

A Masterpiece Restored

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Rev Brian Senior

Readings:

Genesis 1:24-28

Psalm 100

Ephesians 4:17-5:2

We have done a lot of thinking in sermons over the last year or so about being disciples ... very important stuff about what God has called us to be and do – our responsibilities as the people of God. This is important.

We are right to be aware that God has called us for a purpose. We have been saved – rescued from the power of sin and death – in order to fulfil God's purpose. We have been called to be part of his Mission plan to save the world! ... and so we are challenged through the Scriptures, and by the prompting of the Holy Spirit in our inner beings, to live lives that are worthy of his calling.

But there is another side to all this ... and in this current series of sermons, leading up towards Easter, I hope that we are learning, or being reminded, of the wonderful truth that we are precious to God and deeply loved by him ... and so learning to delight in his love and wallow in his goodness towards us.

So we have an opportunity, before we get caught up in the great celebrations of Holy Week and the Resurrection, to renew our understanding of who we are in God: ... wonderfully loved ... set on a firm foundation ... changed by his loving care ... of enormous value to him ... called and equipped by him.

My hope and prayer is that in this way we will deepen our personal relationship with God the Father, through Jesus Christ ... and know more of the touch of his healing Spirit in our lives.

Which brings us to this morning's theme: "A Masterpiece Restored."

I'd like to show you something in which I take a great deal of paternal pride.

[Gareth's Bowl]

This bowl is Gareth's Masterpiece. Many of you have seen some of the things which Gareth made, while he was at college in Wadhurst .. not least the lovely chair which we use when the Bishop comes ... and some of the things which he has made since at the Horizon Project in Tunbridge.

But when he was at college, this was Gareth's final piece of work. It is not the biggest thing he made, nor the most complicated ... but the piece into which he poured all the skills he had learned, and his patient care in working with wood ... and it is beautiful. It is his Masterpiece.

Now, let's turn our attention to what we read in Genesis chapter 1.

The earlier part of the chapter relates how God made Light appear from the Darkness ... how he separated Sea and Sky ... how he formed the Land and filled it with a rich variety of vegetation ... how he set the Stars in the heavens, and made the Sun and

Moon to regulate our lives ... how he filled the sea with Fish and the sky with Birds ...

"and God saw that it was good."

Then we get to verse 24 ... and God made Wild Animals and Livestock and *'all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds'* ...

"and God saw that it was good."

But it wasn't enough! God had made all these amazing things ... he had created a world of beauty and wonder out of nothing, and it was all good ... but he still needed a Masterpiece!

So God says (v26):

"Let us make man in our image, in our likeness."

God's great Masterpiece, into which he poured all his creative energy and purpose – was mankind. Male and Female both ... equally moulded in the image of God ... created like him to be loving, creative, moral, intelligent beings ... created to rule over creation on God's behalf, and to live in relationship with him.

God's Masterpiece – that's you!

Maybe you don't feel much like a Masterpiece, but you are! King David, the Psalmist, struggled to get his head around such an idea. In Psalm 8 (Verses 3-9) he put it this way:

³When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,

⁴ what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?

⁵You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honour.

⁶You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet:

⁷all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field,

⁸the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas.

⁹O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

By its very nature, a Masterpiece is a precious thing ... we do our best to keep it from being harmed. But accidents happen ... and worse, sometimes malicious damage is done.

What then?

The sad truth with which we are all familiar is that God's Masterpiece was damaged by human disobedience. Wilful, sinful humanity turned against God and continues to do so, choosing to go our own way rather than to follow God's way. The result is a broken humanity in which, while still made in the image of God, the image of God is marred.

Human beings have become a distorted image of God. We see glimpses of former glory in acts of kindness and heroism, in truly loving relationships and in many kinds of good - but we see how far from God we have become when we see the horrors of warfare ... suspicion and hatred ... child abuse ... distorted and misused sexuality ... persecution,

cruelty and injustice ... broken faith and dysfunctional relationships.

Mankind falls ... and though the amazing work of the Master is still visible, it is distorted and obscured by the grime of sin.

What would it take to restore us?

A fortnight ago I was in Bethlehem, visiting the Basilica of the Nativity in Manger Square. Built in the Third Century, it is the oldest surviving Christian Church in the world ... and it is, to be honest, a bit of a mess.

But inside, there are substantial remains of ancient mosaics ... on the walls and on the floor ... masterpieces of their time.

[photos of mosaics in Basilica of the Nativity]

Sadly, these amazing mosaics have been damaged by years of neglect, as well as by more deliberate acts of vandalism.

What would it take to restore them?

Well, firstly, I'm sorry to say, it would take getting the different Christian factions who have a stake in the Church to agree together ... something which is not likely to happen anytime soon. In fact, such is the level of *disagreement* that the only thing they can agree on is to maintain the Status Quo. So, nothing can be changed ... not even when that would mean keeping things in good order or repair ...

... and we think that we have trouble when we need a faculty to mend the roof!

But what if restoration was an option? ... or what about when an old painting needs restoring?

I'm no expert in these things, but I believe the first thing you need to do, be it ever so carefully ... is to get rid of the accumulated dirt and grime of the years. Until you've cleaned things up, you can't get down to repairing any damage which may have been done though violence or carelessness.

The results of restoring a painting can be spectacular. Have a look at these two examples:

[restoring a painting 1], [restoring a painting 2]

But one thing is certain. You can't restore an old Masterpiece to its former glory, unless you have a pretty clear idea of what the Master who created it intended it to look like!

Our need of restoration is far greater than that of some old mosaics or ancient paintings – however wonderful they may be. But the task is also much harder. Not only does the dirt and grime of accumulated sin need cleaning away ... ever so carefully because we are fragile! - but also we have much damage that needs repairing ... some of it done to us by other people, but often a lot which we have done to ourselves through our own bad choices.

The Good News is that God is in the business of restoration.

Remember the words of Psalm 100 which we read together:

"Know that the Lord is God.

*It is he who made us, and we are his;
we are his people, the sheep of his pasture."* - verse 3

... and then in verse 5:

*"For the Lord is good and his love endures for ever;
his faithfulness continues through all generations."*

He made us ... we are his ... his love endures ... his faithfulness continues!

Despite the fall ... despite our failings ... despite the sin which so easily overwhelms us
...

... God never forgets that he made us, he loves us, and that we are precious to him.

If an art restorer will invest long hours of painstaking, meticulous work to remove the grime and retouch the damaged sections of paint to restore an old master to its former glory ... how much more will God restore us ... because we are his Masterpiece.

The gospel message is a message of God's determination to restore us ... to restore what was lost ... and to re-make us once more in his image. Jesus came in order that we could find forgiveness of sin and a new beginning as the people of God.

Paul writing to the Ephesians emphasises their part ... and thus our part ... in all this.

Recognising the truth we have been taught, we are to 'put off' the old self, and 'put on' the new self. What we were is corrupted, dirty and damaged. What we are is created anew to be like God, *"in true righteousness and holiness."*

So ... we cannot be passive in this restoration process. We have a part to play.

The Telegraph reported recently that a Jobcentre Plus in Norwich refused to display a job advert which concluded with the like:

"Must be very reliable and hard-working."

The reason? - that the advert might be seen as discrimination against unreliable workers!

God is not politically correct. As he works in us by his Holy Spirit ... as we are *"made new in the attitude of our minds"* ... we also have lifestyle choices to make:

- putting off falsehood and speaking truthfully
- not allowing our anger to lead us into sin, thus giving the devil a foothold
- doing honest work for honest gain so that we can share with those in need
- watching our mouths, and avoiding 'unwholesome talk'
- building one-another up
- avoiding bitterness, rage, anger, brawling and slander
- showing true kindness, compassion, and forgiveness to each other.

All good stuff ... and a constant challenge to us to live authentic Christian's lives, which Paul sums up in these words (Ephesians 5:1f):

"Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children, and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

There is nothing more valuable in God's eyes than you are. God made you, and loves you ... and because you are precious to him, his purpose and plan is to **restore** you to all that you were made to be ... made in his image to reflect his glory.

I'm going to finish by reading something given to me when I was away last November on the Clergy Leadership Programme ... I shall probably use it again before this series is out!

Read: "You are very Special"

You are Very Special

In all the world there is nobody, nobody like you. Since the beginning of time there has never been another person like you. Nobody has your smile, your eyes, your hands, your hair. Nobody owns your handwriting, your voice. You're Special. Nobody can paint your brush strokes. Nobody has your taste for food or music or dance or art. Nobody in the universe sees things as you do. In all time there has never been anyone who laughs in exactly your way, and what makes you laugh or cry or think may have a totally different response in another. So you're Special.

You're different from any other person who has ever lived in the history of the Universe. You are the only one in the whole creation who has your particular set of abilities. There is always someone who is better at one thing or another. Every person is your superior in at least one way. Nobody in the universe can reach the quality of the combination of your talents, your feelings like a roomful of musical instruments some might excel in one way or another but nobody can match the symphonic sound when all are played together. Your Symphony. Through all eternity no one will ever walk, think or do exactly like you. You're Special.

You're rare and in all rarity there is enormous value and because of your great value the need for you to imitate anyone else is absolutely wrong. You're Special and it is no accident you are. Please realise that God made you for a special purpose. He has a job for you to do that nobody else can do as well as you can. Out of the billions of applicants only one is qualified. Only one has the unique and right combination of what it takes and that one is You.

You're Special