

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Everybody is a somebody

Presented by David Reay

One day in 1944, a fire broke out in a circus being held in the New England region of the USA. Many were killed. In time, bodies were identified by relatives or friends. Except for one body. That of a small girl, aged about 8. She had died of smoke inhalation so her body was not burned. When no one came forward to report her as missing, authorities circulated her photo throughout the entire country. No one ever identified her. No one recognised her as a friend or family member. She was buried in an anonymous grave, unknown to any other human being. She became known as “Little Miss Nobody”.

We can scarcely believe that someone can be like that. Utterly unknown. In our hearts, we dread ending up like that. We want to be known, to be understood, to belong. Today let's look at how we are known, are understood, and do belong. The ultimate answer lies not in the other human beings we know, but in the God who knows us. To him, nobody is a nobody.

What are you exactly? One way of answering the question is this. You are iron, enough for a medium sized nail. You are sugar, enough to sweeten seven cups of tea. You are phosphorus, enough to tip a thousand matches. You are sulphur, enough to rid one dog of fleas. And if you are in any way average there is enough fat in you to make seven bars of soap. Plus lots and lots of water. So, that is what you are.

But that doesn't sound right, does it? To be human is to be more than just what chemically constitutes our body. We are not just a collection of elements. And we know this not just because it seems right, but because the very beginning of the Bible tells us so. God did make us out of basic elements of the universe, but he also made us in his own image and likeness. This wasn't so with the gum trees and the goannas, the eucalypts and the echidnas. We are unique.

We matter because not only are we made by God but because we are made in his image. God lavished care on the world he made: he called it good. When he created human beings he quit creating. He couldn't top that. We are the pinnacles of his creative work. We are his masterpieces. True, we are somewhat tarnished masterpieces, but we have essential worth and dignity and value. God doesn't make junk. God doesn't make nobodies.

What does it mean to be in God's image. Certainly it isn't to do with physically looking like him since we realise God has no human body. It is more to do with God planting in us something of his own characteristics, he has put something of himself into us. This explains why human beings have an innate need to relate to something or someone beyond the material. We have spiritual appetites. God has made us for himself and our hearts are restless till they rest in him.

We also have a capacity to relate in general. The very first thing God said was not good in his creation was the aloneness of the first human being. So he made another distinct human being to provide companionship. Human beings were never meant to live as hermits. True, solitude is a valuable and welcome thing for many

of us. But solitude is only helpful when we are also in relationship with others. Otherwise that same solitude curdles into loneliness. So we were made not only for relationship with God but also for relationship with one another. Nobody is a nobody because we need one another. No one is useless or unnecessary no matter how we might feel.

Being in God's image gives us a moral dimension. We have a conscience so as to be able to choose right and wrong. The fact that we choose wrong so often doesn't negate the dignity that this moral sense gives each one of us. Even when those first human beings went badly astray, they still bore God's mark. They still mattered.

And being in God's image gives us a task to perform. We were put on the earth to wisely live in it, to use it though not exploit it. We were put to work by God in it. We are his agents, looking after his precious creation for him. Such a task is not given to nobodies.

Imagine a piece of very old furniture at the back of a garage. One person takes a look at it and sees only a dusty, dirty, splintered bit of wood that is good only for the scrapheap. It has had its day and is now past it. Beyond salvage. Another person looks at the same item and sees a fine piece of workmanship waiting only to be patiently restored to its former glory, waiting for its true value to be revealed again. God sees us in this second way. Battered and a bit grimy, but of great worth. He is ready to get to work on each of us so we become our true best selves. We are not beyond salvage.

In his famous novel, *1984*, George Orwell describes a future society where each individual is relentlessly scrutinised by Big Brother. This unseen yet ever present tyrant controls all that happens in this futuristic society. He can even get inside your head and discern your thoughts. The idea was to bring about a fear based conformity to society.

None of us wants to live under such conditions. And yet, we may well wish to be understood, to have someone forever attentive to us. The Christian faith invites us to embrace a personal God who knows us through and through and who never has his eyes off us. He is, however, a loving father, not a tyrannical big brother. Much of the ancient song that is PSALM 139 is about this God who sees beneath our façade, who knows what lies behind our often confident exterior. Nobody remains a nobody in relationship to this God. None of us is a number or a symbol or a typecast category. We are unique individuals whose uniqueness is embraced and understood by the one who created this uniqueness.

Even before we were born, God knew us. He didn't just start getting interested in us when we were born. Or when later on we became useful to him. He loved us even in the womb. We are in fact the product of his creative will. We are not born into the world anonymous ciphers who are mere statistics. We are born as individuals fashioned by God and loved by God irrespective of our looks, our culture, our usefulness.

We can and do put on a certain persona in order to get through life. We create impressions. Most people do not or cannot get beyond these impressions. Our real self remains hidden. Fair enough in that we don't want all and sundry to know all there is to know about us. But it is good to have at least one or two who can get beneath the surface and truly grasp who we are beyond the roles we play and the masks we wear.

Even when others can't or won't understand us. Even when we can't even understand ourselves, God has no such difficulties. We are never somehow left to wallow in our isolation or loneliness as if no one can see our true selves. We are never nobodies. Of course, we can see this business of God knowing all about us as being disturbing too. It is in fact sobering that we can't hide anything from him. But remember that God is no big

brother, he is a loving father. He doesn't use his knowledge of our guilty secrets as a weapon against us. He invites us to come to him and be changed and he goes on loving us.

We can also feel like nobodies if we are dislocated. We may move out of home, or shift to a different area. We may travel. At such times, we may be tempted to wonder if we really are all alone without our supportive human networks. The PSALM 139 reminds us that God is everywhere. He is not some local deity whom we leave behind when we move. Wherever we are, he is there too.

So no height is too high for him. No depth too deep for him. No darkness too dark for him. No sadness too sorrowful for him. No joy too incomprehensible to him. He never goes on holidays or has rostered days off. He never has a full diary and never calls in some locum God if he is off duty. He never gets in a bad mood or stays sick in bed. The promise of God's presence is the bottom line promise of Scripture. People like Moses and Jeremiah and the first disciples of Jesus were told they had tough assignments to carry out. They weren't promised an easy road. But they were promised the presence of God. And that was enough.

I am known and utterly understood by God. In all my ambiguities and all my shadows and all my confusion. I am valued by this God who made me and who regards me as the pinnacle of his creation. I am not some miserable, lonely, misunderstood individual who is somehow orphaned in the universe. I am made by God, loved by God, valued by God, understood by God. I am a somebody, not a nobody.

Jack Millthorpe was an orphan, born in the early years of the 20th century. He was cared for in an orphanage in the West Country of England. His carers did their best but little Jack never felt as if he really belonged. He wanted to be part of a real family. One day, as he walked in the village where he lived, he saw a man and a boy playing cricket on the village green. But Jack saw more than that. He saw a relationship between a father and a son. He saw the giving and receiving of love. He saw belonging.

It was all too much. So with an aching heart, he turned away and skirted the green to go back to his carer's home. As he did so, the father called to his son and pointed in Jack's direction. The boy came over to Jack with the cricket ball and shyly offered it to him as an invitation to join the game. Jack struggled to accept the invitation, but finally did so. He took the ball, went out onto the green and became not only part of a game, but also at least for a time, part of a family.

This is a picture of how God uses Jesus to invite us into his family. A picture of how we move from orphaned onlookers to much loved children. The difference being that our membership in God's family is for keeps, not just for the duration of a game. Trust in Jesus for forgiveness for our wrongdoings gets us into God's family now and always. We get to call God dearest father. We see ourselves differently from that point on. If God calls me child, and I call him Father, then I can never regard myself as a nobody.

My own father may have abused me. Or neglected me. Or simply wasn't there for me. Or was emotionally distant from me. All that might push me to believe I am a nobody. Embracing the Christian faith by trust in Jesus gives me a fresh start with a Father who won't fail me like any human imperfect father might have done. I am secure knowing I am loved by the one who is the model of all good human fatherhood. I am not about to be rejected if I don't turn out the way expected. I am not going to be marginalised as someone else gets more attention than me. I am not going to be left defenceless in the face of threat. I am safe. I belong.

This ultimately is what gives me my value and security. Our culture might say otherwise. It is my looks: I have to be beautiful, and the right shape. It is my intellect: I have to be knowledgeable and articulate and excel in academics. It is my material success: I must be wealthy or on the road to being wealthy, and I must

always have the best. To be captive to this sort of thing is like being in one of those funground mirror mazes. We look into a distorted reflection of reality and some of us, sadly, believe the lie.

Our parents may have given us the subtle or not so subtle message that we don't quite measure up unless we achieve this or that. Acceptance depended on good behaviour. Even a sort of graceless religion can cause us to feel we are nobodies. The sort of religion that endlessly talks of how sinful we are without the corresponding or even greater stress on the mercy of God. Angry preachers or leaders who lash out at people for being imperfect are at the very least unbalanced and at worst plain untruthful.

We do fall short of God's standards and need the mercy of Jesus. But our falling short doesn't make us worthless beings who are somehow rescued by God despite his uneasiness about us. We are loved to the limit by this God who didn't spare the life of his Son so we could be in relationship with him. Imperfect we may be, but we are not worthless. We are not nobodies.

This God invites us into relationship with him now and forever. We can scarcely imagine God would want to spend eternity with people he found distasteful, with nobodies. And this same God gives himself to us when we accept his forgiveness. We receive his Holy Spirit who lives in those who follow him. Again, we can't imagine God indwelling walking talking bits of rubbish. God has done what he has done for us not because we were useless nobodies, but because we were struggling somebodies.

Let's hear for ourselves those reassuring words from Psalm 139, reminding us that nobody is a nobody, and everybody is a somebody.

7 Where can I go from your Spirit?

Where can I flee from your presence?

8 If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

9 If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,

10 even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.

11 If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me
and the light become night around me,"

12 even the darkness will not be dark to you;
the night will shine like the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

13 For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.

14 I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.

15 My frame was not hidden from you
when I was made in the secret place.
When I was woven together in the depths of the earth,

16 your eyes saw my unformed body.
All the days ordained for me
were written in your book
before one of them came to be.