



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 3rd October 2021

Readings: Psalm 8.1-2; Hebrews 1.1-4 and 2.5-12; Mark 10.2-16

Life's big questions never seem to be far away. Books, radio programmes and house group material try to tackle them. Conversations in the bar and at dinner tables often get down to them. Lying awake at night, tramping through the Cairngorms, trudging the tow path of the Cam, they can percolate our thinking.

- Some of these big questions occur to us as we contemplate what we've seen on the news, and confront the harsh reality of our inhumanity to each other, or of natural disasters. 'Why?', we murmur.
- Life's big questions might stop us in our tracks when we grapple with more personal difficulties, errors, or crises, and find ourselves wondering how to navigate choppy waters, or weather unavoidable storms.
- Others taunt us having read weighty tomes, and wonder what it's all about:
- The years at university are almost definitively full of big questions – as we study our chosen subject at deeper and deeper levels, and at the same time
- discover who we are in heart and mind and body.
- Yet others come to us as we stand in front of the mirror, hairbrush, make up or razor in hand, and echo the ancient Psalm: 'what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?' Psalm 8.4 Or, as the singers just put it: 'Why do you care? Why love humanity? And why keep every mortal name fixed in your memory?'

In fact, as I have prepared this week, *that* question from Psalm 8 struck me as key to so many of the others. Might it be that asking who we are, and why we are loved, is an essential building block of understanding life?

- Have your breath taken away by a sunrise or a newborn baby,
- watch news of an earthquake wreaking horrifying havoc,
- endure a grim phase of one's own life,
- marvel at some philosophical revelation or scientific discovery,
- stand at the threshold of one's career,
- approach the sharp corner we call death,

and a form of this question can so easily rise to the surface: 'what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?'

Let me share with you four ideas that have emerged for me from today's readings.

First, God cares for humanity because God is God. Stare in amazement at the stars, and if we are like the Psalmist, or a small child, we will be caught up in wonder. They are 'the work of God's fingers' – it's a striking image of the 'hands on nature of creation'. (Goldingay 158) In the expansive poetry of the book Genesis, even God is amazed at creation! 'And God saw that it was good'. So it is that in Christian thought, we best understand why humanity matters as we understand that the One who creates cherishes what has been created. It's not an accident, but designed. It's not abandoned but sustained.

But not only so. Secondly, God cares for humanity because it bears God's image. Being made in God's image is not a perfection thing. I am struck by the point which one of you made to me several years ago, that at creation God is not depicted as observing that creation was perfect, but that it was good. Good doesn't mean flawless. And how flawed humanity is! So God shows the nature of divine love by mending what is

broken. That is the work of Christ. That is the power of the cross. That is why, in all our self-will and imperfection, we can turn back to the God we see in Jesus Christ and know ourselves forgiven. Such is the nature and the measure of God's care. To borrow the ever-so human concepts of Hebrews, we are God's children, sisters, and brothers of Jesus.

Thirdly, to ask what humanity is and why God is mindful of us, implies something about relationship. Being put right with God is to be in relationship with God, and to be equipped for relationship with each other. I don't want to speak today about divorce; that is another sermon in its own right. Moreover, I am aware of some divorces that were the only conceivable way forward and of others that were precipitate and impatient. By the same token, I know of some marriages that were obviously made in heaven and others that demonstrably were not. So, no, I speak here not of divorce, but of what makes for a good relationship. The Psalmist's take is that God's relationship to what God has made – and not least to humanity - is defined both by what God thinks and what God does. The Psalmist discerns that God both thinks about humanity and acts for humanity; God is mindful of us and cares for us. It's a sort of walking the walk as well as talking the talk thing. And if that is how God is in relationship with us, are we not urged to find there a model of how our interpersonal relationships flourish? - that we were made for and thrive in relationships of tender thoughts and careful actions. Relationships of integrity and honesty, of fidelity and forgiveness, of self-control and of that self-care which is actually a crucial element of caring for one's partner.

Fourthly, if being made in God's image is not a perfection thing, nor is it a status thing either. It's not about being better than, superior to every other aspect of creation. It's about being partners with God in stewarding creation. Shepherds rather than monarchs – if God's kingship is expressed by shepherding, how much should ours be? If that is true of The only proper way to exercise our role stewarding creation is to start with worship. It's why we began with so fine a hymn of praise this morning. We do not come to church to assert anything about ourselves, but to give God the glory that God alone deserves. And in the strange economy of faith, giving God the glory for who God is has an almost irresistible consequence, that then give creation the place that it warrants and God's gift to us. That's why, to exercise the power with which God has undoubtedly endowed us, even if we exercise it as self-sacrificing servants, without that emerging out of our worshipping God is to risk misusing our place, misunderstanding our status, and over-estimating the significance of our efforts.

Such an appreciation of how God regards humanity can at once both seal our sense that we matter and have dignity, and highlight our vocation to love God with all we are, and our neighbour as ourselves. Moreover, this is not an archaic idea that should be consigned to history. This is the Christian faith's answer to the question, 'what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?' As one writer has it, 'What God intended humanity to be God still intends humanity to be.' (John Goldingay 161) And just as Jesus' ministry was to point us to God, so ours is to point people to Jesus that all may marvel in a spirit of worshipful thanksgiving: 'what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?'

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