

Hebrews 1

1 In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. 3 The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. 4 So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

John 1

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning. 3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. 4 In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

6 There was a man sent from God whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. 8 He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

9 The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. 11 He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. 12 Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— 13 children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

My Grandfather used to say, "you're as good as the next man, but no better".

He was a member of the Brethren Church, and I think that saying is characteristic both of their egalitarianism, and their preference for simplicity.

Of course, “you're as good as the next man, but no better”, wouldn't be acceptable today, not unless you can stretch 'man' to mean 'humanity'.

I don't even think “you're as good as the next person” would serve today, we prefer our ideas about equality to be much more complicated. We are inclined to be inclusive by means of lists, LGBT, or LGBTQ, or LGBTQIA, or LGBTQIA+ – that's lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer/questioning, asexual plus allies.

Other lists of letters are available.

Then there's BAME, black, Asian and minority ethnic, or BME, black and minority ethnic, although these are criticised because they tend to emphasise certain ethnic minority groups and exclude others. That's always going to be the problem with inclusion by list, there's always going to be someone who feels their identity has been excluded. I think I prefer, “you're as good as the next person, but no better.”

One could be forgiven for thinking we have dreamt up inclusivity only in recent times, however I was delighted to read a sermon by the 17th Century Anglican Cleric, Rev Isaac Barrow, in which is a powerful affirmation equality, he writes,

“All men are kin...We are but several streams issuing from one primitive source; several branches sprouting from the same stock; several stones hewed out of the same quarry...We are cohabitants of the same earth, and fellow citizens of the same great Common-wealth...We are fashioned according to the same original idea (resembling God our Father) all endowed with the same faculties, inclinations and affections...and are only distinguished by some accidental inconsiderable circumstance of age, place, colour, stature, fortune and the like...”

That's a lot more wordy than my Grandfather's saying, but it contains some beautiful imagery from the natural world, “we are...several streams issuing from one primitive source; several branches sprouting from the same stock; several stones hewed out of the same quarry.”

I was also impressed by the modernity of describing “ age, place, colour, stature, fortune and the like”, as “accidental” and “inconsiderable” circumstances.

I wondering if he would consider adding sexuality to that list? And change 'all men' to 'all people'?

The line, “We are fashioned according to the same original idea (resembling God our Father)”, is a reference to the Creation account in Genesis where we read,

'So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.'

The Creation account in Genesis is more like poetry than science, we get confused and disappointed if we read it expecting formulas and equations, rather it contains some profound truths expressed in imagery and verse. It always frustrates me when people ask if Genesis is true without reference to what they mean by 'truth', not all truth comes boiled in a test tube.

The idea that we are created by God has been a powerful driver for equality in our history, think of the American Declaration of Independence, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

The idea that not only are we created by God, but that we are created in His image gives tremendous value to each human life. As we are to respect God, so we are to respect those made in His image.

Desmond Tutu explains this well, he says, "Our worth is intrinsic; it comes, as it were, with the package. All discrimination is based on some attribute or other: race, gender, sexual orientation, being educated or not being educated, being rich or poor. All of the later are extrinsic attributes – they can be varied and we would still be human...What the bible categorically says, exhilaratingly, is that what endows you and me with worth, indeed infinite worth, is this one fact: that we are created in the image of God. Our worth is something that comes with the package. It is intrinsic and universal. It belongs to all human beings, regardless."

If you believe that we are made in the image of God then you can look down on no one, and you can know that those who may look down on you are wrong.

Is this just high minded idealism, are Christians perhaps naïve?

If we are made in the image of God, how can we be so mean to each other?

If we are supposed to be as good as the next man, but no better, we may well look at the next man and think, 'well he's horrible!' I am better than that.

Turn the pages of human history and you will find bloody violence, exploitation of others and of the natural world, corruption, lack of compassion, and vice in all its varied forms. We can be very good - brave, compassionate, ingenious, fair minded, even inspirational, but we can also be very bad; so bad that one might think that some perhaps have nothing of God's image in them, or else that God is as flawed as we are.

But then there is Jesus, as we heard in our reading from Hebrews, Jesus "... is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being."

In Jesus we see God's goodness in human form.

God the Son stepped down out of heaven and became God our brother.

As it says in the Creed, "For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and was made man."

Jesus, the perfect image of the invisible God, shows us the way to restore the image of God in us.

We may be created in God's image, but Christianity is not naïve, the perfect standard of Christ shows just how far we have fallen, we spoil our innate holiness by the wrong we do, but the holy image can be restored in us if we follow the way of Jesus.

God's forgiveness and healing is offered freely to humanity, yet it was purchased at infinite cost. This is the value God places on each human life, in Philippians we read,

Jesus, "who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage: rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!"

When you look another human being in the face, you see someone created by God, and so loved by God that Jesus came down from heaven, and in humility lived as one of us, teaching the way that leads to life, and going to the cross so that we might know God's forgiveness and restoration.

When you look another human being in the face, you are looking at someone infinitely loved by God, so be careful how you treat them. Just so when you look in the mirror you are looking at someone infinitely loved by God, so do not let guilt, or self-doubt, or the troubles of life, of the lies of Satan, tell you any different.

If the troubles of this life do cause you to doubt God's love, remember Christmas, remember that the eternal Son did not abhor confinement to the Virgin's womb, that He became little, weak and helpless, Tears and smiles like us He knew, and that we can know He feeleth for our sadness; and remember also Easter, remember that if we follow the way of Jesus He can lead us through the darkest times, even through death, on in to new life.

"You're as good as the next man, but no better" - that's just the bottom line, that's actually the least expected of us. The best is to love one another with the same self giving, generous love, that Jesus showed for humanity.

Equality is only the starting point, loving service of God and neighbour is our high calling.

You are as in need of God's grace as the next person, so accept it, and pass it on.

Amen.