

Good morning, today I'm carrying on with the 2nd part of a 3 part series I'm doing on **our identity** as God's beloved, as God's family, & as those who belong to Jesus. Two weeks ago when I spoke, I focused on our identity as sons & daughters of God; Next week, I will speak on our identity as servants of God and as disciples of Jesus.

And today, my task is to convince you of three things: you are known; you are loved, & you are called.

Two weeks ago, one of the key Scriptures I used was from **Genesis 1:27** which of course, as we know says God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

which is absolutely a **foundational verse** as we start to understand our sense of identity. It is also absolutely foundational to how our **culture, law, health care** and our understanding of things like **human rights** work in most of our Western countries. But here's our problem - our problem is that as Christians we have read & heard Genesis 1:27 so many times - familiarity has bred contempt, well not contempt so much as **boredom**. We need the Holy Spirit to give us fresh eyes, & fresh **excitement** when we encounter these amazing themes in Scripture.

But when Susan & moved to **Cambodia** to live there between 1994 - 2010 one of the wonderful things we found there was a people for whom everything about Christianity was **fresh & new & exciting**. And we got to see first hand how incredibly powerful Genesis 1:27 was in a place & to a people who had never heard it before.

In that very spiritual, Buddhist-animist context, Gen 1:27 was like a **thunderbolt**. One of the areas we saw that really clearly in was the disabled children's programme (**TLC**) that our team started & Susan was very involved with. We had a **clinic** with a nurse, a physio, a Dr & volunteer

helpers. But initially **no body came**. And initially it was really hard to find disabled children. Which we knew was weird - because given the conditions of poor nutrition for pregnant women, & the terrible conditions women were giving birth in, & the poor nutrition children were growing up in (and when we arrived in 1990's, the stats for Cambodia were that **50% of all children were malnourished**) we knew that there had to be big numbers of disabled children in this community we were serving. But we couldn't see them. Until our Cambodian co-workers, our cultural brokers helped us understand what was going on. The kids were being hidden away at the back of peoples houses & shacks. Parents were **ashamed** for their disabled children to be seen - because you see, because Buddhism has come out of Hinduism, it is very much **Karma**-based world view, which meant how you were born & how you were suffering in this life was a consequence of being punished for past sins & misdeeds. This in turn lead to a crushing sense of **Fatalism & hopelessness** about the future, especially for the poor, which had been even more deeply ingrained in peoples minds & spirits after the horrors of Pol Pot.

But our team managed to convince **a few brave mums** to start bringing their kids in for treatment & physio (there's always a few pioneers whose courage & love for their child overcomes their fear & fatalism - & in a mission situation, you are always looking for those pioneers). And then hope arises. These Mother's start to see their kids **respond** to the physiotherapy. Kids that couldn't hold their bodies upright, learn how to sit; kids who couldn't stand begin to learn to walk; kids that had to be hand-fed learn to hold a spoon & feed themselves; kids that couldn't talk, or read or write, are now starting to go to school. Those parents whose kids are growing & learning now start telling other parents in their community about this new thing that is happening; word spreads, hope spreads, & pretty soon we have **30 mothers** involved in the programme, encouraging one another, cheering one another on, recruiting new families & saying "**look, look what my child can do now!**". Parents who once felt that nothing would ever change in their child's future, are starting to believe, & parents who were once ashamed of their child's disability are becoming **excited & proud** about what their child is achieving. It was like watching a miracle of love unfold. And for our staff, their **new mantra** was Genesis 1:27 - every one of these children, & every one of

these parents, is someone precious, special, made in the image of God - not someone forever cursed or doomed, but someone precious & full of potential.

In Cambodia, our team also started an **AIDS Home Care programme**. At that time in Cambodia, there were no effective drugs available for the treatment of HIV-AIDS, & so to be diagnosed with HIV was quite literally a **death sentence** of between 6 - 12 months diagnosis to death. There weren't **drugs** & there weren't any fancy hospitals or **hospices** that people could go to. So our task that we believed God had given us as a team, was to help people **die with dignity, & to die knowing they were loved**. At its peak, we had recruited & trained about **200 community volunteers**, people who were neighbours, siblings, uncles & aunties, and they were ministering in their own communities & neighbourhoods with those who had AIDS & those who were dying, feeding them, bathing them, giving them pain relief & simple medicines, & praying with them, and with their families, & teaching the families how to care for their loved ones **with out-being afraid or with-out throwing them out onto the street** or onto a hospital doorstep to die alone - which is what used to happen sometimes before we started this programme. And the thing our volunteers learned & clung onto was that every person was made in the image of God - including those who were dying of AIDS. **EVERY human life is precious, sacred, & carries the divine image.**

**We forget what a radical, incredibly powerful concept** this is that we are each made in the image of God. One of my roles was that I used to lead a **weekly Bible study** with our Khmer co-workers - some of whom were Christian, some of whom were Buddhist. And I remember very clearly the first time we read Gen 1:27 together in that room, & the **stunned looks of disbelief** on everybody's face. And one young woman - an articulate, intelligent young woman who was a midwife, shaking her head & saying "but I was taught that only men had souls, & not women" (the animistic pop-Buddhism as taught in Cambodia).

And that was when I realised just what dynamite this verse was, & how powerful this concept of us being God's image bearers really was if you'd never encountered it before. My task working with our Cambodian staff was to remind them over & over that **they were known, that they were loved, &**

**that they were called.** Called to serve this God in who's image they were so beautifully made, and called to serve those around them, no matter how poor or sick or disabled, who were also image-bearers.

Our self-image is of crucial, crucial importance. Because you see, **who we see our selves as, shapes how we act.** If we see ourselves as inferior, we act inferior. If we see ourselves as scum, we will act like scum. If we see ourselves as a victim, we will act like a victim, If we see ourselves as a loser, we act like a loser. **BUT if we see ourselves as someone made in God's image** - capable of love, capable of being beautiful, capable of being creative, capable of being a healer - we will act that way. And if we start to see ourselves as an **overcomer**, someone who can & will fight their way through struggles, against the odds & never give in, we will act like an overcomer.

This is so vital for each of us, & its vital when we are working with people who feel inferior & like they are at the bottom of the heap, people who have been broken and knocked around. Whether that be in the Servants Health Centre, or the prison in Milton, or the school we teach at, or **where ever God has placed us.** In every place, it is **our task to remind people, & to treat them with the kind of respect & dignity** that reminds them that they are made in the image of God.

This issue of identity, and what we understand our identity to be, undergirds our sense of personal strength or resilience in life. This week **Waldir** reminded me that at least 3 of the women he interviewed while preparing his Ruth series, and talking about **dislocation & relocation**, referred to this **struggle for identity.** And last Sunday **Kanako** touched on all this in a very powerful & profound way when she said that God had given her the strength to re-forge her sense of identity here in NZ because “**God gave me the power to be strange**” and she was OK with that, because she knew that who she really is, lies deeper than that.

We've just read that very beautiful Psalm, Psalm 139 - again, one we are probably way too familiar with for our own good - that reminds us that **none of us are an accident; that none of us are forgotten; and that none of us**

**is God-forsaken.** In Buddhist thinking, the forces of the **cosmos** just roll on & on, pushed forward by the inscrutable forces of **karma**. There is nothing personal or loving about it. And of course, from a solely **scientific** perspective, the forces of nature just keep rolling on, in a totally **indifferent and impersonal** way too. But from a Judeo-Christian perspective, something **very personal & very** beautiful has happened in **the creation of each one of us**, which is this picture of God hovering over, **mindful of** and individually knowing & creating each one of us; of God very tenderly and lovingly **knitting, weaving** our very **cells** together in our mothers womb. And if you ever watch any of those amazing time-lapse videos or Computer Generated re-creations of us growing through the 9 months of pregnancy, it is stunning, & so miraculous. We begin as this one single cell, the fertilised egg, & that divides into two, then four, & on & on it builds, all the time shaping & moulding into this beautiful baby, & right from the start, **that one single original cell** containing **all** the genetic material ever needed for that human being for the whole of their life span.

A wee while back I watched a **TED talk** on you tube by a scientist - who is Associate Professor of Medicine & **Chief of Scientific Visualisation** at the Yale University Dept of medicine; & on the TED talk he told us that he was a **mathematician** tasked with writing the algorithms for highly sophisticated scanning & magnification technology being used by both Yale & NASA to look at the human body with incredible magnification down to the cellular level. And he talked about just one example of that - **collagen**. Now collagen as you probably know is the structure that forms all our tissues - our skin, hair, bones, fingernails & so on - & he said - under this incredible degree of magnification collagen looks like a very intricate **twirled rope-like structure**. Except in the **cornea** of the eyes - were collagen instead forms a grid like structure = transparency. This awestruck scientist did use the word miracle to describe that, & that looking at the workings of the human body left him with this overwhelming sense of **divinity** - & not just in collagen, but in every system that they looked at. There are something like **37.2 trillion cells** in the human body once fully formed - & **God knows every single one** of them intimately, from the inside out, from the mitochondria to the exact sequence of every one of our chromosomes; just as God knows every hair on our heads.

**Einstein** said there are two ways of looking at life: either as if nothing is a miracle; or as if everything is a miracle. And I, like that scientist on you-tube & like the Psalmist, believe **this** is a miracle. For too much of church history, Christians & theologians have **looked down on the human body** in a very negative way, as simply the carcass that houses our soul. Well I don't think that's right, & don't think its a right reading of Scripture, because Biblically there is no hard & fast separation between our souls & our bodies. Our life force is actually in our **blood** according to Scripture. Our bodies are beautiful & spiritual, & God is redeeming them & will glorify them at the resurrection.

The other thing we learn from **Psalm 139** is that **God's knowledge of our minds & our character is complete**. God knows us better than we know ourselves - all those times we do & say things & wonder where they come from, all those **hidden motivations**, all those unconscious **defence mechanisms**, all those **wounds** that have not yet been healed, all the **baggage** that's not yet been dealt with, all the **gifts & potential** that hasn't yet been realised - God knows, because God knit us together in our mother's womb. We can never **lie** to God, or **deceive** God, because obviously that would be ridiculous - before a word is even on our tongue, God knows it. And because God is omnipresent, nor is there any where we can **hide** from God, or go to to get away from God, because there is no where that God is not. And this is one of the meanings of the story back in **Genesis 2**, when humanity represented by **Adam & Eve** are in right relationship with God & with each other, we read that they are able to be **naked & without shame**. When we are right relationship with God & each other we don't need to hide, or lie, or deceive - we can be **transparent** & we can be totally **real** & totally **honest**, warts & all. Real agape love is when you know the worst someone is capable of, but you still accept them & you still love them, and you are willing to work with them for change & growth - & that's what God does with each one of us. But when we are not in right relationship with God, & when we are not in right relationship with each other, & when we are not in right relationship with our selves - we want to cover up, & we want to hide, & we are ashamed - which is something **Bruce Geddes** referred to a few weeks back when he was talking about the work they do at Elijah house.

In verse 11 & 12, the Psalmist tells us that even darkness is not darkness to God. Even when we feel like we are in a place of great darkness, & confusion & chaos or sadness, **it's not dark to God**, he sees through it as clearly as daylight. He sees the light at the end of the tunnel, he sees the way out. And Jesus, who is light, has promised to never leave us or forsake us in those times.

This idea of **God's foreknowledge & calling of each of us** is everywhere in the Bible. We see it in the life of **David**, who God chose & selected through the prophet Samuel, when he was just a boy; in **Samuel** himself, when he was conceived. We see it in the prophet **Jeremiah**, to whom God says "*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations*"; we see it in the New Testament with person after person that **Jesus encountered** & he seemed to know all about them - **Nathaniel** who he says "*I saw you when you sitting under that fig tree, before Philip even called you*"; we see it in Jesus' interactions with the **Samaritan woman in John 4**, when he knows about the five broken relationships she has been through, & the messed up relationship she is in now, & in that instant **she too realises that she is known, she is loved, she is called** - & she helps spark a revival in that village. As Paul Trebilco reminded us last week, **Jesus has a special place** in his plan & his stories **for the broken & the forgotten** of this world - in this case, for the so-called despised Samaritans.

This idea of **God's foreknowledge** of each of us is picked up in the New Testament by the Apostle Paul, and this was a really important idea for him. In **Galatians 1:15-16** for example, he says "*God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Nations*".

In that amazing eighth chapter of Romans from verse 28 on, Paul goes on to say:

**Romans 8:28-30 (NIVUK)**

28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. 29 **For those God foreknew** he also predestined to be conformed **to the image of his Son**, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

Now I don't want to get into a big discussion here about **predestination**, except to let you know that I'm a huge believer in free-will, & I'm convinced that free-will is part of **the dignity and the responsibility** that God has given to every one of us - and to much of the rest of his creation as well actually. And if we had a couple of hours up our sleeves we could explore what Jesus meant back in **Matthew 22:14** when he said "*many are invited, but few are chosen*" and that interaction between God initiating and us responding. But we don't, so that'll have to wait for another day. But what I do want to draw out from this passage from Paul is this: *Those God foreknows, God calls & when we respond, God cleanses and God justifies and God forgives*. And those God calls, he sets aside for special things, and **to become something special**. And above all, God calls us to become & places us onto a path of **transformation** - so that we will become more and more like Jesus. This passage says those God has known and has called, he is going to glorify, and I can't think of anything more glorious than that he is changing us & that he is going to make us more like Jesus. Our task: **to let him, & to cooperate, & to actually follow Jesus & his teachings**. And this path will also include **suffering** & doing things that are hard, & that's when many of us balk. But anything that is worthwhile in life will include **hardship** & will include suffering.

Lets drop down a few verses later in this beautiful passage from **Romans 8** - down to verses **35-39**. Paul continues -

*35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? 36 As it is written: 'For your sake we face death all day long;  
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.'*

*37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39 neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Paul is convinced, totally convinced that **God knows us, that God loves us, and that God has called us**. And because of that, **God will use everything**, every circumstance in our lives - even the worst, the most painful & the most fearful - for our good & for our growth, & to shape as we learn to follow Jesus.

We see this in the Apostle Paul's own life - Paul who said *to live is Christ, to die is gain, Paul who said God give me sufficient courage to so that - whether by life or death - Christ will be exalted in me! (Philippians 1:20-21)*;

And we too can have this kind of **courage** to seek out, & to step out , & to fulfil whatever God asks us to do - if - we have this foundation, this awareness, this certainty - **that God knows us, that God loves us, and that God has called us**.

And I want to say to you now, **If you have a sense of call on your life**, our job here as leaders (Nancy, Waldir, the elders) is to see you released & empowered into that calling - so if you have that sense, & your struggling to break through into it, or something is holding you back - please come & talk with us, please come & pray with us.

Let's pray