

Mirror, Mirror

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Preacher: Steve Jeffrey

[0 : 00] So, good morning again, everyone. It was this time last year that I stood up and I launched Follow 25. It's our strategic plan, if you like, to shift the ministry culture of this church to a deliberate development of all of life disciples of Jesus Christ by the end of 2025.

So, this is my, and I'm excited to be able to extend upon that now. This is my 14th Vision Series here at St Paul's.

I love Vision Series every year. And this particular one, when I launched it last year, I thought it was crucial in terms of where we are as a church and where our neighbourhood is and where our society is.

That is, the audacious intent of Follow 25 is really simple. And that is to see the majority of us identifying much growth in faith in Jesus Christ through the ministry of this church by the end of 2025.

That is, my goal, our goal for each one of us and for us collectively as a church is that we would grow significantly in God confidence, even as our society's confidence in God declines.

[1 : 31] That's the intent of it. And it's a goal for us to grow together. Now, the reason we have this plan is because I am utterly convinced, utterly convinced, that we as human beings flourish in all of life to the degree that we walk in all of life with our Creator and our Saviour.

Without that, we don't flourish in life. And so, Follow 25 is about you and you flourishing in all of life. You having hope and joy and security, whatever the situation of life is.

Living life well forever. That's the goal of Follow 25. And it's for you and it's for us together as we grow in God confidence.

We are seeking to do this together in a neighbourhood that not only has little to no confidence in God, but also a neighbourhood that is so culturally diverse.

And so, following Jesus together is not an easy thing to do. There are a multitude of barriers to that. Nevertheless, we are seeking to be a church that, despite our cultural backgrounds, our ethnicities, our genders, our preferences, we are looking to make Jesus the main thing in life.

[3 : 05] We're looking to look at Him and be united around Him. Now, our diversity can be a significant challenge. And so, in this vision series, I plan to take a look at a very complex issue that is rampant around our world.

And it's the issue of racism, ethnocentricity, and how we're going to go about building an inclusive, multi-ethnic, multi-racial church, transcultural church here at St. Paul's.

That is, the goal at the end of this, I suppose, is to understand ourselves a little bit better, understand other people a little bit better, and then to be able to grow together in that understanding.

So, that's where we're going. And to kick us off, I just got a whole, if you like, swag of things I want to say by way of introduction.

For those of you who are keen Bible people, please forgive me that I'm not jumping straight into the text, and I'm not getting straight to Jesus.

[4 : 24] Okay? View this message today as part one of a four- to five-part series on this initially, in terms of the biblical unpacking of race and ethnicity.

So, think of that first. This is the introduction to that. So, a number of things. Some preliminary thoughts about racism and ethnocentricity. If you've got the St. Paul's app, you will find this in the St. Paul's app.

Firstly, defining racism and ethnocentricity is not easy. In most cases, when you read about this issue, those terms are used interchangeably.

But I'm going to have a crack at it anyway, even though it's not easy to define. So, here we go. Racism is an explicit or an implicit belief or practice that qualitatively distinguishes or values one race over another race.

That's racism, as I see it. Explicitly or implicitly a belief or a practice that qualitatively distinguishes or values one race over another race.

[5 : 40] Now, in that definition, I'm thinking of race primarily in terms of physical features. Racism, therefore, makes judgments based on physical appearance.

And so, you see someone of some kind of physical makeup and then what you do is you make cultural assumptions about that person as a result of that, just by appearance.

That's racism. Now, the focus of this definition is the heart and behaviour. The heart that believes one race is more valuable than another is a sinful heart.

That sin is called racism. The behaviour that distinguishes one race, owes more valuable than another, is a sinful behaviour, and that sin is called racism.

And I want to say right up front, it is always a sin. Always a sin. It is always wrong to treat a person with any form of disrespect on the basis of their physical appearance.

[6 : 58] Now, ethnicity is slightly different. It's a term that's used to stress cultural rather than physical aspects of a group identity.

Things like language and dress and food and customs and values and sometimes religion. The two are different, but they're connected. That is, when you see a person, you then make ethnic assumptions about them.

Now, where it's always wrong to judge a person on their appearance, I think there are biblical and moral bounds, we are biblically and morally bound to make some value judgments about ethnicities over others.

That is, where those cultural assumptions of that group is fundamentally unbiblical, and that valuing of ethnicities is rooted in biblical teaching about good and evil.

That should not be called racism at that point, when we are challenging cultural assumptions, including our own.

[8 : 22] That is, there's aspect of every culture that is sinful and needs transforming.

Every culture is sinful and needs transforming. Now, secondly, why I think this series is important for us.

It's important for us because of what we're seeking to do here in building disciples of Christ in our neighbourhood. Let me just say that straight up. I also think it's important because we're doing that in a country that has traditionally struggled with multiculturalism.

On the one hand, Australia has been remarkably hospitable, remarkably hospitable towards migrants.

But on the other hand, traditional Australian attitude towards different races and ethnicities is that they should be assimilated as quickly as possible.

[9 : 30] That means we are open-armed, we are welcoming for you, wherever your background is, on certain conditions.

And the general certain conditions are that you embrace the Australian way of life and its values. And values are the thing that always underwrite a culture.

So you need to accept our values. It's essential that you learn the English language. It's essential as well that you don't rob natural Australians of jobs and other opportunities like healthcare and education and so on and so forth.

It's crucial that you leave any of your racial and cultural tensions behind with you and don't import them here. It's crucial that you don't lower the Australian standard of living by imposing too much strain on our infrastructure and certainly not on our welfare system.

So assimilation has been key to Australia's policy on multiculturalism. In fact, the term new Australians was the term that came into vogue in the 1950s and 60s.

[10 : 58] And the goal of that multiculturalism was to place your newfound Australian identity above any other identity you have.

And so while Australia has been incredibly hospitable and welcoming, we have struggled to fully embrace and also really struggled to hand over any form of control, power, or cultural influence to other ethnicities, other cultural groups.

And you see this rampant in the Western church, not just in Australia, but across the Western world, where European culture has dominated church culture in the Western world, even as those churches are existing in neighbourhoods like ours that have become very racially diverse.

That's an ethnicity issue, not a racial issue, per se. So in the next few weeks, I want to unpack how that has impacted the way that we do church here at St Paul's and explain some of the key moves that we've made and to what it looks like for us to continue to make those moves to be a church that truly treasures Jesus together and for the joy of all people.

Third introductory comment. I'm acutely aware of my own failure in this issue. I grew up in a country town dominated by white country Australian culture.

[12:54] We had a Greek cafe, which was run by the Greek family. We had a Chinese restaurant at the RSL run by, I hope it was a Chinese family.

The thing is, I never saw them, so I'm assuming they were Chinese running that Chinese restaurant. And we had, the other, apart from us, white farmers was Aboriginals.

And I had Aboriginal friendships as I grew up. But I was fundamentally racist towards them. I'll unpack that more as I go along.

So on one level, I don't feel like I'm the right guy to be up here talking on this topic. There are people who are much further advanced than I am on this issue in thinking and practice.

I also want to acknowledge the other reason why I think I'm not the right guy to be up here talking about this. There are people in this room and certainly people that you are very aware of who live with racism and ethnocentricity in a way that I just simply never have.

[14:13] purely because I represent majority culture in our society. In fact, I never even had to think and I don't even ever recall ever thinking about racism and ethnocentricity until I started ministering at St Paul's.

I didn't even have to think about it because everything went my way from workplaces to shopping centres to everything.

As a member of the western white majority culture almost unaware of these realities. I've never known the experience of trying to understand another culture and race in order just to survive day by day.

It's only because of here and this place that I've had to wrestle with and learn about how other people groups understand time, the use of space to think, to solve problems, to understand relationships between individuals and groups, express emotions, handle failures and judge status. I suspect that nearly every racial minority group in this country understands white Australian culture really well.

[15:46] They're confronted with it because it challenges their ethnicity every moment. but us white Australians are far more ignorant of other cultures and how they operate simply because we've never had to.

You need to do things our way. So, what that means is throughout this time I'm going to say some wrong stuff.

I'm going to say some silly stuff. It's not deliberate. It will potentially even be an inadvertent racism and ethnocentricity.

So, please have patience with me is what I'm saying. Fourthly, this is a really hot issue in our culture right now.

It's a hot issue but most white Australians aren't aware that it's a hot issue. And I think the Christian faith has got something very significant to contribute to this issue although I suspect the institutional church will not be heard because of our abuses.

[17:05] Australia's race commissioner, race discrimination commissioner said around six or seven years ago that this is the most volatile time of the past 30 to 40 years of racial tension in our country.

This at a time when apparently we're growing more tolerant with one another. There's an irony to that comment. Now, Christian faith has got something very significant to contribute here.

I want to give you an example of what I mean. W.H. Auden, one of the most influential writers of the 20th century, was converted from his intellectual, secular humanism to Christianity in 1940.

So think of what's happening in the world in 1940. And he was converted through one event, one thing radically changed him. And that was he went to the cinemas, what we call the cinemas now, in Manhattan and he saw a movie that was produced by Hitler's Third Reich.

book. It was a propaganda piece about their conquering of Poland. And Auden said that in the movie theater with him were many migrant Jews watching this film.

[18 : 33] And he said when a Polish person, a prisoner, came up onto the screen, he said the audience immediately erupted with, kill him, kill him.

This is 1940 Manhattan and they weren't involved in the war at this point. He said he walked out of the movie theater stunned, stunned, because his secular humanism was the foundation of Nazi secular humanism.

He said philosophically I sit on the same page as some of these people. And he said one thought ran through his mind as he walked out of the theater.

He says what response can my enlightened humanistic tradition give to those who cry out for the blood of innocent victims? He said he's got no response to that.

No response. He saw the bankruptcy of humanism, of secularism, and began to sense that the only answer to evil can be found in God.

[19 : 56] He was convicted, like, literally in that moment by God's grace, of God's perfection and holiness and his sinfulness, 1940 became a Christian.

Now having said that, I fully, it's great having a story like that, but I fully acknowledge that others have made the exact opposite journey.

because of the awful track record of the institutional church on this issue, there have been many, many professing Christians and churches who have long, long held membership in local people, long held membership in local churches, denominations, stand up to declare creeds, stick to a conservative, orthodox faith, and at the same time hold membership cards in the Ku Klux Klan.

So what do you do when you find stories that give you some comfort that Christianity has offered a solution to ethnic pride and other stories that show Christianity is part of the problem?

What do you do with that? What you do is you go to the Bible and you ask whether they got Christianity right or on the other hand they got humanism right.

[21 : 23] And when I ask those questions I don't see that secular humanism as we see particularly in our culture today has got any answers to this solution. I'll get to one reason why that is the case in a moment.

Secondly, humanism does want to promote a selfless morality and an equality of all people. you see that all the time.

It does desire to have a more humane society but I'm not convinced that you can deliver on those goals for a more equal humanity when you embrace an atheistic evolutionary theory that suggests that humans come from lower forms of life.

If that's your foundation you cannot hold at the same time to the supreme dignity of all human beings. It's intellectually incompatible.

When that is your foundation, the view of the human race, it is so easy to fall into racism because the differences are explained by saying that other groups of people are less evolved, are less evolved.

[22 : 52] And that is what has happened amongst academia and now is happening in our society. You conservatives down there, the problem with you is you just are not as evolved as us modern people in your thinking.

It's happening now. So when I go to the Bible, I see a totally different thing than the version of Christianity that supports racism and ethnic pride.

And I just think also we just need to be honest about our history, history of the Christian church, history of the Christian church in the western world and say that the institutional church has blown it again and again and again and again on this issue.

Done some remarkably great stuff but we've also blown it. We've also blown it. Almost I think every people group has got a story to tell of the failure of the institutional church and I don't think I want to even fight that.

Don't think I want to argue against that. I just want to say yep, I know and I'm sorry. I'm sorry for what I've done to contribute to that. Not all those who profess to be followers of Christ are followers of Christ even if they represent the church and those of us who are are so imperfect.

[24 : 10] perfect. We will blow it too. So can we just please look at the Bible I think and look to Jesus and see what they've got to say here.

So how about we do that now? And as I said this is a journey over the next number of years sorry next number of weeks. It might feel like years at the end of it.

Next number of weeks and unpacking this as we go along. And really the point here is I want to focus here on a core creation foundation doctrine of the image of God.

So let's jump into there. Over the next number of weeks I want to look at what the Bible and the Christian faith, the core news of the gospel local church has got this contribution to make. This is the foundation of what we're seeking to be and achieve here as a church if you like.

So my plan is to trace out this issue of race and how it develops in the Bible. We're going to begin with creation. I will get to Jesus eventually.

[25 : 15] Okay so we'll get there eventually. Let's begin with just a creation principle and how that flows from the Old Testament into the New Testament. So the point I want to make today is very significant because in dealing with race and ethnic pride even before I get to Jesus this point is crucial.

Genesis chapter 1 verse 27 God created people. He created man in his own image. In the image of God he created him.

Male and female he created them. That verse is utterly profound, significant, packed full of implications.

And I'm not going to hit all the implications in that, out of that verse. But simply to say Adam and Eve is the first human beings were created in the image of God, different from all of other creation. And every subsequent human being born from Adam and Eve also carry the image of God. God. So Genesis 5 verse 3, when Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son in his own likeness, in his own image, and he named him Seth.

[26 : 45] The words likeness and image there are exactly the same two words that are used in Genesis 1. And the point is that that image carries on. carries on through people.

The first pair are not the only pair, the only people in the image of God. Those who come from them are all in the image of God too. So the implication here is the unity of the human race.

Every human that flows from Adam and Eve, which Acts 17 tells us is everyone, is creating the image of God. Now I don't want to go into every detail of what that means in terms of what it means to be an image of God.

There's a whole list of attributes you could go through it in terms of listing them off and tick it off what it means. And I think it's collectively just take them all as done dusted there. One thing is very significant though, is in Genesis 1 when it talks about your job is to rule over the created order. It's the word dominion there. The word dominion means royalty. That is, there's something about the image of God that means that there's a royal dignity.

[28 : 05] For us who are Westerners, who are English heritage Westerners, that would be significant in the 70th year of Queen Elizabeth's reign.

70 years. Amazing. dignity. And she carries a dignity about her. But there's a royal dignity attached to every human being, whatever their status in life is.

Now the unfortunate thing is that Genesis 1 doesn't give us a specific footnote on what the image of God means. So rather than pick up one of the wonderful human traits, I want to see image of God as us image forth in God.

Bearing his image is displaying his image. Like nothing else in creation can. So being created in the image of God, that means it has a purpose.

It has a mission to it. Humans have traits like God that display God's magnificence, glory.

[29 : 19] So rather than argue about the details, let's take it as image of God here as being a mission. And that mission is to mirror God, to display his magnificence, his beauty, his royal dignity, if you like, to display God, to live in such a way that we reflect the character and the quality of God.

Now that is a massive calling, but I think that's the point of Psalm 8, which we had read out to us. If you want to flick your Bibles to Psalm 8, let me just show you something really briefly.

Psalm 8 is going to be unpacked for us a little bit later in this series, but I'm just doing an introductory thing here, just to help James to set the framework for when he preaches it. Or not.

Psalm 8 is interesting. It begins with, O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth.

And it ends in exactly the same way, in verse 9. O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth.

[30 : 34] Very significant. It's majestic in all the earth. God is majestic. That's the point. That's the bookends of Psalm 8.

And so it's interesting how the rest of the Psalm connects to those bookends. You have set your glory above the heavens.

From the lips of children and infants, you have ordained praise because of your enemies. To silence the foe and the avenger. When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon, the stars, which you have set in place.

What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? What's the answer to that question? What's the answer to specifically that question?

You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and you crowned him with glory and honour or possibly a slightly better understanding of that is you crowned him with glory and majesty, royal dignity, dominion.

[31 : 49] And then the psalmist goes on to describe the uniqueness of humanity. You made him ruler over the works of your hands. You put everything under his feet or flocks and herds and beasts of the field, the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas.

That is, what we see in Psalm 8 is clearly the psalmist has got Genesis 1 open here, reflecting on Genesis 1. But the psalmist does not end with, as you would anticipate as you go through the psalm, oh Lord, how majestic are human beings.

Doesn't do that, which you'd think he would. He did say it a little bit earlier, but it's not the point of the psalm. The psalm ends with, oh Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth.

The psalm ends on the point of praise of God, which means the point of God's creation here according to Psalm 8 of everything, and particularly the dignity and the majesty of human beings, the point of our subordinated majesty above all the creatures is for the praise of God's name.

It's for his glory. That means everything that we have received in image of God is for the glory of God, not for the praise and the majesty of humanity.

[33 : 35] But we're still glorious regardless, which at the very least, it means that if you demean or you belittle anyone created for that end, you in the end belittle, demean God.

You rupture the purpose of all people created in the image of God to show his majesty to all people when you demean another human being.

Now, this creation doctrine of the image of God, even apart from redemption in Jesus, and we will get there, even apart from redemption in Jesus, has got massive implications for us, even more so post-Jesus, but massive implications even without that.

The horror of unjustly destroying or harming another human being in Genesis 9-6, whoever sheds the blood of man by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God has God made man.

God has massive implications for even the way we speak to another human being. James 3, verses 9-10, James picks up a creation argument, not a redemption argument, a creation argument.

[35 : 13] with the we praise our Lord and Father and with it we curse men who have been made in God's likeness.

Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. Both of those arguments are straight from creation apart from redemption in Jesus.

the image of God has massive implications for racial pride. In Acts 17, Paul makes the common origins of all human beings, the ground of equality and the end of ethnic arrogance.

Paul is in Athens in Acts 17 speaking to the Athenians. They were a very proud group of people, very proud. everyone else in their culture who was not Athenian was regarded as a barbarian.

If you've watched any movie that's got barbarians in it, they are just a nasty group of people. That's just who they are. They don't even shower for goodness sake. They just come across nasty and dirty and horrible.

[36 : 34] Paul gets one sermon to this group, one sermon, and what does he say to them? He wants to pick on the racial pride issue.

He says, the God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands as if he needed anything because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.

From one man, he made every nation of men. Why does he say that? There's lots of other things he could have picked up in that culture.

Why does he say that? From one man, he made every nation of men that they should inhabit the whole earth and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. See what he's saying here? Let me do the Steve Jeffrey version of Apostle Paul. You Athenians, you just think you are so special. You are so proud.

[37 : 45] You think you've got some unique origin direct from the soil. Everyone else are all connected but you're not. You've got this special boom where we're separate from everyone else.

You think that everyone else is inferior. You call them barbarians. I got something to tell you. Let me tell you Athenians, you and the barbarians whom you hate, you've all got one daddy.

Surprise, surprise, the DNA test has come out and you're all connected. All connected. And it's God who decides where you end up and where you live and the way you should look and the reason why you talk the way you talk.

It's all God's gifting. diversity. Why? Why? Why has God done this according to Paul?

What is God's goal in making all this diversity? God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him though he is not far from each of us.

[38 : 56] For in him we, everyone, live and move and have our being as some of our own, your own prophet, sorry, poets.

I've had several weeks off. Some of your own poets have said we are his offspring. Against the claims of racial superiority, Paul here asserts the unity of all people, it is foundational, fundamental, to Pauline theology, the doctrine of creation.

He is using this theology to undermine pride and arrogance and segregation, superiority, oppression, the assertion of preferences upon other people groups and instead to turn to unity in Christ.

God wants all people to be unified in their seeking of him through the Lord Jesus. So my point simply today is that the Christian doctrine of creation itself, apart from redemption in Jesus, makes a very significant contribution to dealing with racism and ethnic pride.

That is, if you like, the first foundational brick that we're going to build on in the coming weeks. God himself affirms that by coming into this creation, in the person of Jesus Christ, the perfect image bearer of the Father, to right the wrongs of our broken image because of sin.

[40 : 35] God himself became one of us. So for now, let me just very briefly go through some implications. Firstly, my vision for us is that we be a church that seeks to really know people, really know people rather than commodify them or put them into categories.

Now that has multiple implications. It means not just knowing facts about people but actually walking in life with people.

That's the difference. It's not just knowing facts about them but walking in life with them, together with them. It is typical for churches like society in general to value people and particularly in the western world to value people for what they do and not who they are.

are. We get marinated in that culture. Every person from the womb to the tomb has a beauty and a value independent of their abilities or of what they produce.

simply put, if I said to my wife Natalie tuning in right now, if I said to my wife Natalie I don't find you beautiful or majestic but I do find you useful, I'm confident I'd have a problem in the marriage.

[42 : 28] I'm confident of that. And yet in the western world that's what we do. It's so ingrained in us we don't even realise that's what we're doing.

We value contribution. This church has done it. I've done it. My vision for us is to be a church that values people for who they are as image bearers of God more than what they contribute.

Secondly, because there is a royal dignity imprinted on every person across race, ethnicity, class, education, age, ability, belief system and gender, then we ought to be free, a church free of favouritism and cliques as we build a multi-ethnic, multi-generational, multicultural church.

thirdly, we are to be a church that embrace and care for the poor and the marginalised and the outcast of society.

I'll make this point in a couple of weeks, I think. When you walk past someone in the mall at Chatswood who's sitting there begging, if you've got purely a secular mind on, you will go, that person is beneath me in some way and I'm here to contribute to you.

[44 : 00] I want to help you with your problem. What we need to do instead is because of the gospel, we need to see spiritually, that's me. That's actually me.

That's who I am in God's eyes. And that person, just like me, is made in the image of God and has royal dignity. Fourthly, there is a royal dignity imprinted on every person and therefore Christians, this church, you as a Christian, are against and ought to be against abortion, but not merely in principle.

Not merely in principle. From the very first days of the Christian church, it has been on the forefront of taking in and nurturing vulnerable, unwanted children, including those who are not yet born.

As we launch into 2022, it will be important for us to get the relationship between our words and our deeds right.

Justice and mercy must never, ever replace evangelism. The proclamation of the gospel, of what Christ has done for you, must never replace that.

[45 : 22] But on the other hand, justice and mercy must not simply be an ends to a means in order to evangelize. There is a royal dignity imprinted on every single human being and so can I say, brothers and sisters, let that sink into your heart, let it sink into your minds, as you share communion and morning tea together this morning.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, burden us to look upon one another first with awe and reverence and not with difference and suspicion.

I pray that as a result, your name would be exalted as relationships here between different groups and some Paul's deepen and sweeten.

Amen. Amen. Number one to big