

## Who are we speaking to?

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*Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image according to our likeness" ... So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them ...[and] God saw everything that he had made and indeed it was very good. (Gen. 1:26a, 27, and 31a).*

*[Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Col. 1:15-17).*

*When Jesus had come down from the mountain, great crowds followed him; and there was a leper who came to him and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean." [Jesus] stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Immediately his leprosy was cleansed. (Matt 8:1-3).*

*For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory. (Col. 3:3-4).*

*For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view ... (2 Cor. 5:14-16a).*

The Church is called to proclaim the Gospel to all people. But *who* is the person we are called to address? Christians have often assumed that the person we address is a sinner. Just before Christmas I was given a Christian tract and the first thing it wanted me to know was that "all have sinned" (Rom 3:23). This seems to be a common Christian approach – that the most significant thing about us and the thing that has to be made clear from the outset as of first importance is that we are sinners.

Many Christians and those no longer Christian are, or have been, afflicted with religious guilt, and feelings of worthlessness and think that it is this apparent obsession with sin that has caused them to feel this way. Christians have often thought that unless people are confronted with their sin they will never appreciate the grace of God. Thinking this way affects how Christians understand, God, the Gospel, mission, church, Christian life, and themselves. It also affects how Christians understand

others – the people we are called to address. This morning I want to question this way of thinking. I want to encourage us to re-think who the person is that God calls us to address. This means thinking about what it means to be human.

What does true humanity look like? How can we recognise the person who is truly human as God intends humans to be? Who is the true human being that God planned from all eternity and created godly and “very good” to love, to give freedom to, to be in fellowship with, and to be God’s partner, child, and friend? How can we know what true humanity looks like?

True human being and personhood is revealed to us in Jesus Christ. It is in Jesus that we see true humanity as human beings were created to be for it is Jesus who is the “image of God” in human form. His true humanity is not found in some abstract concept of moral purity, ethical perfection, or spirituality. It is found in the fact that he lives as God intends humans to live. The true humanity of Jesus is seen in the fact that he loves God with all his heart and mind and soul and strength and so he is not seduced by lesser things that try to claim his devotion. It is found in the fact that he trusts God utterly in all things and so he is free of all fear and insecurity. The true humanity of Jesus is found in his complete confidence in God to meet his every need and so he is completely at peace. It is found in the fact that Jesus never seeks to justify himself in the eyes of others for in every way he knows he is loved by God, and justified by God. It is found in the fact that he does not secretly try to cover his shame and hide his true self from the gaze of others for he has no shame to cover and his true self is open for all to see. The true humanity of Jesus is found in the fact that that he loves his neighbour as himself – that he relates to others with transparency, dignity, and compassion and can look his fellows squarely in the eye without arrogance or inferiority. The true humanity of Jesus is found in the fact that he is supremely secure, supremely free, and supremely himself; for his security, freedom, and identity are supremely grounded in God. In all these things Jesus is genuinely human as God intends human beings to be.

This truth is revealed to us in the Gospels. When we read about Jesus we recognise this true humanity in him because we recognise it as something that we yearn for in ourselves. There is something within us that recognises in Jesus what we were made for and long for. In the broken pieces of our own humanity we glimpse an echo and reflection of the full glory of true humanity and true personhood that we see in Jesus. As we gaze on the true humanity of Jesus it fills us with a kind of homesickness and longing for something that rightly belongs to us, something we were made for, but which we have lost.

The true humanity of Jesus is clear to see. But in us our true humanity is obscured by our brokenness – it is submerged beneath our guilt and sin. Our true personhood is corrupted and perverted by our false fear that God means to harm us and take away our freedom. Our true human being is distorted by our mad idea that we can find fulfillment outside of relationship with God. In our God-given freedom we have the capacity to obscure, corrupt, and pervert our true humanity and personhood. But God limits this mad use of our freedom. What God does not permit is for us to destroy our true humanity. We can *deny* our true humanity and act in contradiction to it but we cannot *destroy* it. We cannot un-make the creaturely reality that God has created.

Though we obscure it and deny it, our true humanity cries out within us – it cries out for recognition. This is the secret message that lies behind everything that we do. In thousands of different ways our lives bear compelling and tragic testimony to this truth. So much of what we do is in fact broken attempts to find and secure our true humanity. We conform to the expectations of others because we long for approval and acceptance. We defy social conventions because we long for our individuality and uniqueness to be recognized, respected, and affirmed. We pursue wealth because we seek security and happiness; we argue and fight because we want to be vindicated and justified. We are promiscuous because we seek intimacy, freedom, and affirmation and we take drugs and binge-drink because we secretly hate what we have become and long to be something better. But all these efforts only reveal and confirm our anxiety that we secretly fear that our true personhood is insecure and unstable. But despite our best efforts, our true approval, individuality, security, justification, affirmation, and identity are found only in God. It is only in God and by God that our true humanity is secured.

I am convinced that it is *this* person, *this* true humanity in each human being that Christians are called to acknowledge and address as we interact with and speak with others. It is *this* person that God calls us to honour and affirm because it is *this* person who is the true person that God has created and who, by God's grace, will live eternally with God in the new creation. This is the true person that Jesus has come to reconcile and redeem. In touching the lepers, in speaking to the outcast, and in feasting with the tax-gatherers, Jesus honours, affirms, and gives dignity to the true humanity of us all.

But when we address people as sinners it is often the case that they simply cannot recognise themselves in our description of them. *“I work hard, I love my family, I pay my taxes. I know I'm not perfect, but I haven't murdered or raped anyone. But you seem to be saying that God's fundamental orientation toward me is anger, wrath, and judgement because I am a sinner. I simply can't relate to that! Moreover, I think that your God is petty and unreasonable in demanding perfection and I cannot see that killing Jesus on the cross has anything to do with love or the problem that you say that I have”*.

In addressing people as sinners, Christians assume that sin is something that people naturally know about and understand. But our sin is *not* something that we can understand on the basis of our natural knowledge and feelings. We can only know about our true condition – our alienation from God through sin – by the loving mercy and grace of God. What we *can* know by our own knowledge and feelings are things like: the wrongness of criminal activity; our vague feelings of guilt and shame; our awareness of a kind of malaise in the human condition; our feelings of emptiness, and existential loneliness as we confront the vastness of the universe. But our true condition escapes us. If we consult experts they talk of psychological disintegration, sociological alienation, educational and economic deprivation, or genetic propensities toward certain behaviours, and so on. Though all these things might be valid in their proper context, the knowledge of our true condition escapes us. Our sin is only revealed to us as we understand that God has reconciled and redeemed us in Jesus Christ. Our sin is disclosed to us as we receive and reflect on the mercy and love of God. *“T'was grace that taught my heart to fear and grace my fears relieved”*. It is in the cure that the disease is understood. Outside of the grace of God revealed to us in Jesus Christ we cannot understand ourselves to be sinners, alienated from God, and living in contradiction to our true humanity.

Outside of the grace of God all we confront is a series of misdiagnoses. We think that our sense of alienation from ourselves may be resolved with psychotherapy or the power of positive thinking; our alienation from others through social engineering, economic development, and education; our violence with political institutions of security and peace – yet the malaise remains. Therefore the true knowledge of our sin and the good news of its resolution in Jesus Christ ought to be greeted with enormous relief and rejoicing. This is like someone who has suffered from an illness that no doctor has recognized or understood, but who has only been given a false diagnosis and the wrong medicine. But now they discover that the most eminent doctor of all not only recognizes the disease, but has named it, and made it his life's work to find and provide a cure. This can only produce relief and rejoicing. The nameless malaise does in fact have a name, the condition has been recognized and addressed by God himself, and so all our futile efforts to seek diagnosis and treatment can finally be dispensed with. Thus the reconciling and redeeming grace of God in Jesus Christ is God's truthful judgement and the truthful judgement of God is God's saving grace – for in it our true humanity and our true condition that obscures it are revealed and healed. God's hatred of sin in our lives is not his hatred of us. It reflects his great love and desire that we finally be free from this madness that robs us of our true humanity.

When we speak to people we ought to speak of the true humanity that God has secured for them in Jesus Christ. But when we speak of human sin we ought to do so only in the context of the reconciling and redeeming work of Jesus Christ. Sin is so toxic and so dangerous that we cannot (even as a concept) speak of it safely outside of the grace of God. When spoken of in the context of human being outside of the grace of God sin can only do what it always does – bring forth death. We may only properly speak of sin in the context of the grace of God by which it is already named and defeated in Jesus Christ. Although sin still menaces and threatens us and although in our foolishness and weakness we still give it permission in our lives, God has so acted that sin will never have the last word. Sin can never define and determine who we fundamentally are. Sin can never finally undermine or destroy our true humanity that is secure in Jesus Christ.

But if we simply address people as sinners; in other words if we speak of sin in the context of human being rather than in the context of the grace of God, we risk much.

1. We risk giving the impression that non-Christians are sinners but we are not and that others are bad people but we are good people. To think that you can be sinless is really quite crazy – you might actually imagine that you succeed! This happens because the human heart is conceited and easily deceived. In this case there is a tendency to become arrogant, spiritually smug, and judgemental toward others who you think haven't got the discipline, blessing, or faith, to achieve what you have. Or you might imagine that you fail. This happens because the human conscience is a merciless persecutor within. In this case there is a tendency to become miserable and discouraged and eventually this can drive people away from faith, or into a wretched form of Christian defeatism, or even madness! Or you might secretly realise that you will never be sinless, but because of expectations you act as though you are. This happens because we value the praise of others more than the praise of God. In this case you simply

become a hypocrite. It is these three things – Christians that are arrogant, miserable, or hypocritical – that more than anything else turn people off Christianity in a major way since none of these things point to the true humanity that people actually recognise and long for.

2. Addressing people as sinners risks focusing on a kind of “Christian righteousness” that emphasizes what Christians *don't* do, thus producing a very private and internal kind of morality, but which is very light when it comes to the weightier matters of “righteousness, justice, and mercy”. In doing this Christians have often found themselves fighting moral battles of dubious value. Consequently, the Church has often failed to communicate with a world that has often seen the Church as opposing the wrong “evil” (while sometimes being secretly complicit in real evil) and failing to recognise the genuine good that is in the world (while trying to locate evil in human nature).
3. Addressing people as sinners means confronting people as law-breakers. But preaching the law risks producing a slavish and obsessive religious lifestyle of rule-keeping or alternatively hardening people and encouraging resistance and rebellion. Addressing people on the basis of their true humanity means addressing people on the basis of the grace of God. It is not law that moves people to repentance but the grace of God in Jesus Christ. We should not speak to people primarily on the basis of what they have done against God. Rather we should speak with great humility, compassion, and confidence of what God has done in Jesus Christ for us all. And this word will always be a word of affirmation – a word that speaks God’s resounding *Yes* to the true humanity of every person that God has secured in Jesus Christ in whom “all things (including our humanity) hold together”.
4. Addressing people as sinners risks giving the impression that God’s fundamental orientation toward us is one of hostility and wrath and that we are always in danger of God’s “real” disposition toward us breaking through (and consequently much of our religious effort goes into trying to keep this from happening). It gives the impression that our very being exists in fundamental contradiction to the holiness of God who, as a consequence, can only ever confront us in wrath and revulsion. Thus the Christian gospel is distorted in light of this. God risks being misunderstood as being hostile to humanity and so the proclamation of the Church is heard as bad news. If the Gospel is to be heard as good news, then the news of who we really are (our true humanity in the loving determination of God) must be given its proper place. God’s original, true, and natural attitude toward us is profound love and a merciful desire to separate us from the sin that robs us of our true humanity. The irrefutable truth of this is secured in the fact that God himself has become truly human in Jesus Christ. He has done this for us and for our good. In the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and his ascension to the Father, the humanity that Jesus bears on our behalf is now incorporated into the very being of God and thus our true humanity is secure in him.

And so “your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then *you* (the real and true you in the fullness of your God-given humanity) also will appear with him in glory”. It is for *this*

reason that we now no longer regard people from a “human point of view” that is, from the point of view of a natural or religious understanding. People are *not* first and foremost sinners. We are first and foremost created by the goodness of God for loving fellowship with God and the enjoyment of our true humanity. Secondly, we are lost in the contradiction of our sin and cannot understand this outside of the grace of God. But thirdly, centrally and decisively, we are loved by the God who has secured our salvation through Jesus Christ and who longs for us to recognise the truth about ourselves through faith in God. Because *this* is the central and decisive fact about all people, it is on *this* basis (not on the basis of sin) that we are to address people.

*O God: merciful, gracious, and loving Father, please help us to realise the truth about who we really are. Please help us by the enabling of the living Spirit of Jesus to understand and make real in our lives the fact that you have secured our true humanity in Jesus Christ and long for us to become what you have made us to be. We long for that day when Christ, who is our life, is revealed and we also are revealed with him in glory. Please help us in all of our interactions with others to recognise, honour, affirm, and give dignity to, the true humanity that you have created in them and help us only to speak of sin in the context of your mercy and grace. We pray these things in the name of Jesus our Lord. Amen.*