

Humanity: Important or insignificant

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 23 January 2019

Preacher: Andy Ritson

[0 : 00] But we're back in our series on some of the big issues that Christmas inevitably flags up for us. Last week we started a short series with the aim of addressing some of the issues that the festive season flags up.

And last week we looked at the problem of death, which we all feel just so acutely, don't we, at Christmas time, as we feel the absence of family members that we've lost over the years. But as well as Christmas being a time where we feel the loss of family members that we love, it's also a time, isn't it, that we choose to spend time with family members that, if we're honest, we sometimes try and avoid the rest of the year.

We exhibit some pretty bizarre behaviour around Christmas time. Why is it that Christmas brings out the best in us? Why is it at Christmas that we recognise the value of our family and want to spend time with them, no matter how awkward or angular they might be?

All of a sudden we remember that people are valuable and deserving of our time. I don't know if it's because we've all had a generous helping of mulled wine, or that we've perhaps seen too many warm-hearted Christmas movies, but we all start wishing goodwill to all men, don't we?

[1 : 22] It brings to the surface a truth about our fellow human beings that we subdue most of the year round, that we think that they're valuable. We may dig our elbows into people to get past them on the subway and completely ignore the homeless man on the street the rest of the year, but at Christmas time we seem to see more clearly.

But where do we as human beings get our value from? Is human value something we create for ourselves?

Or is our value derived from something else? It's an important question, isn't it? People talk of human rights, but why should humans have rights?

We all hate being treated like an animal, but what makes us any different to the animals? Why can't we just kick Uncle Bob outside on Christmas Day like we do the dog when he has made yet another barbed comment at our expense?

Oliver Wendell Jr. says this, But is he right?

[2 : 49] Are we no more significant in animals or a grain of sand? Most people in our day and age would say that everything we experience can be explained by evolutionary thinking.

We're just chemicals and neurons, and the only reason that we're here is to reproduce and pass on our genetic makeup to the next generation. We're the product of mindless chance, a complex machine whose only function is to protect and propagate our genetic material.

Love, feelings, relationships are all therefore just clever illusions that drive us towards that reproductive goal, but no more. They're nothing of significance and certainly not things to live your life by.

Those feelings of goodwill that we all experience at Christmas time, well, it's nothing but evolutionary trickery. Francis Crick, who's an atheist molecular biologist, wrote this, You, your joys and sorrows, memories and ambitions, sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells.

Who you are is nothing more than a load of neurons. Well, wouldn't it be quite fun to read his Valentine's Day card to his wife?

[4 : 15] I'm sure he was a hopeless romantic with a worldview like that. What a depressing and simplistic way to think about people. You're nothing more than a load of neurons.

Or Francis Bacon, who was a philosopher, wrote this, Man must realize he's an accident, a completely futile being that has to play out his game without reason.

These may be bleak outlooks on the world and what it means to be a human being, but at least they're consistent with their thinking. If you follow evolutionary, reductionist thinking through, then this is indeed all that we are.

And we just have to come to terms with it. And if we are just chemicals, neuronal signaling, whose only purpose is to reproduce, then I see no reason why you shouldn't just kill yourself at the age of 60.

Have a few kids, get them packed off to university, call it a day. Your work's done. And that worldview's thinking, you're not really valuable anymore. But what does that kind of thinking say to those, well, who can't have children?

[5 : 28] Are they just purposeless beings? What does it say to your elderly relative who struggles with their mobility? Is her life now meaningless because she has little to offer and because she's become dependent on people?

In fact, if that is the only way to think, then why do we bother with health care? Surely, we should be driven by survival of the fittest. So why not euthanize every infant with a genetic disorder or anyone elderly or chronically unwell?

Well, now we're starting to feel a bit more uncomfortable, aren't we? For that is where this thinking leads to, if you're consistent. But the problem is the world around us just isn't consistent.

Nobody can live with this worldview. A chemist a few years back set out to calculate exactly how much a human being is worth based on what we're made up of.

He calculated our value by establishing the quantity of valuable chemicals that are in our bodies. And according to him, we are each worth a staggering £6.80.

[6 : 43] That's what you're worth, apparently. Within the average human being, there's about enough iron to make a six-inch nail, enough sulphur to cure the average dog of fleas, enough carbon to make 900 pencils, and enough potassium to fire a toy cannon.

And here's where the average part becomes very important. Enough fat to make seven bars of soap. So perhaps some of us here are slightly more valuable than others.

And enough water to fill a 10-gallon tank, and enough phosphorus to tip 2,200 matchsticks. And all in all, apparently that comes to a total of £6.80.

And that's with inflation counted in since he first made those calculations. And we laugh, but why? If what we've said is true, if what the world thinks is true, then this is just a harsh fact of life.

We just think too highly of ourselves. But we laugh, because deep down, we know that it just simply cannot be true. We can't live lives in light without thinking.

[7 : 55] Deep down, we know we are worth far more than that. We are more than just chemicals. We have some form of intrinsic value. That's what we sense. That's what we recognize at Christmas time.

We can't just reduce what it means to be a human being down to what we are made up of, or what functions we can perform. Even Jean-Paul Sartre, the existential philosopher, recognized this.

The same Sartre who wrote that we're just crumpled pieces of paper in the rain whose only liberation is death. In other words, we're not really significant at all. We're just playing out a game until we die.

also wrote this, I do not see myself in the world so much as dust that just appeared in the world, but as a being who was expected, a being as it seemed who could only come from a creator.

And this recognition of a created hand, well, it drives me towards the idea of a God. Jean-Paul Sartre just couldn't stay consistent with his worldview.

[9 : 04] What he thought about the lack of intrinsic value in human beings just simply could not be left out in real life. And it's true of us too.

I used to think before I was a Christian that we were just carbon. But I couldn't live with that consistently. My friends were apparently just entities whose only purpose was to reproduce. Yet, for some reason, I actually enjoyed spending time with them and hanging out with them. I would play chess on a rainy day with the guy who was autistic in school rather than leaving him on his own.

I couldn't treat people in the way that my thinking led me to. And I'm sure it's the same with you too and the same with people who aren't Christians. Surely, we can't all have been duped.

The whole world can't be deluded that human beings are valuable, can't they? So where does this sense of intrinsic value come from that we sense? Well, evolution, materialism, existentialism, all

these things seem to leave us without an adequate answer.

[10:14] At least not one that we can live out in the real world. In fact, I'd argue that every other world view that I can think of apart from Christianity leaves us without an objective reason as to why human beings are valuable and why they should be treated with dignity.

So what does the Christian worldview make of humanity? Well, unequivocally, the Bible says that we are more than neurons and chemicals. We are worth far more than £6.80 because we're made in the image of God.

Listen to what God said about humanity when he created human beings back at the start of Genesis. God has just created the whole cosmos, stars, planets, plants and animals and then he turns to create his statement piece, humanity and he says this about us.

Then God said, let us make man in our image after our likeness and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.

So God created man in his own image. In the image of God he created him. Male and female he created them and God blessed them.

[11:41] God couldn't have stressed a point more clearly. We are made in his image and that means we have dignity that puts us above the animals and above every other creature because we resemble him, the most dignified and perfect and honourable being in all the universe.

we are all unique individuals who reflect our creator and that we have great capacity for creativity we have moral responsibility we can generate meaningful relationships with people we can even produce things like art and music.

Christianity says that we are not just higher functioning animals but are creatures of great dignity because we are created in God's image.

and God shows our value in another way too. I think it's both surprising and incredibly staggering that God's cosmic narrative is centred around humanity and specifically on Jesus becoming a human being in order to redeem and restore humanity.

Society says that we are just blobs of carbon on a small planet in an insignificant part of the universe. but not according to the Bible. God's action in the universe is centred around redeeming and restoring humanity through the work of Jesus Christ.

[13:09] Now that isn't because of anything that we have done we don't merit God's love or his interest in us but we can't ignore the fact that no other creature or thing in the universe is privileged to such attention from the almighty God because no other creature has been bestowed with such dignity that comes from being created in his image.

And the significance of this is that everybody is valuable in the Christian worldview. Old, young, black, white, disabled, independent, Christian or not Christian all are made in the image of God. The value of human beings is not dependent on our level of function or what we can offer the world or simply how easy we are to get on with around a dinner table but intrinsic to who we are.

The value is placed on us purely because we are human. And the significance of this is that Christians have been at the forefront of some of the most significant movements in history.

They pioneered the fight against slavery, racism, child labour, infanticide. They promoted education and health care wherever the gospel spread because it was based on the conviction that every human is equal and valuable because every human bears God's image.

[14:32] Christians who live consistently with this thinking have done incredible good for all humanity which contrasts starkly with those who are sent to evolutionary reductionist thinking who simply can't be consistent without leading to despair and I think inevitably treating people in an inhumane manner.

Tim Keller who is a Christian author writes this when you believe in the image of God the circle of protective life expands but if you don't believe in the image of God if you only believe in capacities or some other trumped up approach to why we believe in human rights the circle will continually contract it will get smaller and smaller and fewer and fewer people will be protected you see how incredibly and crucially important the image of God teaching is you see if you don't have an objective reason for human value based on something that is intrinsic to who we are something that is God given then it's just a matter of time before you start drawing lines and start deciding whose life is worth protecting and whose isn't who's valuable and whose isn't who's deserving of being treated with dignity and who isn't but who decides where that line is drawn if it's not God everyone

thinks that they're the one who knows best

I certainly think I know best most of the time and I'm sure you're quite similar so do I get to decide what makes a life valuable or do you or should we just all take a vote on whatever the majority says goes well we all know that the majority can be drastically wrong even in the most civilized of societies in fact quite often the most civilized societies often end up doing the most uncivilized and atrocious things to their fellow human beings they draw the lines in places that favor themselves at the expense of others happens all the time so then why not just trust who's in charge surely our politicians are in the best position to come to a reasoned conclusion well even then I know we're all skeptical about our politicians at the moment they are still human and have their own agendas don't they and we only need to look back 70 years in history to see a world leader push through the most inhumane policy the world has ever seen the problem is whatever group of people you get together or whoever you think should decide they will all have limited knowledge and have misshapen thinking and a bias wanting to promote themselves at the expense of others so surely it's a much wiser option

I think to look to someone out with our humanity who isn't trapped in our closed system of thinking our human thinking to decide what makes us human and decide whose life is worth protecting and for the Christian we gain that knowledge from God the creator of humanity who has spoken in the Bible and told us that every single one of us is valuable we don't have to construct meaning for ourselves it's given to us by our maker nobody has to draw the lines nobody has to come up with a definition everybody is of the utmost value no matter who they are or what they have done because God says so even those who have committed the most horrendous of crimes still bear God's image and are incredibly valuable even those who have done the most evil deeds we can imagine are therefore to be treated with dignity and we are all capable of great evil aren't we

I'm not just talking about the pedophiles or the murderers I know in of myself that I have the capacity to do great harm to people and I'm sure it's true of you too does that undermine our value and our dignity that we've been talking about because sometimes we don't look like we're created in God's image do we does that undermine our value and dignity that comes from being created in God's image how are we to reconcile our capacity for great evil with our great dignity and value that comes from being made in God's image are we just animals in disguise after all does the bible have any answer to that question well yes it does the bible describes humanity as a glorious ruin beautiful and valuable but desperately damaged and not as we ought to be to illustrate that this photo here we might look at that photo and some of us might say well what a mess

[19:45] I don't think much of that at all what an awful building and you could come to the conclusion that it's always been that way and that building actually has no value no dignity no significance whatsoever but clearly from this photograph we can see that something catastrophic has happened the photograph is of Windsor Castle from 1992 when a great fire ravaged the building it was once a majestic building which you'll see in the next slide but after the fire it wasn't what it once was it still showed features of beauty and the wonderful architecture and the dignity and worth but it wasn't what it once was and the bible says that's exactly what we're like we were once glorious but rebelled against god and ruined ourselves but our rebellion didn't extinguish god's image in us but rather just obscured it and tainted it so often we don't look or act like we were created to be we're glorious ruins we don't always look like that glorious building that god created us as but that doesn't depreciate us of value does it i mean i meant to have a ten pound note on me for this illustration but sadly i don't have any money in my wallet whatsoever but i could stand here with a ten pound note and say to you i'm willing to give this to absolutely anybody here who raises the hand who wants this ten pound note and although many of you are british imagine there's a few chances in the room who would put up their hand and ask for the ten pound note i could then crumple it up into a ball try and ruin it and then raise it in the air again and say who who wants this ten pound note and the same chances would probably still put up their hand and want it i could rub it in the dirt and before they were actually made into plastic these plasticky vegan friendly notes whatever you could actually tear a note couldn't you and i imagine some people would still want that ten pound note after i'd rubbed it in the dirt and torn it it may be ruined but it still has value doesn't it you could still tape it up and bring it to the bank and it would be accepted so it is with us terribly marred but with the same value as before we rebelled god god values us despite our rebellion and our warped state god is grieved at what we've become and as a result we rightly sit under his judgment but he hasn't stripped us of our intrinsic value and dignity in fact more than that despite what we've done to ourselves and what an offence that is to him as our maker god offers us

redemption he makes a way in the lord jesus christ for our broken humanity to be restored for us finally to be as we were always meant to be if only we will trust in the lord jesus if we do he promises to slowly restore us this side of eternity by the work of the holy spirit as colossians 3 10 reminds us we have put on the new self which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of our creator but even more wonderfully than being slowly transformed this side of eternity god promises complete restoration of us of our humanity in the future born to raise the sons of earth born to give them second birth that's what we sing at christmas time one day we will all be fully raised if we are put our trust in jesus we will all at last perfectly reflect

our creator god as we live restored lives in a new creation where all our sin is dealt with and everything that distorts us and warps us and taints us is done away with forever there will be no more signs of that catastrophic event that has marred us so terribly well this afternoon I hope to have shown you in some way or equipped you in some way to have good conversations with your colleagues or friends and to show you that materialism and every other philosophy in this world that people live by falls miserably short of explaining why we think people are valuable and should be treated with dignity in fact it's almost impossible to live consistently with a secular world view without I think becoming inhumane and treating people badly at some point somebody has to draw a line and decide who is valuable and who isn't and we better hope that we're inside that line and we see that in our society don't we that's why abortion is so prevalent here in the west that's why euthanasia lobbying is really gaining momentum people are drawing lines that strip the most vulnerable people the people who are the most burdened to their lives of value and dignity so they can have freedom and be unburdened to do whatever they want that's what's happening but in contrast the bible says explains perfectly the intrinsic sense of value that we know that we have it explains why we feel like we are more than just chemicals and neurons it explains why we feel that the most abhorrent of individuals should be treated with dignity it explains why we find ourselves spending time with difficult family members and friends at christmas rather than narrowing the circle of compassion based on some trumped up subjective criteria the christian worldview opens a circle wide for all every human life is valuable because however poorly a person reflects their creator they are still made in his image and that gives them infinite value and the right to be treated with dignity that's what you sense at christmas time though you might not be able to put it into words that's why you spend time with people you find awkward and exhausting and that's why uncle bob famed for his passive aggressive remarks is allowed to remain at the dinner table rather than being kicked outside into the garden like you might your dog let me pray for us father god we thank you it's time we can spend together thinking about serious issues and we do pray father for all of us here who are christians that in some way this would stimulate conversations during the week and give us real confidence in our conversations with our friends our family our colleagues help us to use this talk to have conversations about value and why people think we're valuable and try and lead people to the inconsistencies in how they think and we pray father that as we do that and for people here today who perhaps aren't christians that it would lead to a real intrigue into the bible and what the bible has to say about humanity that it helps see that the bible really does better than anything else make sense of our humanity why we are as we are it reflects us perfectly so help us as we have those conversations and if we do not yet if we have not yet put our trust in you help us to think about you seriously and we pray this in jesus name amen we ever we will make a enjoy this yeah but it very it sampai anything yeah