

“WE'RE ALL SPECIAL”

Genesis 1:24-31

Jonathan is very special person this morning. We have taken time to thank God for him, and I'm sure his family has done that many times in the last few months. Babies are always somehow special, aren't they? But I'm sure that there are plenty of other children and plenty of other people whom each of you consider special – people you love, people you care for and care about, people who have a particular place in your heart and in your thoughts. And I'm sure, too, that most of us feel we are special to someone. They say, don't they, of even the most unlovely and unlovable characters, “*Well, his mum loves him.*” Of course, there may be some here today who don't necessarily feel that – you actually feel unloved, that you're not really special to anyone. Well, what we have read from the Bible this morning reminds us that we are all special to God – we all matter to him very much indeed.

We've just read from the Biblical account of the creation. I'm not going to debate this morning all the ins and outs of whether it's a literal account or not – most of you have got your own views and no-one's going to change that in twenty minutes! But whether God created the world in six days or six billion years, the writer of *Genesis* clearly wanted to communicate that there's something very special about human beings as far as God is concerned. These creation stories tell us three things about what God intended for us.

Firstly, human beings are created in the image of God. Both men and women are created to be little replicas of God in this wonderful creation that has just been finished. (Notice that it's both men and women – we all bear something of God's likeness!) We share God's capacity for love, for emotion, for doing good. And we are given responsibility for looking after the world that God has created. There is something of God in each and every one of us.

Secondly, human beings are blessed by God. That little phrase at the beginning of v28 is not mentioned in the accounts of any of the other created things. God has specially wished the human race well. This morning we asked God to bless these two little babies and that is what God wanted for everyone right at the beginning of our history. He wanted the very best for us – which is why he goes on with the rest of his speech in vv28-30. Human beings were given the very best of creation to use responsibly for their own needs.

Thirdly, human beings were actually given life by God. Again, that's something that is not said about any of the other creatures in the world. God specifically breathed his life into human beings (2:7). Not only do we share God's image and live in the light of his blessing, but we are also filled with his life – a special life which enable us to get the very best out of all that he has made..

There's no doubt about it – if we look at how the creation of human beings is described in comparison with the rest of creation, there's something very special about you and me. Of course, God cherishes all creation. Again and again we read in *Genesis 1* that “*God saw that it was good.*” We are not following God's plan for the world if we demean and exploit what he has made and put us in charge of as responsible stewards. And at other places in the Bible it is made clear that God wants the best for all created things. But he has a special affinity with human beings, with you and me – a special love and concern for us, just as a family has a special love and concern for as new baby.

And yet You don't need to be a hardened cynic this morning to see that things haven't really turned out as it seems God wanted them to. The apparent bliss of the first human beings – Adam and Eve – and the paradise of the world which God pronounced good are not too much to the fore today, are they? In fact, when we look around us, when we watch the news on television or listen to the radio, when we examine our own experiences of life, we see that most of us don't appear to have much of the caring and loving image of God in us. The blessing of God seems to have gone horribly wrong as we have been a bit too “fruitful”. We have raped and despoiled the earth which we were intended to manage wisely and

carefully. The life of God in us has turned sour to the extent that many people just want out – for themselves or for others – by way of murder, suicide, euthanasia, abortion. Special? Really we'd rather not be so special. The intellect and emotions which we have and which mark us off from the animals can easily seem a curse rather than a blessing.

Well, if we had read a bit further in *Genesis* we would have discovered that the first human beings got a bit too big for their boots. It wasn't long before evil started to get a foothold in this bright new world. To be made in the image of God wasn't enough – they wanted to be God. The freedom to make choices was abused and the wrong choices were made. The things which God had told them to leave alone became an obsession and the things which he had delegated to them as a privilege and a responsibility became a chore and burden. The wonderful world became a place of danger and terror. Rather than respect it, human beings resented it. And the selfishness and rebellion and sheer disobedience of those first human beings became a part of life for everyone who followed them.

So today, thousands of years later, we see the accumulated debris of hundreds of generations of selfishness and neglect. All of us, if we are honest, can see the traces of it in our own lives – selfishness, dissatisfaction, lack of fulfilment, jealousy, hatred. And as we look around – with a more critical eye than we cast on ourselves – we see a world that is tearing itself apart. Special to God? It doesn't look like it, does it?

But although, as Paul tells us in his letter to the Roman Christians, God was content to let human beings get on with it, he never forgot that we are his special creation. He never forgot that we are made in his image, that we are filled with his life, that right at the beginning he blessed us. And he didn't want us to forget either. The Old Testament is a story of how he tried again and again to convince the human race of his love for them. Through the people of Israel and their prophets he called out to his special creation. But the message didn't even sink in to the people of Israel – the people who were supposed to be, as the Bible puts it, “*a light for the other nations.*” They never really took the message seriously themselves, so it never got passed on.

So God tried again. You see, he couldn't impose himself on us – that would infringe our liberty to choose and would detract from the very things that make us human. So he sent the message another way. In fact, he came himself – in disguise, almost. Jesus, the Christ, came into our world, and emphasised that we are special to God by coming as a human being himself. He didn't shout from the heavens with some kind of celestial megaphone. He turned up and showed what being made in the image of God was all about. He came and demonstrated what it was like to live as if God's life was really in you. He lived a life that sparkled with God's blessing.

Jesus showed compassion and concern for everyone he met – and modelled in his own life and activity what it was like really to care for people and for creation. He spoke to crowds and did amazing things for thousands of people – but he also found time to show that every person is special to God as he spoke to and healed and transformed the lives of individual people, people who were often unloved, neglected, lonely, on the margins.

Eventually, as I'm sure you know, Jesus died – executed on a wooden cross. *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* says that “*one man was nailed to a tree for saying how great it would be to be nice to people for a change.*” Well, that's part of it, I suppose – but there's a heck of a lot more to what Jesus was about than that. Jesus hung there to identify with hopeless and hapless humanity – God saying, “Don't think I don't know what you're going through. You're so special to me that I'll stand with you in your need.” God identified with us, with his special creation. He identifies with you – with you, in all your anxiety, all your pain, all your guilt.

And what's more, he does something about it too. In a way that I can never fully understand, that sacrifice that Jesus made means that you and I can once more be reconciled with God. The great rift that grew up

between human beings and God, caused by our own selfishness and by all those wrong choices, can be crossed. You've never stopped being special to God, but through what Jesus did you can know it and experience it. What you have to do is recognise that things have gone wrong – which isn't always that easy – and ask God to change things in your life. You need to accept that what Jesus did wasn't some futile and feckless gesture, but was God's way of reaching out to restore that original blessing to you. God wants you to model his image a bit better. He wants you to know the vibrancy and excitement of his life flowing through you.

Jonathan is so special to his family – but you are infinitely more special to God. You're special because God made you. You're special because God gave you the capacity to make mistakes. And you're special because when you made those mistakes, God sent Jesus to provide a way out. You're so special that Jesus died for you. What are you going to do about it?

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Human beings are created in the image of God. We share God's capacity for love, for emotion, for doing good. And we are given responsibility for looking after the world that God has created. There is something of God in each and every one of us.

Human beings are blessed by God. That little phrase at the beginning of *v28* is not mentioned in the accounts of any of the other created things. God has specially wished the human race well. Human beings were given the very best of creation to use responsibly for their own needs.

Human beings were given life by God. Again, that's something that is not said about any of the other creatures in the world. God specifically breathed his life into human beings (*2:7*).

And yet things haven't really turned out as it seems God wanted them to. The freedom to make choices was abused and the wrong choices were made. The things which God had told them to leave alone became an obsession and the things which he had delegated to them as a privilege and a responsibility became a chore and burden. The wonderful world became a place of danger and terror. Rather than respect it, human beings resented it. And the selfishness and rebellion and sheer disobedience of those first human beings became a part of life for everyone who followed them.

But although, as Paul tells us in his Letter to the Romans, God was content to let human beings get on with it (*Romans 1:18-32* especially *vv24,26,28*), he never forgot that we are his special creation. So he sent Jesus. Jesus showed compassion and concern for everyone he met – and modelled in his own life and activity what it was like really to care for people and for creation. Eventually Jesus died to identify with humanity. In a way that we can never fully understand, the sacrifice that Jesus made means that we can once more be reconciled with God. We need to accept that what Jesus did was God's way of reaching out to restore that original blessing to us.

Questions for discussion

1. What does it mean to you to be created "in the image of God"? How might that affect the way you live your life?
2. If human beings were blessed by God, should we talk about "original blessing" rather than "original sin"? How might that affect the way we think about humanity?
3. What is it (if anything) that sets us apart from the rest of the animal kingdom?
4. When Paul writes in *Romans 1* about God "giving [people] over" to various things, what does he actually mean? What does that mean for us?
5. "The wonderful world became a place of danger and terror". In what ways is that apparent to us?
6. In what ways did Jesus "identify with humanity" ?