became one of us. The whole point of Hebrews 2 is that God became human in Jesus. "*Both the...*" (2:11) Jesus, the Son of God, the "*Image of the invisible God*" (Col 1:15) is also the perfect human being; Jesus is One who has lived life to full, One who has shown us what it means to be fully and completely human. Jesus is the model human being, loving and being loved, able to make moral choices and in His case always making the right ones, able to live in relationship with His father. I can think of no greater honour that God could pay us than becoming one of us.

So we are to treat everyone we meet with dignity and respect. We are all made to love and be loved; we all have choices to make and the capacity to make these choices for ourselves; we are made for a relationship of love and faith with God; we all have opinions that are equally valid - we all deserve to be listened to; we are all free to make our way in world without fear; God's desire is that every person should be able to live life to the full, having all that they need; our challenge is to treat everyone in the same way, fairly, with justice and without prejudice and to make sure that every person is treated in a right and proper way. The reason for this: we are all made bearing the image of God; we are the crown of His creation; we have the capacity to love and be loved, the capacity to make moral choices; we are made for relationship with God. This is who we are; this makes us complete human beings, we are unique, different, and we are crowned with glory and honour.