

What is Man ?

Readings: Psalms, chapter 8; John, chapter 3, verses 1-8

Our society is obsessed with trying to find answers to every conceivable problem. In the process we very often forget that behind every answer lies a prior question. And if you ask the wrong question you are likely to come up with the wrong answer. I believe that there are a relatively small number of fundamental questions which must be asked and, if we get them right, the answers might make the world a better place to live in.

One of those fundamental questions was posed by the Psalmist. He asked; "what is man?" and he used the word in a generic sense. Man includes woman! It's a basic question about human nature.

All sorts of answers can be given. From a purely biological point of view it would be absolutely right to answer that man is 80% water. That is a scientific fact. And I take comfort from that. When I was a Chaplain at the Helicopter base in Yeovilton I was often called in to talk with the Commodore. He was an intimidating presence amongst the personnel on the base. The acres of gold braid on his uniform struck fear into them. But I took comfort in remembering that he too, was 80% water!! That puts human relationships into some kind of perspective and saves us from the temptation to idolise others and from the need to engage in nauseating flattery.

Other definitions have been given. Man is a tool-making animal. Man is a thinking animal. Man is simply a small cog in a vast machine. And, in these days of computer technology where programmes are written in a binary system of numbers it is held that man is no more than a number. A New York census enumerator once visited a lady and enquired as to the persons in her household. "Let's see" said the lady, "there is Bill and Fred and Teresa and Mabel" and the man from the census interrupted. "Never mind the names; just give me the numbers".

The Bible has another perspective. It comes from the earliest creation story in Genesis, chapter 2 where it says "The Lord God formed man from the dust of the earth and breathed into him the breath of life". That single sentence contains two profound insights into human nature.

1. Made from the dust of the ground. In other words man shares a nature in common with all other creatures. That Biblical insight is confirmed by science. Only the blinkered creationists today would deny that the theory of evolution (whatever the details) is a correct account of the development of the species. Like every other species we emerged over millions of years of evolutionary development. Man's kinship with the primates is unarguable. This is where we came from. We share a common inheritance and a common nature. There is something very earthy, something very animal in our make-up.

And if you want any further proof then just look at those pictures which came out of the Belsen concentration camp at the end of WW2. They were horrific. More recently, you remember the pictures which came out of Iraq which showed American troops humiliating their prisoners and the worst one of all was the picture of a woman soldier leading a prostrate and naked Iraqi across the floor, a dog lead around his neck. Other pictures showed a variety of other humiliations and there is only one word to describe them; - bestial. Simply saying that word reminds us of beasts. But it gets worse. No animal or beast could ever devise such brutal activity. These soldiers are worse than animals! And, if you think that only Americans could stoop to these depths and being British guarantees better then you had better think again. Accusations abound as to British brutality as well.

This is human nature; but it is the nature we have in common with the animals and the beasts of the earth. Lurking just below the surface of a sophisticated and so-called civilised man lie the instinctive drives to sex and self-preservation and power and it doesn't take much to remove the veneer and expose the beast below. Given the right circumstances man will revert to the animal nature from which he came. Belsen and Buchenwald proved that. So does a gaol in Bagdad.

2. But the Genesis text contains another truth. Man is more than an animal. He has the breath of God breathed into him. Or, in the words of the other creation story in Genesis, chapter 1, man is made in the image of God. This sets man apart. What other animal has the capacity to make moral distinctions and to separate right from wrong? What other animal has the freedom of choice and will to act on those distinctions? What other animal has the capacity for entering into fellowship and relationship with the Creator? Man alone has been endowed with a moral capacity and a spiritual potential way beyond that given to any other creature. This what makes him different.

The trouble is that man has fouled it up. We have deliberately failed to fulfil that potential and regressed. The image of God in man has been scarred and marred and distorted almost beyond recognition at times. We have used that instinctive will-to-power to play God and rejected the conditions in which our potential could be fully realised. The story of Adam (Hebrew for "man") in the Garden of Eden says it all. This is our failure. By our disobedience, by our egoistical self-centeredness, by our self-assertive will-to-power we have failed to become. And we have chosen to live out our lives at a basic animalistic level. A soldier dressed in camouflage kit in an Iraqi gaol is the worst example. But an equally brutal assertiveness is evidenced by men dressed in pin-stripe suits in boardrooms and Government; and by so-called football supporters following England away.

3. That's why we read the story of Nicodemus from St John's gospel. For Jesus offers this man the possibility of being "born again"; of becoming a different type of person; of fulfilling his calling and his potential as man. That potential is realised when we allow the Spirit of God to energise our whole life. And what was on offer to Nicodemus was actualised in Jesus. He was the "Spirit-filled man". His humanity is the proto-type for all humanity. The humanity of Jesus represents what all men are called to be and what all men can be. In Him our human nature has realised its full potential.

We ought not to be surprised at the horrific pictures of prisoners being treated like animals in Iraq. And the Iraqis did the same to their own. That's the way we are at bottom when you have scratched off the veneer of what passes for a civilised society. But, if I am not surprised, I am not satisfied either. It doesn't have to be this way. Another kind of humanity is possible. But it will not come via human DIY effort. It comes as gift from God. And, to take that gift, to receive the Holy Spirit, is to have the image of God in man fully restored. It is to become what we are meant to be. It is to become truly human, measured by the humanity of Christ.

"So lift us up, strong Son of God,
Restore your fallen race;
We who have lost your image shall
Regain it through your grace."