

# Sermon Series: Imago Dei



## #1 Where do we come from – Genesis 1-2

It wasn't just capacity crowds missing from our summer of cricket this year, it was the thought that we may **never see** the English "barmy army" back in the stands of the MCG singing "**Where do we come from?**"

That's the title I've given this first sermon in the new series, "**Where do we come from?**" I chose this, not because of my love for English tourists, but because many today are asking **existential questions** about humanity.

I read a parent's tweet this week about having the "**birds and the bees**" talk with her primary school aged children. After explaining how babies are made, one of her children cried out, "Wait a minute, you have done *this* three times?"

Knowing **from whence you came** changes and shapes your understanding of who you are and how you relate to others around you. Think of the challenges we face each time Australia Day comes around. Learning how we have benefited as "settlers" by so greatly disadvantaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders makes us see ourselves differently, act differently. Knowing **from whence you came** shapes **who you are** and **what you do in life**.

[PAUSE]

Take a moment to think **what stories of human origins** were most influential upon your early childhood learning.

Whether you're fascinated by the creation stories of the **Zoroastrians** dating back to 2000BC or whether you think we all crawled from the **primordial soup** 4.0 billion years ago, one thing is for certain, every system of belief about humanity must address **the question** of our **origins – where did we come from**.<sup>1</sup>

Some start with the words, "In the beginning there was **nothing**..." Others start with the words, "In the beginning there was **something**..."

The Bible begins with the words: "In the beginning...**God**." (Genesis 1:1)

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<sup>1</sup> All of history's major philosophies and religions can be compared and judged on 4 common standards: origins, identity/purpose, ethics, and destiny

The beliefs we draw from the beginning of the Bible about humanity's origins influences **our** view of **self**, **our** view of **others**, and **our ethics** for life.<sup>2</sup> Let me share some examples from the first two chapters of Genesis today.

## Image-bearers

In Genesis 1:27 we read:

So [*adam*] was made in God's image, in the **image of God** [*adam*] was created; male and female God created them. (*my translation*)

The Bible tells us **we are God's image-bearers**. **Imago Dei** is Latin for "image of God," a concept common to Jews, Christians, and Muslims. **Traditionally**, Christians agree that **human beings** are distinctively made in the image of God among all that is around us.

The term "image of God" occurs **three times** in Genesis (1:26–27, 5:1–3, 9:1–7). This idea was already present in other ancient cultures. For example, some kings in the Ancient Near East used to install **statues of their likeness** throughout the lands to exercise dominion across their kingdoms.<sup>3</sup>

But we should ask **what**, in particular, **does being an image-bearer mean** in the Bible's intention. There are **many and varied opinions** across Christian history from dividing body and soul, to functional views, to our ability to think, and to our ability to procreate. Let me highlight some clues in Genesis 1 & 2.

### 1. We are **Equally Image-bearers**

Firstly, let's affirm that we are **equally God's image-bearers**.

In Genesis 1-3 the Hebrew word *adam* has two uses – it refers to **humanity**, as here in 1:26,27 and it refers to **"the man"** in chapters 2-3.

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<sup>2</sup> Zoroastrians, for example, believed on the basis of their origin stories that The purpose of life, according to Zoroastrianism, is to actively choose the good in thought, word and deed. Darwinians, on the other hand (not Darwin himself), would argue that survival of the fittest is the governing principle of life, with all its frightening implications for the weak. Although Charles Darwin did not write explicitly about the origin of life (and was criticized for it), he did mention a "warm little pond" in a letter to Joseph Dalton Hooker dated February 1, 1871

<sup>3</sup> Even some Babylonian creation stories at the time of Israel's exile regarded humans as a vague representation of gods (see Skinner's views)

You may be surprised to learn that **'adam is not used as the name** of the man in these creation stories until chapter 4 (vs. 25).<sup>4</sup> Sometimes those old picture books of the bible taught us things about humanity not actually present in the text.

But Hebrew has **no other common term** for humanity than *'adam*. Hebrew also only has masculine and feminine terms, no neuter terms, so, the choice of *'adam* (masculine) for "humanity" should not be used to argue for prioritizing males over females (another error we were often taught). Instead, Genesis 1 and 2 expresses **equality** of importance and responsibility for **both** male and female in God's creation of humanity.<sup>5</sup>

When we come to the **making of the woman** in Genesis 2:21-23<sup>6</sup> we see she is formed from the man's side (which is neither above nor below her). The writer uses the words *'isha* for the woman, and *'ish* for the man to indicate their **connectedness**, and their **differentiation** from one another.<sup>7</sup> And note the **ecstatic acclamation** of the man when he meets the woman. Here is the joyful discovery of the **same image-bearing likeness** in another who is yet different to him. In verse 23 he cries, (at last) "bone of my bone", "flesh of my flesh".<sup>8</sup>

[PAUSE]

What difference would you see in your life now if you affirmed the original intention of God that we are equally image-bearers?

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<sup>4</sup> Note that God addresses *'adam* (the man) regarding the tree of the fruit of knowledge in Gen. 2:16,17 and not Eve [*'havvah*] because in the chronology of the story she has not yet been made.

<sup>5</sup> The word *'adam* in Genesis 1 is "humanity" and in Gen. 2, before the making of the woman is described, it is "the man". Some argue by way of chronology for inferiority of the female, despite the acclamation of the man in Gen. 2:23, and with a doubtful interpretation of the apostle Paul to support their view.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis chapter 1 describes God as creator of the cosmos and all life, while chapter 2 zooms in on the creation of the man along with his home, his work and his companion. Literary doublets like this are present throughout Gen 1-11.

<sup>7</sup> In Genesis 2 there is a play on the Hebrew words in verse 7. The man *'adam* is formed from the dust of the ground *'adam-ah* (the feminine). There is a strong connection to and a differentiation from the earth. Because the feminine counterpart to *'adam* was already in use, the writer chooses *'ish* and *'isha* for the man and the woman in chapter 2 to show a strong connection to and a differentiation from the woman.

<sup>8</sup> Many books also teach us that verse 24 suggests that marriage is prioritised or even first created or mandated in relation to the image of God in us. But marriage is assumed in the Bible, not invented. And it's more likely that the reuniting of the flesh by God, separated earlier in the text (vs. 21) helped to affirm the place of marriage in ancient Hebrew communities. Gen. 2:18 describes the woman as a "helper corresponding to" the man, *'ezer kenegdo* in the Hebrew. Despite what we were often taught in church, there is no necessary sense of inferiority or subordination of the woman in this designation.

## 2. We are **Uniquely Relational**

A second feature in the text of Imago Dei in us in the Biblical creation narratives is that humans, among all of creation, are **uniquely relational**. Theologian Karl Barth was great expounder of this viewpoint. Barth pointed to both the **vertical relationship** between humanity and God and in the **horizontal relationship** between humans. And I would add that we are uniquely placed, in the Genesis texts, to relate to **all of creation**.

Note in verse 26 of Genesis 1:

Then God said, 'Let **us** make humankind [*'adam*] in **our** image, according to our likeness; and let **them** have dominion...'

The use of the plural "**our**", "**us**" and "**them**" are intriguing. In the light of New Testament revelation of God as Trinity Christians are given to see here the great importance of relationships: community within God (Father, Son, Holy Spirit), expressed in the creation itself in our capacity for relationships

Paul Gauguin's greatest work in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century is titled *Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?* It depicts relationships between people and God and creation from birth through to death in all great exotic variety. Gauguin said of this work, "I have finished a philosophical work on a theme comparable to that of the Gospel."

[PAUSE]

How much time do you put into relationships right now – with God, with others, with the creation around you?

## 3. We have **Dominion and Stewardship**

A third and most controversial aspect of Imago Dei in us according to Genesis is our likeness to God as **carers of the earth**.

In the text dominion and **stewardship** are explicitly linked to the image of God in us.<sup>9</sup> Notice too that such responsibility is **equally given** to male and female.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> neither gender division, relational capacity, marriage, or fruitfulness are linked directly to imago dei here.

<sup>10</sup> In Genesis 1 and 2 there is nothing to directly undermine the equality of the male and female.

The Hebrew verbs to rule (*kabash*) and to dominate (*radah*) is [in the ideal world of Gen. 1] is best illustrated by the way the man “**works and takes care of**” the Garden and names the animals. It is also inferred that humans are creative and should take care as we see God doing in Genesis, taking our part in the ongoing **activity of God in ordering and creating in the world and in civilization**.

I’m not much of a gardener. I’m happy with the heavy lifting, but I’m less interested in the soil quality, the tender nurture, the craft of pruning, or the fruitfulness of the plants. This makes me more representative of the ecological problems on earth, which alarms me and give me pause for thought.

[PAUSE]

If the image of God in us includes care for creation, consider the implications given that many Christians have interpreted “dominion” as licence to exploit the earth at great expense and damage.

## Conclusion

**Three keys** to knowing from whence we have come as humanity:

1. Our **Equality** in diversity
2. Our capacity for **relationships**
3. Our responsibility as **stewards**

**Where you come from** impacts who you are and what you do.

In the New Testament, the letter to the Hebrews remarkably describes Jesus Christ as the perfect representation of, the icon of, the image of God.

3 He [Jesus Christ] is the **reflection** of God’s glory and the **exact imprint** of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.

In the coming sermons we’ll explore what the bible says about how the image of God in us was tainted, and how the Gospel of Jesus leads us, not back to the Garden in Genesis, **but on** toward the **New Humanity** that is being newly created in and through Jesus Christ by His Spirit today. Join us on that journey of learning.

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