

Sermon Series: Unshakeable

Building our lives on the promises of God

#2 You bear the image of God- Genesis 1:26-27

Intro

The TV soap opera called *Neighbours* once rated highly here in Australia, moreso in England. Recently it was cancelled after 37 years. But 15 years ago, nearly got my big break on the show. I was promised a role. “Now,” I said to myself, “I will finally be **significant, important.**” My whole family sat down to watch my episode on TV. But all that was seen or heard of me was **my left elbow**. Everything else ended up on the cutting room floor! I was still a “nobody”, after all.

You are important!

Have *you* ever found yourself asking the question: “Am I **important?**” “Am I **significant?**” It’s a question common to all human beings.

Max Lucado writes:

“It’s easy to feel anything *but* important when the corporation sees you as a number, the boyfriend treats you like cattle, your ex takes all your energy, or old age takes your dignity...”

He goes on to say,

“When you struggle with that question [“Am I significant?”], remember this promise of God [in the bible]: you were created... **in God’s image**, for God’s glory.”

The Bible tells me where my significance comes from, and what it is.¹ In Genesis chapter 1 we read:

“Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature, so they can be responsible for the fish of the sea, the birds in the air, the cattle, and, yes, Earth itself, and every animal that moves on the face of Earth” (Genesis 1:26 THE MESSAGE)

¹ In fact, all three Abrahamic religions affirm this (Jews, Christians, Muslims).

God doesn't say: "Let us make mountains in our image" or "fish in our likeness". It's true, the Bible does affirm that the heavens reflect the glory of God, as in Psalm 8. And, according to Scripture all created things find their origins in God. But humankind is highlighted as especially **stamped** with the *imago dei*. And there are no exceptions - everyone, irrespective of gender, ethnicity, demographic, able-ness, status, wellness, education, or qualification, is at the outset declared as bearers of the "Imago Dei".

So here is the first and foundational promise of God inferred in the Scriptures in Genesis 1:26 – you are significant! God says so!

What does the bible mean by "image of God"?

What, then, does the Bible **mean** by "image of God"? What kind of **significance** and importance does that image point to?

- Genesis chapter 1, some say, suggests that humans are **iconic**.² The reference to "image" and "likeness" in Genesis 1 has produced much musing down the ages as to what they mean. To the ancient reader, such language would have been alike to many **monarchs** who placed statues of their own likeness in the regions over which they reigned. So too, then, humans spread around the globe symbolise God as rightful ruler over all creation. Our 'likeness' to God signifies God as **ruler**. This view of the image of God might be called a "representative" view.
- Some say the image of God in us is connected to being given "**dominion**" over the earth and its creatures. For example, Psalm 8 connects the dots this way, saying, "...you [God] have made [humans] a little lower than [the heavenly beings]... You have given them dominion over the works of your hands...". This view, we might say, suggests that image is a **functional** thing.

But isn't there something more relational, more personal, more "spiritually" significant about the **likeness** to God in humans? I think we can confidently say "yes" to that question. Even in the Old Testament, this idea is already present. For example, Genesis chapter 5, as if riffing off the creation narrative, says "After Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son in his **own likeness**, in his **own**

² In many scriptures often affirm how human beings are the product of God's imagination, not God fashioned in our own minds, the latter being true of many other religions.

image; and he named him Seth” (Gen 5:3) It was obvious to all that Seth bore the image and likeness of his parents. Surely it wasn’t Seth’s curly hair or left-handedness that is being referred to. Why not a reference here to traits and character and values too as we would when saying a child is very like their parent?

I found it interesting listening to mothers of young footballers, yesterday. Each was asked to speak of something that made them **proud of their son**. Do you think the moms talked about their son’s skills? About physique, or wealth, or successes? No, every mother highlighted a story of either faithfulness or trustworthiness or generosity or courage, or resilience.

You see, even though the Bible tells us that the image of God in us is **distorted**, but not obliterated, because of sin, we **still recognise** in people the likeness of God in everyday acts of kindness, courage, compassion and care.

Theologians have wrestled with various ideas of **what exactly** God’s image evident in us might be, e.g. our rational capabilities, our spiritual, our soulfulness, our moral capacities, our priestly potential, and our relational capacities. **No single view seems to nail it**. Some, on their own, even present problems.³ Instead, the Bible presents **complexity**, even **mystery** about the full details. Yet, the claim and promise of Genesis 1:26 is a strong foundation for your sense of **significance – you bear God’s image**.

The Gospel leads us to image restoration or re-creation

But wait! There’s more. Despite our sins, the New Testament tells us that God **lovingly gives us the Gospel** of Jesus. It speaks of God’s ultimate **image-restoration project**, put in place for all humankind. The Apostle Paul puts it this way, saying,

“[you believers] have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator” (Col. 3:10)

And Paul gave this promise on top of the promise of God to Christians, saying:

“[The one] who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:6).

³ E.g. the idea that our intellectual capacity compared to the animal kingdom is the key can lead to considering those with impaired rationality are somehow lesser image-bearers.

One of the moms in that same session yesterday, told a funny story about her son. As a young child he was obsessed with a certain AFL footballer. On picking up her son after the first day of kindergarten, she asked the teacher, “Where is my son [and she used his name]?” “We don’t have any child of that name,” said the teacher. For the whole first day, the boy had apparently **only answered to the name of his idol**, so the teachers went with it!

The Bible tells us that there *is* an **idol** who is appropriate for each of us, a **model example**. Jesus is the perfect example of the **image of God** present in all its fulness in a human being. Hebrews 1 speaks of Jesus of Nazareth as

“...the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of [God’s] being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So, [Jesus] became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.”

It’s **not** Jesus’ Jewishness we are being transformed to be like and to aspire to, **neither** is it Jesus’ male-ness, **nor** is it his role as teacher or ‘rabbi’. Instead, we are being re-made in the likeness of Jesus’ righteousness; that is, Jesus’ sacrificial love for humankind that leads to a harmonious relationship with God, with all people, and with the creation itself. It’s that “image” that God enables us to participate in, by grace.⁴ And it’s by the help of the Holy Spirit of God that we are becoming more and more like Jesus. The Apostle Paul clarifies this, saying...

“We [who believe] are being transformed into [Christ’s] image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18)

So, this first **promise** of God in the Bible is developed further – You [believers] are being **re-made in God’s image**; in the image of Christ.

Conclusion

Of course, it was **complete folly** for me to seek my importance and significance in fame and fortune on TV 15 years ago. If only had stood firm on the first promise in the Bible. I’m already significant! The bible, from the outset, invites

⁴ See 2 Peter 1:1-11

you and me to stand on this **fundamental declaration about human beings**: you and I are **made in the image of our Creator**. More than this, that image-bearing behoves us to point to what God is like in the way we live and serve and steward the creation God has made.

Even more than this, the Gospel of Jesus promises us that Christians are being re-made to be like Christ, and this image-restoration project, available to all by faith, will come to completion. This promise gives our lives **meaning** and **purpose** today.

Justine Toh, sociologist at the Public Centre for Christianity in NSW says Christians who believe this to be true make a big difference in their communities. She even references TV show *Neighbours*, saying, “Everyone needs good neighbours.” So, she says, communities need Christians as neighbours. She says,

“Research shows people who regularly attend church services are more likely to volunteer than people who say they are not religious, and to do more hours of volunteering... regular churchgoers give significantly more [money to charity] each year.”

Those who live out the likeness of Jesus’ unconditional love (respecting the image of God in every human) and serve sacrificially for the benefit of people and the planet, we will be living up to the promise and benefiting fully from it.

Let’s build our lives on this promise and help others to do the same. It will be good for our households, good for our communities, good for the planet, and especially good for those most in need in our world. We may even become known as those who bear the likeness of God.