

Sermon for St Michael's Anglican Church, Kelburn
Humans made in the image of God
10 July 2011
Matthew Bartlett

Genesis 1:26-32
Colossians 1:15-20
Matthew 12:46-50

Good morning everyone. Today we are going to look at one of the doctrines or themes of Christianity that I personally find most exciting and useful. It is the idea of humans being made 'in the image of God'.

We'll look at this in four parts:

1. Firstly we'll investigate the historical background of the concept, and ask what our Genesis reading is arguing against.
2. Next we'll look at what the image of God means as a description, or *status*, of human beings.
3. Thirdly, we'll look at what being the image of God tells us about humanity's *task* in the world.
4. Finally, I want to bring Jesus into the picture, and consider what difference he, as the perfect image of God, makes.

Background

So to the background – the historical context of the verses: As David noted last week, the Genesis text is a *polemic*. It's not a naïve 'just-so' story, as if ancient tribespeople gathered around a campfire and invented the story to answer their children's questions about where the stars came from, or where camels come from. [But nor is it a journalistic report from the beginning of

time that dropped from the sky, written in English, and bound in leather.] It's an argument with rival ancient Near-Eastern understandings of the world, and of how things ought to be, and even of how society should be organised [i.e. politics].

The best example of a rival mythology that Genesis argues against is the *Enuma Elish* (my pronunciation may be off).¹ The *Enuma Elish* was the Babylonian creation myth. In it, the world is born out of the epic battle of two gods – Tiamat and Marduk. Tiamat is a female god, and Marduk a male, and they each have an army of minor gods. Tiamat is killed in the battle, and Marduk tears her corpse in two – one half forms the sky, the other the earth. The minor gods who were on Tiamat's side are made the slaves of the winners. They complain about their hard labour, so Marduk kills Tiamat's husband Kingu, and makes humankind out of Kingu's blood. So humans exist to be “cheap slave labour created to do the dirty work of the lower gods”.²

The contrasts with the Genesis account are obvious and striking. Instead of the world being the product of a chaotic, violent struggle, the one God calmly speaks it into existence – ‘Let there be light’ – and declares it Good. As David noted last week, the repeated refrain in Genesis chapter 1 is ‘And God saw that it was good’. In the Babylonian myth, humanity is an afterthought, and created for slavery. In Genesis, humanity is the pinnacle of creation – the last thing God creates before resting, and the thing that completes the creation. God arranges the world to be fit for humans, to be a good home for them, and to supply their needs – ‘See I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of the earth’, etc. etc.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enuma_Elish

² This is a quote from J Richard Middleton, “The Liberating Image? Imago Dei” (http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/Ted_Hildebrandt/OTeSources/01-Genesis/Text/Articles-Books/Middleton-ImagoDei-CSR.htm), which much of this sermon relies upon.

So how does the ‘image of God’ fit into the ancient Near-East context? The societies who had mythologies similar to the one I’ve just described – the Babylonians, Sumerians, Assyrians, Canaanite, and Egyptian – were rigidly hierarchical, with the gods at the top down to peasants and slaves at the bottom. And mediating between the gods and humans was the king, who is referred to in various ancient texts from these cultures as the image, or representative of their particular chief god – Marduk or whoever. All members of the society knew their position in the hierarchy, and knew that the blessings of the gods flowed through that one man, the king.

So the ‘image of God’ is an existing metaphor that Genesis is using for its own purposes – it’s another way of saying ‘royalty’. The declaration that all humankind, every human being, both male and female, are images of God is a radical and liberating one. It’s a kind of democratising – each individual, no matter how lowly, has a sort of royal position, as is a representative of God. [Coptic wedding – king and queen]

Image of God as description / status

So this brings me to my second point – the image of God as a status that human beings have. What I mean is that each human being is somewhat revelatory of God’s self. Of course, since the fall, we are all distorted in various ways, as are our perceptions of each other. But though we don’t see clearly, and though we don’t represent God perfectly, there is still something of God to be seen in each person. I suggest, therefore, that we need to

- be on the lookout to catch a glimpse of God in each person we encounter, and
- treat each person with the respect that their status – royalty – deserves.

Somehow when we encounter very young babies, these ideas are self-evident. I don't think it is just magical thinking or romanticism – maybe it is – but when you hold very new humans, even before they're able to do much of anything at all, it seems obvious that there is something extraordinary there. I just want us to apply that feeling or insight more broadly – to recognise who we're dealing with when we encounter apparently ordinary people in our apparently ordinary lives.

[Substance: There is scholarly debate about when Genesis came together in the form we have it today, but the most plausible dating for this, I'm told, is the 6th century BC. Heads held high in exile.]

Image of God as task

But the image of God, in Genesis is not only a noble status, it also supplies a basic job description for humans – my third point.

At various times through church history, theologians have sought to identify the particular aspect of humans that holds the image of God. They've asked the question, what is that humans have that God has, and animals don't. Some options have been humans' intellectual capacities, moral sense, language, a soul. If I understand Mormonism correctly, they see the image of God as meaning that God actually looks a bit like humans. Make of that what you will. But the way the text reads, the image is not primarily a resemblance of some kind, but a function, or an office – as in John Key holds the office of Prime Minister; you and I (and John Key) hold the office of 'image of God'.

And the function is – to rule over the world on God's behalf. The idea is to represent God to the other creatures and to each other – to treat the world in

such a way that if it could talk it would say ‘ah... that’s how God would have done it’. [One author has put it this way:

The chief end of [humans] is to represent God to the rest of the creation, so that when it experiences humanity it will be not unlike it experiencing God (i.e. joy that leads to seas roaring and trees clapping their hands; “vegetables may be said to experience the sort of joy” said CS Lewis, “that a vegetable would feel”). A joyful whole-creation is to be what Christ will inherit and what will be complete in him. And we are part of that whole-creation. Our specialness within the creation is not for our sake but for the sake of the rest of creation so that Christ’s inheritance and its own joy and completion may be furthered.³]

[Substance: The structure of the text literally surrounds its talk of dominion, rule, subjugation – all royal language; this is what kings and queens do – in image language four times over:

Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind 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, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.]

This is elaborated and extended in the second creation account, in Genesis chapter 2, in which God puts the man into the garden ‘to till it and to keep it’ – i.e. to develop it and preserve it. But the reality is while we might be quite good at developing the earth, we haven’t been very good at preserving it.

[FAO slide]

³ Prof Andrew Basden, University of Salford, UK.

As I talked about earlier, in the light of the mythologies of its time the message of the ‘image of God’ was liberating – it was good news. But for our times, do we really need to hear that God has put us in charge of the world, to rule it and subdue it? Isn’t that exactly the problem? Well, yes and no. As Richard Middleton has written, ‘The question is not whether humans have power, but how they organise and use such power.’⁴ And as another writer has said, “‘Nature’ is over ... there isn’t a litre of seawater anywhere without its share of PCB and DDT. An altered climate will reshuffle the ecological deck for every creature that breathes. You can’t escape industrialism and hide from the sky.”⁵ The Genesis text now seems ‘realistic’, in that the rule of humanity is a fact of life on earth. The trouble is that we’ve latched onto the ‘dominion’ aspect of image-bearing, without considering that it’s not for our own sakes that we rule, but on God’s behalf.

[Clear elsewhere that creation has value independent of humans – early days of creation; ps 104]

Jesus the true image

As I’ve said, the image of God in us is distorted. We are alienated from God, the source of life and goodness, and one of the effects of that alienation is that we do a poor job of representing God in the world. This manifests in the ecological degradation I’ve noted, but also in violence and poverty. So what difference does Jesus make? (This is my last point.)

Our Colossians reading, and a number of other texts in the New Testament, present Jesus as the true, unmarred image of God. In fact it’s perhaps the central Christian claim: if you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. Look at what he did and said. Look at his symbolic actions, his healings, his

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Bruce Sterling (<http://www.enlightennext.org/magazine/j38/bright-green.asp>)

welcome of outcasts, his announcement of a coming kingdom of justice and peace, his willing death at the hands of the powers that be, and his resurrection and vindication as God's true Son.

Here are three differences that Jesus makes:

- he provides a *pattern* for right action. He shows us that God-like rule is different to what we might have expected – take for instance his washing of the disciples' feet.
- he offers *hope* – that God would do the for the whole world what he did for Jesus in the resurrection, that God would in him reconcile everything to himself (as per the Colossians reading) – in other words a reversal of the alienation of the Fall, and finally
- he offers *participation* – that we can be connected to this reconciliation now, by the Spirit of God, and become a sort of preview or advance guard of the final reconciliation.

The message isn't that we're not doing such a bad job of being the image of God – we are after all the creatures who came up with the Holocaust, and who are presently causing enough other species to go extinct that some scientists have labelled this the sixth great extinction event – the message is that God is on the case, and that we are invited to be part of what he is doing in the world.

In the name of the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

'Ocean Sky' timelapse video by Alex Cherney (<http://vimeo.com/24253126>)