



**"Created in God's Image" (Genesis 1-2): Our Common Biblical Heritage  
AGM of CCJWA**

St David's Anglican Parish Hall  
Simpson and Bombard Street  
Ardross

Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB  
Archbishop of Perth  
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I would like to begin this address this afternoon first of all by thanking the organisers for the invitation to be a part of this important gathering. I have been the Catholic Archbishop of Perth for nearly three years and it is to my embarrassment that this is the first time I have been able to be with you. I hope you will forgive me for my tardiness!

I would also like to express my gratitude to the leaders of the Jewish and Christian communities who have made me welcome here in Perth. In particular today I want to express my thanks to Rabbi Dovid Freilich for his kindness and friendship to me on the occasions we have met in the last three years. (I am very grateful to you, Rabbi Freilich, and hope we can continue to build on our budding friendship.)

It is of course a great privilege for me to be able to address you all. I am very conscious that I come as the representative of the Catholic community in Western Australia and I hope that my presence with you can be a sign of the growing friendship and sense of mutual respect which is developing between our two communities, Jewish and Christian, and between the various Christian communities present in our city and state.

I must explain, before I share with you some thoughts I have prepared for today's occasion, that prior to becoming a bishop I was a lecturer in theology both here in Perth at Notre Dame University and also, for much longer, at the Catholic Theological College in Melbourne which is a constituent College of the Ecumenical Melbourne College of Divinity. I tell you this because, in preparing for today's meeting I found myself reverting to type. I have prepared what probably resembles a theological lecture more than anything else. But I do want to assure you that I do not wish to lecture you – I simply want to share some ideas with you.

At the time of the Second Vatican Council, whose fiftieth anniversary we are celebrating, the Catholic Church opened much wider the door to respectful and sincere dialogue with the followers of other religions. Although when we read it now the *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions*, known by its Latin title of *Nostra Aetate*, and published in October of 1965, may seem rather tentative and timid, it did in fact usher in a new era in Christian and Jewish relations which, in the Catholic Church, was then fostered and deepened by Pope John Paul II, by Pope Benedict and now by Pope Francis. Many of us would be aware of the deep friendship which has existed for many years between Pope Francis and Rabbi Abraham Skorka of Buenos Aires. Some of us may well carry in our minds and hearts the images of the pilgrimages made by Pope Benedict and by Pope John Paul II to the Holy Land and also of course to the Chief Synagogue in Rome. We might also be aware of the close boyhood friendships which existed between the young Karol Wojtyla, later Pope John Paul, and some of the children of his Jewish neighbours in Wadowice, especially the young Jerzy Kluger.

I am very conscious that it was Pope John Paul who in 1986 reminded Catholics that the members of the Jewish faith can be thought of as what he termed "our elder brothers in the faith of Abraham". Pope John XXIII had used a similar phrase before him. Pope Benedict would instead call the Jewish people "our fathers in the faith of Abraham" as he felt that "elder brother" carried echoes of the story of Jacob and Esau, in which the elder brother was rejected in favour of the younger brother. In Pope Benedict's mind at the time, I am sure, was the fact that is formal Catholic teaching that God has not rejected or repudiated his covenant with the Jewish people.

I am not sure how Jewish people react to either phrase, elder brother or father in the faith of Abraham, but it does occur to me that for most of our 2000 year history, we Catholics, and most Christians generally, have not treated our elder brother, or our father, with the respect and deference he deserves. As the younger brother or a son we have taken a different path in faith to our elders and this inevitably can give rise to resentment, anger, suspicion and even worse. But just as in other families such reactions are ultimately a sign of deep and destructive immaturity, so it is with us. And as we know to our cost and to our shame, immaturity, arrogance and pig-headedness can have terrible consequences. "Nostra Aetate" with the full authority of our Church, called on Catholics to repudiate all of this. Hopefully we, and all Christians, are learning to do so.

All of this is by way of introduction to the few thoughts I wanted to share with you this afternoon. Towards the end of "Nostra Aetate" the document reminds us that, and I quote, "*We cannot truly call on God, the Father of all, if we refuse to treat in a brotherly way any man, created as he is in the image of God*" (NA 5). The exclusive language may grate, but the sentiment is sound. The conviction that human beings are created in the image of God is absolutely fundamental to a Christian understanding of what it is to be human and this conviction comes to us, of course, from the first chapter of the Book of Genesis. I thought it might be interesting, and helpful, if I shared my own understanding of this pivotal phrase from the first book of what we in the Christian

tradition sometimes call the Old Testament or First Testament and which, in the Jewish tradition, is the first book of the Torah and of the Hebrew Scriptures. In doing so I am acutely conscious that I have very little understanding of the undoubtedly long history of Jewish reflection and interpretation of the particular phrase, "the image of God" or of its meaning within the Book of Genesis or indeed within the whole of the Torah. I am conscious too that my own understanding of the Book of Genesis has been forged in the context of a typically western philosophical, cultural and linguistic context, as well of course in a Christian context, and this may well differ radically from the contexts in which Jewish thinkers have approached these sacred texts. My hope is simply that as I share something of what my own theological tradition has bequeathed to me it might stimulate all of us here to revisit and deepen our own understandings of this important idea and rejoice in, and allow ourselves to be challenged by, what we perhaps share as our common inheritance.

In the Christian tradition the books of the bible are divided into chapters and verses. The phrase "image of God" comes in the first chapter of Genesis in verse 26. It goes as follows:

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 air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon 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 and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it ...." (Gen 1:26-28).

As I indicated earlier I am not as familiar as I should be with the Jewish tradition but in the Christian tradition there has been, from the beginnings of Christianity, a long history of reflection and interpretation of this phrase. In the past I have had to spend some time studying this tradition and have I think some sense of the many strands of interpretation in Christian thought. Nevertheless, important and valuable as it is to know the history of the various interpretations in our traditions, sometimes it is also good to simply go back to the text and try, difficult though it is, to read it with fresh eyes.

The fact that the phrase occurs in verse 26 means that there are 25 verses which precede it. It is worth asking ourselves if these earlier verses might give us a clue as to the meaning of the phrase upon which we are reflecting. To help us do this let me make this suggestion. If you were to read this passage, from the first verse to verse 28, to a child and then ask him or her, "What kind of God is being talked about?", I feel quite sure that many children would say, "Well, it's a God who makes things". In the first chapter of Genesis God makes the sun and the moon, the day and the night, the stars in the heavens, all the plants and the animals and then finally people, human beings. It is these, the first humans, whom we are told are made in the image and likeness of God.

Because of the context in which the phrase "image and likeness" occurs, because it comes in other words at the end, and as the high point, of a long presentation of God as a creating, life-giving God, it seems to me quite possible to suggest that we human beings most truly fulfil our calling, our destiny, our vocation, to be the living images of God in the world when we are creative and life-giving. And for this reason I think it is no coincidence that the text goes on to immediately say that God created humanity as male and female and directed them, us, to be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it. To give life, to nurture life, to care for life, to be at the service of life - this, if my understanding of Genesis has any value in it, is the most God-like thing we can do. And of course, to do the opposite, even if we do so in the name of religion, is the most unlike God thing we can do. It is to repudiate in the most drastic way possible the very meaning of our God-given existence.

Of course there is a second presentation of the story of creation in the Book of Genesis. It comes in chapter two. It is it seems to me a much more earthy story. It tells of God making a man out of the dust of the earth and then creating the rich tapestry of animal life among which, however, no companion suitable to be a helpmate was found. And the reason for all this? God expresses it in these words: *"It is not good that the man should be alone. I will make him a helper fit for him"*. It is then that God puts the man into a sleep, takes one of his ribs and forms another human being to whom the man, when he awakes, gives the name *"woman"* for *"she is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh"*. And this is why, the text goes on, *"a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife and they become one flesh"*. Soon after, in the logic of the story, the man and the woman have intercourse and their son, Cain, is born. In their coming together, in their being fruitful, they are, in the most evocative and powerful way, living out their vocation to be the image of the life-giving God.

As I read and reflect on these extraordinary stories at the very beginnings of our shared sacred texts, I am struck by the fact that it is only when the man and the woman encounter each other, and enter into a relationship with each other, that they really begin to be the images of God they were created to be. They couldn't do it alone: they had to do it together.

There is a profound truth in all of this about what being human is really all about. It is a truth which is confirmed by our human experience even though at times we can seem to be pushed by inner and outer forces in the opposite direction. Human beings, men and women, you and me - we are made for communion, not isolation. We are made for inter-dependence, not independence. We are made in such a way as to need each other, not in such a way as to be able to stand on our own two feet and go it alone. We are made, in opposition to what Cain seems to be suggesting with his famous question put to God in chapter 4 of Genesis, to be *"our brother's keeper"*. This is why marriage matters, why family matters, why community matters. It is why religious freedom, and religious tolerance, and religious sensitivity matters. It is in fact why any of our rights, or freedoms, or mutual responsibilities, exist. We are, as human beings, inextricably woven together, and the good of one is the good of all. We are made by God to be, in God's creation, the living images of the transcendent one, giving expression to God's

creative, life-giving presence in the world through our own life-giving and creative lives. Pope John Paul II, writing to his Catholic brothers and sisters at the beginning of this present millennium, reminded us that, "*my brother or sister is a part of me*". It is a conviction that comes, initially, from his belief that every human person is made in the image and likeness of God. It is perhaps a vision to which we could all subscribe.

May the God of our ancestors, the living God, enable us through his presence in our lives to be faithful to all that he is asking of us.

Thank you.

+Archbishop Timothy Costelloe  
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