

Churches Together in Central Peterborough –

Rev Michael Page (Baptist)

michael@mpage.org.uk

MADE IN GOD’S IMAGE

I guess that many, if not all of us, will be familiar with the Genesis creation story. The opening words of the Bible could not have a simpler statement:

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”

Over the next few verses we are told that God went on to create day and night, sea and land, vegetation, living creatures, fish and birds, livestock. It was at God’s word that everything was created:

“And he saw that it was good.”

Then we are told that:

“²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals,^[a] and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

²⁷ So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

²⁹ Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. ³⁰ And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the

ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food.” And it was so.

³¹ God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.

The book of Genesis is not a scientific textbook, nor is it a blow by blow historical treatise. Rather, it is a reflective account of how humans understood God interacted with creation.

We would no doubt disagree among ourselves as to exactly how we should interpret the story, but I hope that we would all be able to agree that God’s creation has a fullness and richness that is wonderful to behold.

I have often read the book of Genesis during January, and I am doing so again this year. I had been reading the opening words when, last weekend, I was asked if I could take the service this evening. I said I would, even though I knew I was going to be away this week on a conference and would therefore have limited time to think about what might be said. However, these opening words proved to be a helpful lens through which to reflect on the theme of Christian unity.

I have long been involved with a charity which provides facilities for churches and Christian groups to hold residential weekends and meetings. Our charity has a centre in Hertfordshire and another in Derbyshire. But there are other organisations that run centres across the UK. And the conference that I was at this week was organised by the umbrella association for all such organisations.

As it happened, the conference was held at our charity’s centre in Hertfordshire, but the delegates came from the length and breadth

of the country, from Devon to the Scottish Highlands, from Northern Ireland to Norfolk.

Because this was the first such conference in three years, due to the Covid pandemic making it impossible to meet in person, for many delegates this was the first time that they had been to such a gathering.

As we met with one another we learnt that some centres were quite small and could host groups of 30 or so, whilst others could handle groups of several hundred. Some were aimed at self-caterers, others provided restaurant-style facilities. Some were in tents, others offered hotel-like ensuite bedrooms. Some provided adventure activities, others were places for quiet reflection.

But as we met and talked with one another the thing that we realised was that, despite our differences, we had a common calling and a united purpose. We all had a mission to see people learn about God, to find or deepen their faith, and to become followers and proclaimers of Christ.

On the face of it, an observer might have said that we were competing for the same customers. But all of us realised that in our differences we had something so much greater than if we had all been the same. We could learn from one another, support one another, encourage one another.

As we took our leave of each other at the end of the conference we realised that, in making us all different, God had created something very special that could serve his people.

Now I'd like to tell you a somewhat different story. This is about a man called Herman, who was born in Poland in the later years of the 19th century, in a village called Oswiecim. As the century moved to its close Herman married a girl from a nearby town.

They had hoped to settle down in Poland but there were some troubles and they felt it would be for the best if they moved. First they went to Vienna, where they had their first child, but Vienna wasn't right, and they moved countries again, ending up in a small town in southern Germany right on the Rhine near the border with Switzerland. They had more children, a total of five girls and a boy.

Then the first world war came along and Herman signed up to fight for his adopted country. He served with distinction in the army, and wearing his uniform he looked just like the next man: there was nothing to mark him out as different. When the war finished he went back to his small town, hoping to rebuild his life there.

Although things weren't easy, he made a living. But then things started to change. There was a shortage of goods, which led to rampant inflation. Life became hard. And a rabble rousing politician started to blame a certain group of people for the problem.

Unfortunately, that group included Herman and his wife, because they had gone to Germany from Poland hoping to build a better life. At first, their neighbours in the small town didn't respond to the rabble rouser, because Herman and those like him were good citizens and contributed to the life of the town. But over the years, the rabble rouser and his political movement gained more and more power and brought in more and more laws which made things tougher for Herman and those like him.

Now I'm sure that by now you will have realised that Herman was part of the Jewish community, that the rabble rouser was Adolf Hitler, and that his political movement was the Nazi party.

As the Nazis took over every part of German life, Herman's son realised that things would not go well for him and he was tipped off one day that he was on a wanted list. The son was able to slip over the border into Switzerland, and then made his way to Palestine.

Things were not so easy for the rest of the family. The older girls now had children of their own. But the youngest girl was still single and as life got even tougher she managed to make the tortuous journey up through Germany and into Belgium, eventually getting a ferry to England. She arrived at the beginning of September 1939, just as the Nazis invaded Poland, after which the UK and France declared war on Germany, honouring their guarantee of Poland's border.

Of course, during the war, there was no communication between Britain and Germany, so our young refugee had no means of knowing what happened to her family. But, after the war ended, she learned that her parents, her siblings and their families, had been returned to Herman's original village in Poland. Only it was no longer called Oswiecim: it had been renamed Auschwitz. They had all died in concentration camps.

On the face of it there was nothing different about Herman's family and the general population of the German town where they lived. They lived side by side with their neighbours. They bought goods from them and provided services which their neighbours needed.

But when things seemed to start going wrong, it became convenient to blame people like Herman for the problems. We know what happened in Nazi Germany, and it wasn't good.

Today, in so many places around the world, we see people wanting to find scapegoats

upon whom blame can be heaped for things going wrong.

In China, in India, in Myanmar, in Iran, in America, yes and in the UK, we see minority groups being blamed and persecuted just because of who they are, and because it's easy to think that they are the cause of any problems.

In eastern Europe we are seeing what happens when a power hungry dictator wants to widen his circle of influence. The people of Ukraine and Russia, who have so much in common, are fighting literally to the death, with thousands of casualties every day.

²⁷ So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

³¹ God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.

It is in our rebelliousness that we have changed the narrative. I have no doubt that this is not what God wanted. And we know it because, in Jesus, God provides a way back from our inhumanity towards one another.

As the letter to the Galatians reminds us: **3**
²⁶ So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, ²⁷ for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

In the differences that I experienced among the delegates at this week's conference I saw God's provision at work. Learning, sharing, encouraging, we all benefitted. In conflict, we are all impoverished.

Herman was my grandfather. His youngest daughter was my mother. If she had not made that difficult decision to leave her parents, her siblings, her family, and made that tough journey there is no doubt she would have gone to Auschwitz with them, and I would not be here this evening.

Jesus was asked by a teacher of the law which was the most important commandment. I'm sure you know the answer.

²⁹ “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. ³⁰ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ ³¹ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’^[c] There is no commandment greater than these.”

If we love our neighbours as ourselves then we all have a part to play in overcoming prejudice of any and every kind, wherever we find it. Don't be afraid to speak out whenever you see it. Amen