

Sermon
Saint Peter's
Ash Wednesday 2024
Text: Galatians 5.1
Title: The Dignity and Misery of Humanity

Today we begin our journey, from the season of Christmas – Epiphany, to the season of Lent.

By his life as a human being in fellowship with God, Jesus revealed the human destiny, of fellowship with God.

This is the basis of the dignity of each and every human being, regardless of wealth, influence or power.

No humiliation that befalls us, can extinguish that dignity.

And in the faces of the poor, the suffering, and the humble – who have nothing else in this world to command respect – in the face of the children on a World Vision card, or a television ad – there is a reflection of that dignity, that we do not have by merit, that we do not receive from others, that no one can take from us.

Revelation in Jesus Christ, the God-man, is the revelation of God. But it is also the revelation of man. The human race, the individual human being, whose nature is its destiny. And whose destiny bestows dignity. The dignity of the children (Rom 8:14-23) and the image of God (Gen).

Human dignity, the human destiny in the image of God is marred by sin. By human conduct, without human dignity, without due regard to the human dignity.

Here the image of God in human life is marred beyond anything that oppression, injustice, or poverty can do, however unworthy, unjust, and humiliating, however contrary to the divine destiny, these things do not alienate us from our divinely ordained destiny. We are alienated from that destiny, only by our conduct.

We can never completely escape our dignity, of course. When we turn away from it, it presents itself to us, as judgment upon our unworthy conduct. Only

here do we plumb the depth of the human plight. In which neither want, nor suffering, nor human frailty, nor death, but only in conduct, that fails to recognise our human destiny, do we make the Apostle's cry - 'O wretched man that I am: Who will deliver me from this body of death?' (Rom 7.24) – our own. So that misery is the lived experience of those who turn away from God; from the worship and service of God. Of all who have come to rob themselves, and others, of the human dignity, and the human destiny, of the image of God. That follows only from fellowship with God, in Jesus Christ.

We are at our most miserable when we are not even aware of our plight. When the goods of this world blind us to the reality of God. We become miserable in the midst of prosperity and affluence. We are miserable because we find life meaningless, empty, with no purpose.

The word 'misery' may be better than 'sin' as a description of the human experience of becoming lost, when we are far from God. It sums up what it feels to be separated from God, of human autonomy, its terrible consequences. Similarly the word 'alienation' captures both sides of the human experience; being both an action we can take, and a state we can find ourselves in. We can alienate ourselves from God and other people, and we can be in a state of alienation from God and others. In German the equivalent word is close to another word, which means 'a foreign country'. Because of our conduct, we are miserable, alienated, as if, in a foreign country, and far away from our home.

In the New Testament, the Gentiles are in a state of alienation from God, 'because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart' (Eph 4.18). We do not possess our own identity. We participate in it, by our fellowship with God, outside of ourselves. In fellowship with the infinite God who is 'other' than ourselves, and all, merely finite being.

The modern world is all too well aware of the misery that is in the world, as a consequence of human conduct, apart from God. Apart from the human destiny, that is the image of God. Modern literature and art depict it. But it cannot see, as Christianity can see, its origin in the relation to God. It cannot see, as Christianity can see, its horizon in the kingdom of God. That, when it comes, will fulfil within the human race, the image of God (Gen 1.26ff).

In human dignity, and human sin, then, we have not only the two great Christian statements about man; but also the two great presuppositions to the

Christian proclamation of God's action in the redemption of the world, by Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

The world is in need of redemption. The world is in need of redemption from sin. Redemption from the cause of the modern state of alienation from God, and from our true self. We, who are God's creatures. We, who are the crown of creation. We, who are the children, and the image, of God.

'For freedom Christ has set us free,' the Apostle exhorted us. 'Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery'. (Gal 5.1)

It is only redemption in Christ, that sets us free. Free, to be the children of God. Free, to live in fellowship with God. Free, because of what Christ has done, once, for all people. For you, and for me.

On Calvary's hill.

'Free at last.

Free at last.

Hallelujah, we're free at last.'