



## **Anglican Church Diocese of Sydney**

Transcript of the address by

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### **'What are Human Beings?'**

### **Psalm 8**

'What are human beings?'

I once asked the Head of a School whether human beings were by nature good or bad. Without hesitation, good, he replied. I did wonder how well he knew his students and how long he'd been teaching, but I will return to that answer in due course.

Every learned profession and every intellectual discipline incorporates some anthropology, some doctrine of Man. In the mainstream social science disciplines for the last decades, rational choice theory has been the dominant understanding of human nature. It maintains an Enlightenment conception of a human being as having individual autonomy and rationality: that is, the ability to analyse alternative options available to the social actor, and then the capacity to make choices, which result in action or behaviour. I think that it assumes the basic goodness of human nature.

More recently, however, frequent appeal to our evolutionary history to explain - and justify - every aspect of human behaviour. This is a popular point of view in newspaper Opinion Pieces, in the promulgation and defence of new ethical values. Rightly or not, evolutionary ethics is premised on the view that we are nothing but animals, and may be treated thus. If rational choice theory has some concept of the freedom of the will built into it, one danger of evolutionary psychology is a deterministic streak – we can do no other than what our genes predestine us to do. This alleged fact becomes the justification for behaviour and there is a corresponding diminution of responsibility.

I do not know what constitutes a legal anthropology, apart from reference to that ancient authority Mr A. P Herbert, who introduced me some decades ago to the Reasonable Man, ‘an ideal. a standard, the embodiment of all those qualities which we demand of the good citizen’. ‘This noble creature,’ says Mr Herbert,’ stands in singular contrast to his kinsman the Economic Man. whose every action is prompted by the single spur of selfish advantage and directed to the single end of monetary gain. The reasonable man is always thinking of others; prudence is his guide and “safety First”... his rule of life.’ He is a rather unattractive person.

Nonetheless, the question, ‘what are human beings?’ is clearly fundamental to the law. Thus you will be aware of course that in 2006 the High Court was faced with the issue of whether it is possible to secure damages simply for having been born. Is non-existence, under certain circumstances, a better option? In the majority judgement, Justice Crennan said, ‘In the eyes of the common law of Australia, all human beings are valuable in, and to, our community, irrespective of any disability or perceived imperfection.’

This is a wonderful assertion. I take it that the common law would not say the same thing about an animal, even one as noble as an elephant.

But why not?

In the name of human reason some weigh up the merits of a healthy elephant against a profoundly disabled human and decide in favour of the elephant. For human reason, despite what we may think, is not sovereign. The problem with human reason is that it is in bed with human nature. In a recent lecture at the great Synagogue, the distinguished Chief Rabbi, Lord Sachs pointed out chapter and verse the virulent anti-Semitic words of the heroes of the Enlightenment, including Voltaire and Kant, and we must never forget the illegitimate use put to Darwinian evolutionary science by the social eugenics movement.

I take it that the statement by Her Honour is not immutable. If the core ethical and social beliefs of our community change, I suppose that even the common law will change with it. I presume that our judiciary will see the problems inherent in moving from the 'is' of evolution to the 'ought' of treating humans as mere animals.

But it is less obvious that rational choice theory contains its own dangers and can be contested by another vision as to what it is to be a human being.

What anthropology is assumed by opinion writers in serious newspapers? I presume that they are often premised on the view that we are alone in the universe, the chance products of matter, fundamentally good if rather unenlightened, autonomous in the creation of standards.

Here for example is Philip Adams: 'life is totally meaningless...we have no destiny, no purpose, no author. We just are. ...Morals are simply expedients, rules that are set up like traffic lights, to try to sort things out...I believe that what we call love is a useful social adhesive that, much of the time stops things falling apart...I cannot believe that truth is always good.'

If you think that such public intellectuals give voice to community standards, I guess that you will instinctively assume the aims, temper and inspiration of this anthropology, will perhaps elide them with those of the Reasonable Man:

egalitarianism is the aim of social policy, insisting on rights in the absence of absolutes

libertarianism is its temper, stressing tolerance

autonomy is its inspiration, putting the individual prior to community.

These things from such a view of the world.

However, here is a different voice, a different wisdom:

‘What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honour.’

The Biblical anthropology starts with the idea that we are not alone in the universe, that we the creations of a majestic and glorious God who in power and wisdom has made all things. Furthermore, this God takes a keen interest in us; he is not aloof, dispassionate, uncaring. On the contrary, he has revealed his will to us and we are blessed in the doing of it. True freedom, to this way of thinking, is found in worship not in autonomy.

The leading Biblical name for all this is that humans are made in the image of God.

The implications for this seminal idea are as follows:

*First*, all who bear the human name are precious and equally precious.

*Second*, we are kin to the animals and yet distinct from the animals.

*Third*, that as God's image bearers we have been commissioned to be the stewards of the world – under his rule, accountable to him, but with responsibilities and privileges. From this basic teaching comes the rejection of the division of the world into the sacred and the secular – for work, rest, relationships, science, art, music, literature all these are the proper activities of the worshipping human being as we fulfil the mandate we have received to cultivate the world.

*Fourth*, that we are designed to be social creatures. The first thing that God declares to be not good, is that man is alone. Biblical religion avoids the horrors of collectivism on the one hand and the hubris of autonomy on the other. The image of God is both a personal and a communal idea – we are together in his image.

*Fifth*, the image of God in us is flawed and corrupted by human rebellion against the will of God. Whatever my headmaster believed about human nature, I would have thought that theology and the common law have this in common that we honour humans, can see the capacity for good, but accept the constant reality of human weakness and corruption. As G. K Chesterton put it “original sin ... is the only part of Christian theology which can really be proved.” The legislators may be more utopian, of course.

*Sixth*, that in Jesus Christ we have a life lived that is fully in the image of God, and that he fulfils what God had planned for the human race. For it is integral to a Christian anthropology that hope is real, that forgiveness is possible, that we in dealing with a human being, no matter how depraved and hopeless or disfigured and deformed, you are dealing with one who has a future, for whom there is hope.

Here, by way of contrast is what a biblical anthropology may lead to:

It doesn't say

*egalitarianism is its aim, insisting on rights*

but has

justice as its aim, insisting on fairness and responsibility

It is not

*libertarian in temper, stressing tolerance*

It really has

love as its temper, stressing compassion

It does not have

*autonomy in inspiration, putting the individual before community*

But has

self-sacrifice as its inspiration, building community.

Will a contest between radically different anthropologies make a difference to the anthropology which inspires the law? I raise a question which I am not fit to answer.

But I am interested in a discussion I had recently with a Senior Counsel. We were talking about anti-discrimination legislation and how it may affect religious schools and indeed religious freedom. Thus, to take one case in point, why should a religious school have the right to appoint a religious gardener? Surely a person's religion makes no difference to their capacity to carry out the function of a gardener? My colleague pointed to the difference in the way we answer the question 'what are human beings?' If you think of the job of the gardener in merely functional terms, as the work of an autonomous individual, earning a living among a lot of other autonomous human beings, there is no reason why it has to be a religious person. But if, following the idea of the image of God, you see the gardening as a vocation, a calling, the work of one who cultivates the earth as an image bearer, and if you connect the gardener with the very life of the community he or she serves, the outcome is different. The gardener is not merely an employee

but a member of a body dedicated to the service of its members. I would want to employ a person who could pray for the students and who would model what it means to be made in the image of God.

Even if you do not accept this vision of what it is to be human, I think you can at least see that it is noble and ennobling vision and that in the name of our religious freedom it is one that should be sustained, not diminished by a competing view posing as the only possible right one.

‘What are human beings?’ Even if I am wrong to suggest that the law has an anthropology, I am sure that you personally have one.

Here is what the Bible says about you: you are made uniquely in the image of God. Your life matters; whether you are in full strength and vigour, or old and decayed, or erudite and successful, or profoundly disabled, you are equally precious to the God who made you. You have not been made to stand alone, but to stand for others as neighbour and to worship God which will be your joy. You are called not merely to tolerate others but to love others, to create community; your work matters, for in it you are fulfilling your role as a guardian of the world; you are not perfect, but have much that stains your life and needs forgiveness; you can find a deep and abiding hope for you and your family in turning to Jesus Christ, the true image of God, for when death has been defeated, you will live in a new creation with Christ for ever.

Who are you? The wisdom of the Bible is this - You have been made a little lower than God and crowned with glory and honour.

