

Epiphany 3 2012 Evensong                      Jesus College Chapel

What is a human being?            [Gender, sexuality, tolerance]

Readings: Psalm 8; Genesis 1.26 – 2.2; Mt 22.23 – 33

‘All knowledge, all information between human beings can only be exchanged within a play of tolerance. And that is true whether the exchange is in science, or in literature, or in religion, or in politics, or even in any form of thought that aspires to dogma.’ That’s a quote from a remarkable book entitled ‘The Ascent of Man’ by Jacob Bronowski. In the early 1970s Bronowski presented what many people reckon the best series of TV programmes the BBC has ever made. He traced the cultural evolution of human beings over the past million or so years; and the book reproduces verbatim what he said in his talks. The fascinating series is now available on DVD.

Bronowski traces the gradual evolution of human knowledge and human skills since our first recognisably human ancestor being emerged roughly a million years ago. It’s a process that’s far from ended. Far from complete too is the growing knowledge that we human beings have acquired about ourselves. While we now know a great deal, what we know has to be ‘exchanged within a play of tolerance.’ That means there is always a certain uncertainty about what we know; and what we think we know is always open to modification as further discoveries are made.

That's as true of religion as of science, or literature, or politics. We like to think that religion is stable, even unchanging. Christians believe that God has made himself known in the history of Israel; and the Jewish scriptures, the Christian Old Testament, witness to that self-revelation. God, we believe, has made himself fully and finally known in Jesus Christ; and to that the New Testament, the Christian scriptures, bear witness.

So we might think that the answer to the question, 'What is a human being?' is clear and final. 'God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.' Genesis tells us that humankind comes in two genders. Each has appropriate sexual characteristics, designed to ensure the perpetuation of the human race. Psalm 8 reinforces what Genesis says: human beings are only a little lower than God (or is it the angels?). We're crowned with glory and honour, we have dominion over the rest of creation.

Two genders, two sexes, created for mating and procreating. It sounds simple enough. But notice that Psalm 8 asks a question: what are human beings that you are mindful of them? It doesn't fully answer the question. Nor can we, except within a degree of tolerance. For modern advances in knowledge about ourselves suggest a less than simple, a more complex answer, than Genesis gives. Male and female, yes. But what about masculinity and femininity? They don't totally coincide with male and female. They're rather more on a spectrum. One man can

be almost completely masculine; another can have a strong streak of femininity. One woman can be rather masculine; another can be almost completely feminine. There's still further tolerance: a few human beings with male bodies feel themselves to be females, a few with female bodies feel themselves to be males.

There's a similar degree of tolerance about sexuality. Most men are attracted sexually to women, and most women to men. But some men are attracted sexually to other men, some women to other women. That's not by their own choice, it's simply the way they've been created – created by nature, and so, since nature is God's creation, in the final analysis created as like that by God.

Psalm 8 was wise in leaving the question open: what is a human being? Modern knowledge hasn't in the least changed the fundamental answer given by the Jewish and Christian tradition. We're created in the image and likeness of God, only a little lower than God, capable of sharing in divine creativity, and, apparently alone among the creatures, capable of understanding ourselves. But that fundamental understanding of humankind is within a certain tolerance. Men attracted to men, women attracted to women, are no less in the image and likeness of God: God who is of course without gender and without sex, even if we traditionally use 'he' and 'him' of God, and say that the Father begets his only-begotten Son.

Our understanding of human beings and human nature has evolved, just as we ourselves have evolved. Those are matters of fact, and they are facts which enlarge our understanding of God's creation. St Paul was clear that God makes himself known not only in history, but also through the created universe. He wrote to the Christians in Rome: 'Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made' (Romans 1.20). The 'world' in Paul's time seemed vastly smaller than the unimaginable vastness of the universe we now know creation to be. It's an expanding universe, a developing universe. Within it, planet earth is an infinitesimal speck; it too is developing, and so is the human life that has evolved on it. Through the ability God has given us to investigate and discover, to ask questions and answer them – within a degree of tolerance – our understanding of creation and of ourselves is developing. Our concepts of gender and sexuality, of male and female, of masculinity and femininity, aren't the same as those held by our more or even less distant ancestors. Our answers to the question, 'What is a human being?' are more nuanced, less cut and dried, than the answers they gave.

Christian religious institutions, and not a few Christians, are reluctant to accept such changes. They hold on to traditional cut-and-dried concepts. But our understanding of gender and sexuality, of what it means to be men and women, is changing. That shouldn't dismay us Christians. For

one thing, Jesus says in this evening's second reading that gender is provisional: in heaven there's no marriage, we shall all be like the angels, who traditionally are androgynous. More seriously, Jesus also tells us that the Spirit of God will lead us into all truth. That promise suggests we shall grow in our understanding of truth; and truth must surely include whatever is found to be the case in a universe created and sustained by God. In time churches do come to acknowledge the facts. Most Christians now accept that Galileo was right: the earth does move round the sun and not the other way round. Gender and sexuality are another Galileo situation for the churches. Both are more complex than we used to think. In time the churches will almost certainly come to accept the facts; many people, among them many Christians, already have. That's of vital human importance for the small proportion of men and women attracted to others of the same gender. It means they would be free, like the rest of humankind, to find the love and support we all need in recognised and accepted stable and loving relationships. They differ from traditional relationships; and some thirty five years ago, Christian critics of same-sex relationships invented a slogan: God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve. But enough people already do live in such relationships to make it clear that the love of man for man and woman for woman, equally created in the image of God, is just as able to reflect the love of God as the love of Adam and Eve. And living God's love is what being human is all about.

*If anyone has thoughts or questions they'd like to raise, Fr Hugh would be glad to hear them. He welcomes comments and debate. Do email him on [hugh.wybrew@queens.ox.ac.uk](mailto:hugh.wybrew@queens.ox.ac.uk).*