

Parramatta City Uniting Church

17 October 2021



WELCOME

today we continue in a celebration of creation focusing our attention on Humanity. This Sunday has also been claimed as Community Sport Sunday and Climate Action Day. Today we reflect on what it means to be made in the image of God and how that shapes how we live in this world as people of God.

CALL TO WORSHIP

From the dawn of creation we were imagined by God
From before we were born we were loved as God's own
In this moment of worship we are brought together
All of us God's people, joined by God's Spirit
So let us enter this time with expectation of receiving and giving blessing
Let us worship God.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We acknowledge the Burrumattagal people of the Darug Nation, the first inhabitants of this place, as the traditional custodians of this land our congregations usually meet and pay our respects to their ancient culture, their elders past and present and their emerging leaders. We acknowledge the presence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who now reside within this area. We honour them for their

custodianship of the land, on which we gather today. We also acknowledge the first peoples of the many places from which we are gathering in this virtual space. We acknowledge that “the First Peoples had already encountered the Creator God before the arrival of the colonisers; the Spirit was already in the land revealing God to the people through law, custom and ceremony. The same love and grace that was finally and fully revealed in Jesus Christ sustained the First Peoples and gave them particular insights into God’s ways.” (*Preamble to the Uniting Church Constitution para 3*)

LIGHTING OF THE CANDLE

The light shines in the darkness and is not overcome.

The candle is lit

What a wonderful world visual prayer ...

I see trees of green Red roses too I see them bloom For me and for you
And I think to myself What a wonderful world
I see skies of blue And clouds of white The bright blessed day The dark sacred
night
And I think to myself What a wonderful world
The colors of the rainbow So pretty in the sky Are also on the faces Of people going
by
I see friends shaking hands Saying, "How do you do?"
They're really saying "I love you"
I hear babies cry I watch them grow They'll learn much more Than I'll ever know
And I think to myself What a wonderful world
Yes, I think to myself What a wonderful world
Ooh yeah

Songwriters: George David Weiss, Robert Thiele

OPENING PRAYER AND AFFIRMATION

Vladimir

God who is known to us as love,

To accept that we are loved, welcomed and wanted is much harder than we sometimes let on. We are thankful that this does not change your resolve.

To dance with abandon and celebrate with generosity does not come naturally to most of us, we are grateful for those who show us different ways of expressing devotion

To call out injustice, to stand with those who are treated poorly and who refuse to participate in destructive systems is not nearly as simple as it sounds, we are blessed by those who follow your leading and expose injustices great and small.

In these uncertain times we are thankful for your unsettling Spirit -reminding us that creation is never static, that most things exist on a continuum and that in all things you are present, breathing life and saving us from despair.

So when we cannot see what you see in us or in each other – give us sight

When we cannot dance or enter into a spirit of generosity – find our joy

When we are afraid to speak out, or buy into inuendo about those who do – wake us up

When we are despairing and consumed by loss – give us hope

Today is a new day, a day to seek you in one another, a day to resolve to accept your welcome, a day to be made whole just a little bit more.

We welcome this day and all that it brings because you are the giver, the promiser and the lover

May we be the community you long for us to be. Amen.

SONG: BECAUSE WE BEAR YOUR NAME

1. Lord Jesus, we belong to you, you live in us, we live in you; we live and work for you — because we bear your name.
2. Help us receive each other, Lord, for you receive the least of us and come to us in them —
3. Bless those who give us any gift, because they know that we are yours; reward them with your grace —
4. Let us acknowledge those as friends who use your name to right a wrong but have not joined us yet —
5. Let nothing that we do or say offend the weak so that they fall and lose their faith in you
6. Keep us from missing out on life; give hands that help, and single sight, and feet that walk your way —
7. You are the salt that cleanses us, so clean us out, and make us fit for common life with you — because we bear your name.

TIS 686

Words John Wilfred Kleinig

Music Robin Mann

ALL AGE TIME

I am Niall, one of the ministers in the Parramatta City Uniting Church cluster. In this season of creation, I was wondering what I could share about humanity, people, you and me, our family, our friends, everyone, what does the story in the bible say to us.

I was looking at my bookshelf to see if there was anything on there that could help me. There are lots of books – but “no” the books were not going to help me.

There was a happy looking friar, I was given 41 years ago when I left my job as a lawyer to become a minister, and yes God wants human beings to be happy but no the friar did not have what I was looking for. There is a very special, I think it is called a coolamon, given to me by Auntie Pearl Wymera on my induction as Moderator and it has sand from the lands of Aboriginal communities throughout NSW – the sand can't be separated and yes God wants us to be as one, I think this may have something to say about the Aboriginal way that might help save the planet... Then there are photos of my granny and grandad, my wife's and my mum and dad, my wife my sons and me, and yes God wants us to know and see ourselves as God's one big family, all special, all loved... maybe something in this but the photos were not what I was looking for. Then there was something that I don't remember being there – A Babushka doll - I don't even know where I got it from. I thought you are on my bookshelf because you have got a story to tell.

I got the doll down and I thought you have got something to say about being human that might help us when in the book of Genesis it says, humans are made in God's image.

Babushka means grandmother or old woman

I discovered that in Russia they are commonly called Matryoshka dolls – a mother carrying a child within her – the dolls one inside another are like a child, a mother, a grandmother, a great-grandmother and back to the beginning.

But another way Russian people talk about the dolls is that they are body, soul, mind, heart, and spirit. (*Take apart*)

Body – that is this part of us that everyone can see – you can touch and feel

All the other parts that make us human you can't see or touch or feel

Soul – this is who you are – happy, mischievous, thoughtful, adventurous, dreamy

Mind – all the things we think about in here, good things, naughty things, funny things, sometimes things we don't tell anyone else, but also it is where we work things out, we work out how to solve problems, to build things, to invent things

Heart – a big heart is one that has a lot of love, a little heart is not so loving

Spirit – God is sometimes called Spirit or Holy Spirit. In the book of Genesis, it says humans are made in the image of God. What does that mean? It means we are somehow like God. We have a spirit, something like God is within everyone – sometimes hidden way inside, but the most important part of who we are. This spirit, being like God, is not meant to be hidden inside but there to help us:



- have big hearts full of love for others and all creation – because God loved everyone and all that he created, animals and birds and trees and fish, mountains and rivers, clouds and rain,
- to use our minds to think that this creation is good but also to work out how to take care of the earth, the plants and the animals, to solve the problems created when humans have not loved the earth as God does,
- to have souls whether they are happy, mischievous, thoughtful, adventurous or dreamy that help to grow a good, caring whole community benefiting from all our personalities,
- show to the world the God that is within through the lives we share and the things we do

I wonder what being like God means for the way we treat other people, especially those who are different to us, and the way we care for the earth? What do you think?

SCRIPTURE READING – Genesis 1:26-28

Then God said, "Let us make humankind^[a] in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth,^[b] and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

²⁷ So God created humankind^[a] in his image,
in the image of God he created them;^[a]
male and female he created them.

²⁸ God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."

Philippians 2:1-8

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy,² make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.⁴ Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was^[a] in Christ Jesus,

⁶ who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,

⁷ but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

RESPONSE - In these words may we hear God speak

REFLECTION

These last few weeks I have been immersed in the first few chapters of Genesis. Partly because we are celebrating the season of creation and partly because this is what the young adult's bible study have been exploring.

It's easy for me to get carried away with these stories of creation and perhaps be guilty of being too academic because there are so many gems in there, mostly hidden to us as we read and listen. Part of our difficulty in uncovering these gems is because of the way we have received these stories, often framed in Sunday school simplicity we continue to hear them through those childhood lenses and rarely read them or study them with our adult experiences. These are also stories that have been terribly misused and misunderstood which is a shame because they have been used to divide, vilify and turn people away from recognising God, which is the exact opposite of what they are meant to do.

This week's Genesis text focuses specifically on the creation of humanity. Stating very clearly that human beings are created in God's image.

What does this mean to be created in the image of God?

This is a question that has entertained theologians for a long time. To be made in the image of a God who will not be imaged, not even named. How can this be? And why is it important?

According to the story in Genesis 1, on the sixth day, God created human beings, in God's image, male and female. In the rhythm of the liturgy of this story, the creation of human beings, male and female is not binary but the whole spectrum of humanity.

Just as the creation of the land and the sea is not binary – God didn't just create Land and sea, but also wetlands, tidal beaches and floodplains.

Just as the creation of day and night is not binary – God also created dawn and dusk, the times of partial light.

Human beings, created in the image of God, transcends gender, transcends ability, intellectual and physical, it transcends culture The very things we use to differentiate, divide and value humanity are clearly not in the image of God.

So what does it mean to be created in the image of God?

Some might say it is our ability to love – but I’m not sure that other creatures are devoid of that, I’ve seen animals pine for a dead mate, fiercely defend a child and I understand there are species that stick with one partner season after season – and of course galah’s who will lure a predator away from the flock, risking their own lives to save others. These things may not be love... but I don’t think any human being is in a position to know for sure that it is not.

So what does it mean to be created in the image of God?

Some might say it’s our ability to create, to shape our environment to build cities and roads and houses with great intricacy - but I’ve seen magnificently engineered bowers of a bower bird, complicated woven nests of grass and mud ... we are not the only creatures who create.

As I have reflected on this passage over the past few weeks, and taken the Bible study group through the first few chapters of Genesis, I have noticed many things that I have missed before or perhaps forgotten.... And have tried to not merge the second creation story with this one and to let it stand alone. In the past I would have said that being made in the image of God was about spirit, our spirits being a part of God’s since God breathed life into us But that’s not in this text. If I put aside the Sunday school merging of the stories this one presents quite a different perspective on what it means to be made in God’s image.

And now, in my context and in this story, I seem to have landed with the thought that being created in the image of God has more to do with responsibility than anything else. With God sharing responsibility with us, God’s creatures.

Responsibility transcends gender, ability and culture In this story we are made share in the responsibility to care for and to nurture the whole of creation, the earth, the universe, and one another as does God.

I see it in this text. This first creation story that begins the compilation of holy scripture. I don’t think it is an accident that this story, this creation story is placed before the much older one in Genesis 2. I think it is there because this is the frame through which we will know God and know our reason for being. This is the frame through which all scripture needs to be read.

That age old question, “what is the meaning of life?” is answered right at the very beginning of scripture in a story crafted to enable a people in turmoil to see God at work in them and with them as they return from exile and begin the tasks of reconnecting with those who had been left behind, of rebuilding a culture, a city and a belief system that God had chosen for them. It was through this frame of understanding the goodness of creation and the responsibility for its care embedded in the image of God that humans bear, that the Israelites were enabled to be the blessing to the world that they were created to be.

As the Israelites recreated their home – they were charged with the responsibility to respect the land, to not over farm or degrade.

They were charged with the responsibility to respect the animals – to care for those in their charge, the working animals and to respect the wildness of others.

They were charged with the responsibility to respect one another – to value difference rather than vilify it, to look out for those who couldn't look out for themselves and to live in such a way as to be a blessing to other nations.

All of these things and more are evident throughout the Hebrew scriptures and are summed up in this part of the liturgy – a reminder that they are made in the image of God and it was good.

Just as it was designed to be the frame through which God's chosen people were to live, so I believe it is for us.

And in our Christian context we hear this frame of responsibility for the other echoed, time and again throughout the words of Jesus and in the letters to the early church.

One of our struggles is that when we hear this message without the framework of Genesis 1, it sounds different it can even sound impossible.

Too many times I have experienced the words of today's text in the letter to the Philippians, used in a way to shut down debate and robust discussion and to manipulate people into silence. Many of us have embedded in our minds the idea that true Christians don't argue or disagree and that if, actually when, they do it is because of the evil that is within us. This passage is an impossible ask – and I actually think it is an unhealthy ask when it is interpreted this way. This is maybe the best example of how not to hear this text.

Instead, let us put it in the frame of Genesis 1.

The call to consider others as better as ourselves, - which might be more helpful to think about value rather than the competitive better and its opposite worse.

To reflect on our motivations and to check those motivations that come from fear, or self-loathing, or ambition to get ahead and to instead embody the humility that comes from knowing who we are and whose we are. Something that Jesus spoke of often.

The call to work to come to agreement makes different sense through the frame of Genesis 1. The whole of creation, the entire spectrum of creation is our responsibility and we must work together, and we can do that when we work from a position of humility. Then we are enabled to value difference, not just live with it, but to see the creative power that is enabled when we value those who are different and put aside our own agendas, our assumptions and our biases.

If I was writing Philippians I would put the sentences the other way around because that is closer to my experience of how things work.

³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was^[a] in Christ Jesus,

And then you will find you are of one accord, you are reflecting the image of God.

Jesus is the example of what humility looks like. He is not self-deprecating, he is not hiding his talents and abilities, he is not always sweetness and light, he is not always agreeable and he is not silent so as to keep the peace ... instead what he is, is someone who values all others and who helps them see their worth. He is someone who exercises his abilities because that is what is helpful, he is a strong leader and teacher who looks more like a servant than a celebrity and he is willing to be corrected and learn from others this is the model of humility that we look to and we need to see the difference between that kind of humility and the false humility that is often passed off as the way of Jesus ... the framework of Genesis 1 will show up false humility.

In many ways we in the church are not too dissimilar to the returning exiles:

We are facing the need to radically change what we have done

We are confronted with a whole lot of unknowns and pressing needs

We are trying to discern what to keep and what to let go and what to create new

So this story, this first story in our scriptures, continues to be God's gift to us In its liturgy we are reminded of who we are and whose we are and why we are.

But all of this is a bit academic ... it's interesting to ponder, certainly fun to discover the gems in these stories But I think the more important thing for us to do is to consider how it makes us feel. How does it focus our discipleship?

What do we feel when we think about being made in God's image?

I know some people feel a sense of specialness, even pride or wonder

Some people don't really believe it, not deep down. Their sense of self worth is so low that they simply can't imagine it.

When I think about being made in God's image I feel the weight of responsibility. That's a lot to live up to .. but that is quickly moderated with God's voice ... "my grace is sufficient for you" and then there is the revelation, the deep knowing that this is good. this is also the source of the kind of humility that Jesus inspires us to cultivate.

Embracing that we are all made in God's image enables us to see others as valuable and important in sharing the responsibility for the care and nurture of all of creation.

It changes our frame of reference from being all about us, to being all about creation, all about others. In much the same way as having a child that we are responsible for shifts our focus away from our own needs to providing for the child.

This first chapter of the first story in our bibles is meant to be our frame of reference. Our reminder of who we are, why we are and whose we are.

Our reminder of where we will find the humility we need to become all that we were created to be to embrace our responsibility to care for and nurture a world of justice, mercy and connectedness with God.

I wonder how this story makes you feel? Do you hear God's words of affirmation, encouragement and empowerment?

Are you brought to your knees in overwhelming humility that enables you to see God's image in others? I hope so.

Made in God's image.

If we can take this with us into every situation, every relationship we are well on the way to living out of the humility that enables the kingdom of God to be experienced more and more. May it be so.

Rev. Dr. Rhonda White

SONG: COMMUNITY OF CHRIST TIS 473

Community of Christ, who make the Cross your own,
live out your creed and risk your life for God alone:
the God who wears your face, to whom all worlds belong,
whose children are of every race and every song.

Community of Christ, look past the Church's door
and see the refugee, the hungry, and the poor.
Take hands with the oppressed, the jobless in your street,
take towel and water, that you wash your neighbour's feet.

Community of Christ, through whom the word must sound –
cry out for justice and for peace the whole world round:
disarm the powers that war and all that can destroy,
turn bombs to bread, and tears of anguish into joy.

When menace melts away, so shall God's will be done,
the climate of the world be peace and Christ its Sun;
our currency be love and kindness our law,
our food and faith be shared as one forevermore.

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PRAYER FOR OTHERS

Sports Sunday 2021

Creator God,

You gave us bodies
as well as minds and hearts
with which to praise and worship you.

Our bodies are fearfully and wonderfully made and we give thanks for the diversity of humankind, each person a unique and beloved part of your creation.

Sport and exercise are a fitting use for the gifts
and talents you have given humankind.

Through sport many are drawn into relationship with others, through their shared interests, and as they work together in teams to do their best.

As we pray on this Sport Sunday, bless the workouts and the games that are played, and bless all those who exercise, train or compete.

Give them strength, endurance, courage and agility. Keep them safe and healthy as they celebrate their physical and mental skills in sport.

Loving God,
you are present in all places
- beyond the walls of the church building,
and outside the recognised church community.

Often there is a tension for those who join in community sport that times of formal worship and sporting competition may clash. God, we pray that each and every person will find ways to worship you, as well as ways to be in Christian community. We pray that your people, your church, will discover new ways to worship and innovative ways to share in the life of discipleship and faith that will include more and more people.

Equip us as your disciples to share our faith and hope in unusual places and beyond the gathered church community, with words of love, grace and hope.

Help us to see ourselves as those sent into your world to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Just as in the church, most sporting events and competitions rely on the work of faithful volunteers to keep clubs running. We pray for all those who administer sporting competitions and clubs, sacrificing their own free time for the benefit of the sport and for those who compete and watch.

We pray also today for the work of Chaplains in all the contexts where they serve: prisons, hospitals, aged care, police and emergency services, disaster recovery, schools, universities and many other places, and including those who serve as Chaplains in community sporting settings.

This work, on the edges of the gathered church, reaches out into the world of everyday work, study and life, as well as into places of trauma and recovery. This work is valuable and brings hope and healing during times of struggle and difficulty. We give thanks today for all who serve in this way.

Open our eyes, our hearts, our minds, and our treasures that we will all see and respond to your call on our lives.

No matter where we are right now – enable us to be a blessing to those in our world.

Amen

Let us join together in the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples...

Our Father in heaven, hallowed by your name.

Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us in the time of trial and deliver us from evil

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever amen.

BLESSING

The blessing of the one who called us into being
The blessing of the one who inspires us to be all we are created to be
The blessing of the one who enables us as the image of God
Creator, Redeemer and Lifegiving Spirit. Amen

BLESSING SONG – For you Deep Stillness

(Julie Perrin with permission OneLicense#A727308)

**For you deep stillness of the silent inland
for you deep blue of the desert skies
for you flame red of the rocks and stones .
for you sweet water
from hidden springs**

**From the edges seek the heartlands
and when you're burnt by the journey
may the cool winds of the hovering Spirit
soothe and replenish you**

**in the name of Christ
in the name of Christ.
in the name of Christ.**