

Christmas Eve 2012 Tarago

A sermon by Tom Frame (23/12/12)

In addition to this being Christmas Eve, it is a special night for James Humphries. He is being baptised and welcomed into the family of God. If you are well acquainted with the Bible you will know that James has human origins & divine beginnings. Let me explain this briefly. There are certain things in James, such as abilities & aptitudes, that have been acquired biologically from his parents & there are certain things he will absorb from the environments in which he develops and grows, particularly over the next two decades. But neither biology nor sociology, or nature and nurture as they are sometimes called, will account for all that does and certainly not all that he is. I want to suggest to you that if we are made in God's image, we also need to know about that God to understand something of ourselves.

The Biblical writers consistently maintain that human beings are unique in God's creation. Furthermore, because there is a distinct divine intention in every creative act, each human being bears the imprint of the Creator. As God is understood to be infinite and transcendent, his creative acts result in endless imprints. In Psalm 139, which is attributed to David, the greatest of the ancient kings of Israel, who says: "O Lord, it was you who formed my inward inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed".

While nature and nurture undoubtedly have some influence, each human person reflects the purpose of the Creator. The notion that God is present and actively involved in each creative act is encountered in both the Old and New Testaments, and implies a two-sided view - temporal and divine – of human origin.

There is the visible, natural side of creation which occurs in the womb. It is a physical realm which is known and can be understood. There is also a divine dimension in which God 'sees' and 'knows' the individual in a highly personal way within a spiritual realm. Apart from the obvious

empirical *beginning* of life in the womb, the Psalmist points to an *origin* which involves the thought, will and creative power of God.

The distinction drawn between beginning and origin is deliberate and important. Jeremiah's prophecy contains a similar sentiment: 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you' (1:5). The book of Job acknowledges that God's 'hands shaped me and made me' and he implores God not to bring him low by reminding God that 'you moulded me like clay'. Conversely, the prophet Isaiah calls the nation Israel to religious fidelity by reminding them that it was God 'who made you, who formed you in the womb, and who will help you' (44:2).

These, and similar passages, assist in developing an appreciation of human difference and serve as the basis on which God forms a special and unique relationship with every human being. All of this highlights not only something of the personal character of the relationship which the Creator longs to have with the creature but that each relationship recognises the place of God in the origins of the individual and their uniqueness. So it is crucial as James forms an identity of his own, that he not be denied access to, or be distracted from, exploring the place of God in understanding what he was made to be, and to do. So I implore his parents, grandparents and godparents, to engage in frequent God-talk so that God is not an alien being or God's grace an obscure subject. And the spiritual meaning and significance of this Christmas season is a good place to start if we are to prepare rightly for God's coming anew into our world and afresh in our hearts.

At Christmas time, we think about the infant Jesus and do not fear, nor are we scared. Neither was Mary afraid after she had been told by an angel that she would give birth to the saviour of the world. But we need to be still, to watch and to wait. To look at what we believe and ask why? To consider those things we want but don't dare ask, and ask why not? Later in this service, God will come to us in the bread and the wine. When you eat and drink at this table and recall that the infant Jesus would become the crucified Christ, open yourself for the unexpected and the unimaginable. We never ask for too much, we accept too little. This Christmas, seek the gift that no money can buy - the presence of God in the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.