

"LET US MAKE HUMAN BEINGS IN OUR OWN IMAGE, ACCORDING TO OUR LIKENESS..."

Have you ever found yourself marvelling at the wonderful diversity of the human race? What an incredible assortment of shapes, sizes, colours and personalities we come in – perhaps some a little more incredible than others! It's one of the reasons I love watching crowds of people wander past me in the local outdoor market, and many is the time I wish I could capture what I see on camera.

My work has given me the immense privilege of meeting with a cross-section of this diversity on every continent but one. It is always fascinating. It's one thing to see the massive peaks of the Himalayas, the grand sweep of the African Rift Valley, the powerful rivers disgorging their massive loads of sediment into the Bay of Bengal, the ochred vastness of Australia's interior – but to my mind there is nothing as captivating as the people who inhabit our extraordinary planet, and the societies they have created.

But far more remarkable than even this is the fact that each and every one of us has been made in the image of God. This is one of the fundamental truths of creation.

*"God spoke: 'Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature so they can be responsible for the fish in the sea, the birds in the air, the cattle, and, yes, earth itself, and every animal that moves on the face of the earth.' God created human beings; he created them godlike, reflecting God's nature. He created them male and female."*¹

Each of us bears in a unique way the image and fingerprints of our Creator. This gives every human a value that is beyond measure. Regardless of our appearance or capacity, or how we are viewed or measured by others, our real and God-given value is simply incalculable. We are worth everything to God.

This truth lies at the very heart of the good news that Jesus came to tell and demonstrate. It informed everything he did and said. Consider, for example, Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. Take a few minutes now to read the account in John 4: 7-30.

The disciples were appalled when they saw Jesus in animated public conversation with a woman. To make matters worse, she was a Samaritan, and it would seem, a person of low standing and repute in her own community. But Jesus wasn't contaminated by the same prejudices about religious difference, ethnicity and gender that provoked his disciples. Instead, he lovingly and honestly connected with a hurting person made in the image of God.

It took Jesus' disciples quite some time to discard their bigotries and learn to see others through Jesus' eyes. It was not easy for them, and it's no easier for us. In Karl Faase's Biblical Reflection from Episode One we were reminded of Peter's reluctance to change and we saw how God challenged him.² Thank God that Peter was prepared to listen to God and was willing to change. As a result there was a shift in his mind and heart so profound that he was able to see beyond the otherness of Cornelius, and do God's bidding. This deep personal transformation was of the kind Paul later wrote about to the Christians living in Rome:

*"I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect."*³

Peter's transformation meant he could now see Cornelius and his extended household in an utterly different way, and it enabled him to cross a huge divide. Politics and power, a violent history of oppression, ethnicity and religion, all conspired together to create deep enmity and suspicion between these two men, yet now they embraced one another as brothers-in-Christ. The intervention of the liberating power of the Holy Spirit made possible something that until then was simply unimaginable.

When we fully understand the truth that every human is made in God's own image and is unconditionally loved by God, it has the power to recalibrate how we think about and connect with each person we meet. It can even transform how we think and care about people we may never meet.



Take some time now to pray to God. Think back on what you saw and heard in the first episode - the images and the voices, the people and their life experiences. Was there anything that surprised, disturbed, challenged, confused or encouraged you? Ask God to deepen and enrich your understanding. More than that, ask the Holy Spirit to prepare your mind and heart so that you will be able to hear what God wants to say to you as you participate in the "Australians Together" journey.

¹Genesis 1:22-27 (The Message) ²Acts 10 ³Romans 12:1-2 (NRSV)

THE CRIES OF THE OPPRESSED

You may have found some of what you saw and heard in Episode Two very disturbing, even if it was not news to you. The suffering endured by Australia's Indigenous people as a direct consequence of the arrival of Europeans, and its on-going legacy, is a terrible thing. At its extreme, such pain and anguish can lead to a sense of God-forsakenness. Such despair is poverty at its very worst. "Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" the writer of Psalm 10 asked, because it seemed to those who had been so brutally crushed that God no longer cared for them. It was as though God had disappeared.

Have you ever experienced anything like this? If so, then you may be able to empathise to some degree with the psalmist's anguish.

Thank God that such deeply disturbing questions are not avoided by the Bible. Far from it. God's word is utterly earthed and real. This can bring both comfort and acute discomfort.

Consider Job 24:1-12, a deeply disturbing account of a community's suffering at the hands of those with the power to oppress and exploit. Read it now. Ask God to help you imagine what it must be like to be on the receiving end of such cruelty, and allow these words from Job to penetrate deeply into your mind and heart.

*"But if Judgment Day isn't hidden from the Almighty, why are we kept in the dark?
There are people out there getting by with murder—stealing and lying and cheating.
They rip off the poor and exploit the unfortunate,
Push the helpless into the ditch, bully the weak so that they fear for their lives.
The poor, like stray dogs and cats, scavenge for food in back alleys.
They sort through the garbage of the rich, eke out survival on handouts.
Homeless, they shiver through cold nights on the street; they've no place to lay their heads."*

*Exposed to the weather, wet and frozen,
they huddle in makeshift shelters.
Nursing mothers have their babies snatched from them;
the infants of the poor are kidnapped and sold.
They go about patched and threadbare;
even the hard workers go hungry.
No matter how backbreaking their labor,
they can never make ends meet.
People are dying right and left, groaning in torment.
The wretched cry out for help
and God does nothing, acts like nothing's wrong!
(The Message)*

This is a graphic picture of cruel oppression, and the processes of injustice described in it are not without parallels in the suffering and pain of our Indigenous peoples. How would you respond to the conclusion in this passage from Job? What would you say to someone who feels the same way, i.e. that God may see the suffering and pain of the oppressed poor, but doesn't care?

In his second Bible Reflection, Karl Faase explains how the composer of Psalm 10 moves beyond the cry of anguish to a deep expression of faith – of faith in a God who does "not abandon the helpless", who "comes alongside them in their pain", and "brings hope even in the darkest of times". But how does God do this? This is not a question that should be lightly asked because as Karl says, God often does it through us: "We are in many cases the voice of comfort, the hands and feet of God to reach out and touch those who have been damaged."

The Bible asks the hard questions, but in so doing it also urges us to take up the challenge of being part of the answer. There is a sense in which it is foolish to even ask the question unless we are willing to accept the challenge. Consistently and persistently, the Bible makes it crystal clear that at the core of our job description as Jesus' disciples is the requirement to live compassionately and justly. God is building this into the DNA of his people, something we will explore later in more detail.



With this in mind, and in the light of the stories we have heard in Episode Two, I encourage you to prayerfully consider the implications of living compassionately and justly in Australia. Remember these words from the Rev. Graham Paulson: "What gets passed down is the enormous hurt and disorientation that comes from losing one's land, losing one's identity, losing one's goal and purpose in life. This has come down by osmosis, passed down from my grandparents to my parents, and from my parents to me. And so I had to deal with this disquiet and dysfunction that I couldn't explain." What might God be calling upon us to be and do? How can we come alongside our Indigenous sisters and brothers in Christ? These are just some of the questions we can be praying.

MORE THAN A SONG

I'm Welsh by birth, so maybe it's not surprising that I love to sing. Singing is in my genes – though, I hasten to add, I only sing publicly when my voice is buried in a crowd of other voices. The first hymn I learned after coming to faith as a 15-year-old was one made popular in the Billy Graham crusades – *How Great Thou Art*. I still love to sing it, particularly as it inevitably reminds me of that very personal awakening to the love of God. Often as I sing it I am overwhelmed by a renewed sense of gratitude.

Singing can be a very precious dimension of worship. *"Sing God a brand-new song! Earth and everyone in it, sing! Sing to God – worship God!"* begins one of the most amazing songs of praise ever written.¹ Surely God loves to hear us sing to him, no matter the quality of our voices. Doesn't he?

Well, as we heard from Karl Faase in his Biblical Reflection on Episode Three, God spoke very strongly about this through the prophet Amos, leaving no doubt that there are times when he derives no pleasure at all from the singing of his people. Amos' words on this subject are very disturbing,² and he was not alone in expressing what is one of the primary messages of the Old Testament prophets. It is summed up in Micah 6:8: *"He has told you, O mortal, what is good: and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"*³ I'm old enough to remember the old "Scripture in Song" choruses that were very popular in my church in Auckland in the late 70s. Great lyrics, but probably not such great music! This verse in Micah was one we would occasionally belt out with great gusto. But what might be easy to sing is much more difficult to do. But let's just unpack what Micah says a little bit more, because within it there lies a significant clue as to what provides us with the motivation to embrace God's passion for justice and kindness.

It's in the previous couple of verses where Micah very deliberately reminds his listeners of God's wonderful liberating work in rescuing them out of the most terrible slavery and exploitation in Egypt. Here we have it. Gratitude is the key. It motivates and sustains our love for God, integral to which is our love for our neighbour in need. The missionary-theologian Lesslie Newbigin expresses it brilliantly: *"The Christian congregation meets as a community that acknowledges that it lives by the amazing grace of a boundless kindness... A Christian congregation is thus a body of people with gratitude to spare, a gratitude that can spill over into care for the neighbour."*⁴

In Episode Three we listened to the experiences of our Indigenous Australian neighbours. How can our gratitude "spill over into care" for them? What might this care look like?

In his Redfern Speech, former Prime Minister Paul Keating listed the terrible injustices inflicted on Australian Indigenous communities over more than a century.

"Isn't it reasonable to say that if we can build a prosperous and remarkably harmonious multicultural society in Australia, surely we can find just solutions to the problems which beset the first Australians - the people to whom the most injustice has been done.

And, as I say, the starting point might be to recognise that the problem starts with us non-Aboriginal Australians. It begins, I think, with that act of recognition.

Recognition that it was we who did the dispossessing. We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the diseases. The alcohol. We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers. We practised discrimination and exclusion. It was our ignorance and our prejudice. And our failure to imagine these things being done to us."



What are the implications of this for you and me, and our churches, given the Biblical reminder that the acceptability of our worship to God is connected to our determination to "do justice" and "love kindness"? (Words that were affirmed by Jesus in Matthew 23:23.)

It is good to be prayerful over questions like these, with quiet deliberation making ourselves attentive to the prompting of the Spirit.

*"Through prayer we develop the longing, the yearning to sink down deep into the things of God. From prayer we discern the actions we are to take to overcome evil with good."*⁵

¹Psalm 96:1 (The Message) ²Amos 5:21-24 ³RSV ⁴The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1989, p 228
⁵Richard Foster, Streams of Living Water, Harper Collins, 1998, p173

"GOD IS BUILDING A HOME. HE'S USING US ALL..." EPH 2:19¹

About 300 of us had been together for just under a week. We had come from nearly every corner of the earth – a wonderful collage of ethnic diversity. In our singing we were led by Leonardo, the man we came to call the Chilean Psalmist – a composer and singer of truly beautiful songs that served to remind us of God's love and, in particular, his love for the poor. This was our final time of worship together. Then, just as we were about to share the wine and the bread, something so remarkable happened that this became the most precious communion service I have ever been part of.

Dino, a good friend from the Indian state of Manipur, was leading the service. He began to tell us of the long and bitter history of ethnic hatred between his and a neighbouring tribe. He spoke of many killings. Unknown to me and the others, among us was someone from that other tribe – Banner. Struggling to keep his emotions under control, Dino invited Banner to come to the front. With the rest of us as witnesses, he asked for Banner's forgiveness, and Banner responded by enfolding his brother in Christ in a long and firm embrace.

Dino then reminded us of Jesus' words about the need to be reconciled with one another,² and invited us to consider whether or not we needed to talk to anyone else before taking the bread and wine. We were a global community in that room. Some of us were citizens of countries that had done great harm, intentional and unintentional, to communities and societies represented by others sitting alongside us. In the silence I saw a young American student from Wheaton College go over to talk quietly to Melba, a theologian and Christian leader from the Philippines. I couldn't hear what was being said, but I could see that Melba was moved to tears, and she sat with her arms around a man young enough to be her grandson.

Many others crossed the room to sit and talk. In such a context, this was prayer of a most profound kind. We then shared the bread and drink, reminded one another of Jesus' sacrifice and love, and a deep peace and joy flowed around and through us. I will never, ever forget it.

God is indeed building a home – out of a wonderfully diverse people. It's an on-going project at the very heart of God's kingdom strategy. Take a moment to read Ephesians 2 – an urgent plea to Christians to overcome the barriers of culture and ethnicity, and allow God to transform them into one people. In this transformed community of faith much of that which formerly divided one from another becomes a source of wonder, joy and celebration.



We participate in this journey by first committing to small steps, and then by continuing to walk along the same path. Think back to what you heard in Episode Four: "listen to each other"; "reaching out to each other"; "humility and respect"; "have a cup of tea and a yarn"; "honour one another without trying to make them the same"; "come together and heal each other's wounds". Think of the smallest steps you could take in response to these heartfelt comments. What would they require of you? Where might they take you? Linger over these questions in prayer, and any others that the Spirit might bring to your mind. If you are in the habit of keeping a journal, you may want to write them down and return to them in the weeks ahead.

¹ Ephesians 2: 19 (The Message) ² Matthew 5:23-24