

SERMON: 12 August 2018 – Mrs Sarah Finegan

“The Image of God”

(Genesis 1: 26-27; Matthew 25)

Becoming a parent does some crazy things to a person (maybe you are going through it now, or watching someone else). It's a shock to your current operating system. At one point in your life, your underwear drawer did not have random pieces of Lego. At one point, if you wanted to leave the house you just opened the door and left and didn't have 10-20 minutes of negotiating objects that had to come; you chose your clothes because you wanted to wear them, rather than they were the only ones without baby sick on them; breakfast used to be eaten in peace - hah. You know what I mean. It's like stepping into a tardis of craziness you can only see from the inside and it's not always fun. It's hard work. At one point you could shut your front door on the needs of others and now the needs are there 24/7.

That all sounds fairly negative and it would be if that was all it was like, but as we have the needs of another constantly before us like no other point thus far, we experience this HOLY stretching of our capacity to love. Every day we face choices; do we in this moment protect, encourage, shout, clothe, discipline, manipulate, demand, perfect, influence, control, empathise, nourish, neglect, be present, compassion, ignore, understand, listen? It's like the child comes to be your mirror and show you just what you are really like. On our good days we wouldn't mind but, when we're tired, at the end of our rope of patience, they show us what we sometimes don't want to see. They expose our imperfections. We might sneak into their rooms at night and apologise as they lie there, as we recognise their frailty and smallness. In that moment (when we are not demanded by them) we can be reminded of our deepest longings of goodness towards them and we get a clarity of what kind of a person we wish we could be for them. It doesn't have to be a child, anyone we love deeply can be this reflection to us. Any human can be our mirror or our reflection.

There is a metaphor in the Jewish and the Christian scriptures that speaks of a creator who made humanity in his IMAGE or his reflection. It was first recorded in the creation story or poem. Notice I did not say science book. The writer of Genesis was not recording the scientific exposés of the beginnings of humanity. That was never their intention. The writer instead was trying to communicate the deep mystery that there is something intrinsically divine in humanity and it was best expressed in a poem; in a metaphor. They said humanity is the very image,

reflection, impression, likeness of God. Imagine a fingerprint - humanity is not the finger but the impression and pattern of the divine

This is our original calling and purpose. A fleshy, beating heart impression of the living God. That's why we'd better make sure we go on a journey to understanding God in his truest deepest nature, otherwise we could be reflecting all kinds of rubbish. We must reflect love itself.

There are moments in life when we are awakened to the divine imprint on humanity. I had a moment like that a few months ago when someone very precious to me looked right inside me. A picture says more than 1000 words... Just take a few moments and let this picture do something to you... *(picture displayed of baby Abbie)*.

She has an incredible gift. When she looks at you she stares deep down inside you with such openness, acceptance and interest. When she looks at you it's like she is looking at the first human being she has ever seen. She takes you all in and she has an incredible peace in her eyes and such a stillness in her body. When she looks at me I feel inside what it must be like to be gazed at by something other-worldly, something divine. She preaches with her eyes the image of God right back at me. She reminds me that there is something precious about humanity that I have forgotten and I need to wake up. Abbie held up a mirror to me that day that reflected divine presence.

Why is it that little children can do that to us? Is it because there is no offence between us? There is no shame, no expectations, no demands made of us, no second guessing each other, no judgement, just a gaze. They are disarming. Think about how hard it is to look intently into the eyes of someone you know, even a close friend, a colleague, a lover. There are all sorts of motives, concerns, words floating around that make the gaze uncomfortable or even just fleeting. Or think about trying to look into the eyes of someone who has hurt you. It's hard to meet their gaze. We actively look away. We very seldom get moments to take in just what a wonderful mystery it is to behold another human being and their intrinsic value.

Awareness of this divine imprint on humanity is something Jesus wanted us to wake up to. He lived it out as a perfect reflection and expression of God. He even said, "if you have seen me you have seen my father also". He was living like a mirror to God.

Jesus once told a story about the Sheep and the Goats that we read this morning. The gospel writer includes this story in a group of stories all about the end times. This story in particular has been often be interpreted in isolation to the surrounding

text and has been taken literally and only to explain what God will do in the end. The trouble with reading the story in isolation from its context misses what Jesus was really trying to do here. Jesus actually was telling 3 different stories about what would happen in the end. Therefore, it follows that we cannot use these stories literally. That was never the gospel writer's intention. He was employing a literary tool to punch at something.

You have also got to know 2 other things about Jesus and the way he taught. 1) He was a radical! and 2) most often he was found critiquing his own religion. He would often tell stories that had one particular shock in them. If you look for the shock factor you often find what Jesus was actually meaning or punching at. Here the Jewish audience would not have been shocked by the God on a throne dividing people up into righteous and unrighteous (*read the end of Isaiah*). What would have shocked the listeners was 1) **where God was** and 2) what that meant about **who was righteous**. What a surprise then to discover God had got off the throne and had chosen to identify with the most vulnerable, the poor, the ritually unclean, the unlawful. What a shock that all the work they had put into being ritually clean by avoiding such people and law keeping, placed them on the other side of a padlocked door they had been reserving for everyone else. Jesus was messing with them, Jesus was pulling the rug from under their feet.

Yes this story is shocking – it's shocking even to us today and its punchy and it's uncomfortable and if you haven't felt the punch of this story then you have missed the point. So often religious communities have very neat lines drawn about who is in and who is out and who is good and who is bad, who God is pleased with and who he isn't pleased with. And, quite frankly, that is bad religion. Jesus is inviting us to a deeper awareness of our deepest calling in God. To recognise that his creation is marked with his divine imprint and in some mysterious way is even more potent when his creation is suffering. And if we don't go to the vulnerable, if we don't associate with the social outcast we will miss God, we will miss encounters with him, we will not serve him. And what a shame that would be. Do you need Jesus to mess with your religion?

Let us waken up to see that God cannot be loved separately on some heavenly throne somewhere else. The deepest expression of love to God is how we love humanity, our neighbours, strangers, people in poverty, and our enemies. If the global church wakes up to this priority, the church may have a basis and reputation to be worthy of listening to. Until then, our worship is lacking and, in extreme cases, is hypocrisy. Jesus told the story and it has been recorded so we can at least wake up

to see IT'S THE VERY ACT OF LOVING OUR FELLOW HUMAN BEINGS THAT IS THE TRUE FULFILLMENT OF THE FIRST COMMANDMENT, which is to love God.

You were made in love, you were created for love and when you act in love – you are true to your deepest identity. You are a [mirror](#) to God.

I just want to mentioning three areas this could be transformational in -

Parenting

It would transform the value that we place on parenting. It's one of our deepest callings in God to love a child. When has anyone entered your world so vulnerable, naked, hungry, thirsty and helpless than a new born baby. Perhaps this is why we can truly see God in the face of Abbie, Mia, Miles...

We don't need to feel there is MORE we should be doing other than parent these small people. It is all-consuming and it's precious. They are one of the main works of our lives, they are the very expression of our worship and it is costly but we encounter in a radical way, like no other time before in our lives, what life is all about – it's all about living for the good of another and it's the truest form of love. It's a holy stretching to love more.

A big thank you to all you lovely parents here today – you are worshipping God and you might not have known it. You have hosted God in your home and may have been unaware.

Church in community

If we took this story of Jesus seriously it would radically transform what it means to be a worshipping community. We might be less concerned with what happened in a worship service and more concerned with have we fed everyone who is hungry in our village, have we clothed adults and children who can't buy clothes, are we helping families struggling with debt, have we visited the people in our own community who are in prison. Not serving the people who believe the same thing as us, but serving people because we believe they are made of the same stuff as us – they are made in the image of God.

With this new clarity we might get rid of hypocrisy in the church.

Politics

It's no new thing that politics is concerned with money, power and status. It serves the big people at the top and ignores the little people on the ground. And we have

put up with accepting that this is just how it is. What a shame. What if we could transform politics to live up to its truest calling to govern 'the people' well or let's just say, for the sake of today, to govern the 'image of God' well. What if policies became so concerned with the little people on the ground, that the immigrant was given land, the homeless given a home and policies that actually worked to lift people out of poverty we created.

What if Jesus took a seat in the Scottish Parliament in the form of you?

What if you became a radical like Jesus and defied your cultural norms to critique society. (*Read the story of Elin Ersson, a 20 year old protestor from Sweden. She managed to prevent a forced deportation, by the Swedish immigration forces, of a 52 year-old man to Afghanistan.*)

What if money was not the focus but love of humanity was?

As Bishop Michael Curry said, at the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, "If love was the way, the whole earth could be a sanctuary".

Let me finish:

You were made in love by love itself, you were created for love and when you act in love - you are true to your deepest identity.

You are a mirror to LOVE

You are a mirror to God

You are the image of God.

Amen