

Easter 2 2008 – What It Means To Be Human

Exodus 14 vv 10-31 p71, Exodus 15 vv20&21 p73, Acts 2 vv 14-32 p1093, 1 Peter 1 vv 3-9 p1217 John 20 vv 10-31 p1089

There has been a lot of controversy in the media and in Easter pulpits about the latest Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill. The main points of disagreement appear to be as follows:

- The idea that human DNA could be grafted into the eggs of animals and that the resulting embryo could be allowed to develop for up to 14 days. The rationale is that this would enable scientists to study better how embryos develop and might lead to cures for such dreadful conditions as Motor Neurone Disease.
- A clause to reduce the age at which abortions may be performed from 24 to 20 weeks. This arises because developments in perinatal care have made it possible for increasingly premature babies to survive.
- A clarification of the law to permit the selection of embryos in IVF treatment. As things stand, this would definitely outlaw the selection of babies on the basis of gender, physical appearance etc. It would, however, allow the selection of babies whose tissues could be used for the medical treatment of older brothers or sisters (so called saviour siblings). There is a suggestion that deaf parents should be able to choose a deaf baby because a deaf baby would fit in better with the deaf community to which the parents belong.
- Clinics providing fertility treatment would not have to consider the need of any child so conceived for a father and Lesbian couples conceiving by IVF would be able to have both their names entered on the birth certificate as parents and not the name of the man who is the actual biological father.

Given the history of these things, I think it is only fair to assume that these proposals are not the end of the road. Once we have got used to animal cells with human DNA being allowed to develop in the laboratory to 14 days, someone is bound to suggest that scientists could learn even more if they were allowed to develop for longer or if they could be implanted in a womb. When we have got over the yuk factor in the thought of deliberately manufacturing a baby to provide stem cells for an existing child with some horrendous disease, we shall gradually acclimatise ourselves to taking other tissues and organs for other, possibly less serious, conditions.

A further point of controversy has been the government's attempt to whip this Bill through parliament. The Bill evidently raises complex and difficult ethical issues on which the world's religions and moral philosophies have an important contribution to make. MPs have always in the past been allowed to follow their consciences when such matters have come before parliament. On this occasion, they are to be whipped into passing the Bill, leading many of us to infer that a new secular morality is being forced on society. This attempt to compel people to act in opposition to their consciences is also morally flawed.

The point at issue is *What is it to be a human being?* Science, without the benefit of religion, tends to answer that we are nothing more than the matter we are made of. The solar system coalesced out of clouds of gaseous vapour. One particular planet around one particular sun just happened to have the right conditions for life to develop. By chance, natural selection

and the survival of the fittest, we are what we are and that is all there is to it. Law and culture, therefore, are nothing more than human constructs. Neither is morality. There is no judge outside ourselves to weigh our conduct. This life is all we've got. The difference between us and the animals is quantitative, rather than qualitative. In other words, we are much more intelligent than most animals, but essentially we are the same as they are. It is interesting to ask from whence, if people think that this is what it is to be human, we obtain our supposedly inalienable rights?

The Church teaches something very different about what it is to be human. Yes, we are made of the dust of the ground, but we believe that essentially the universe makes sense. The universe exists and things are the way they are because they are the product of the Mind of God. It is God Who creates life and, therefore all life is sacred. We cannot do just as we please even with the animals. Their life is God-given. God cares about them and we are answerable to God if we do not treat other living things with respect.

This is enough to make us question whether we ought to be using animal cells as hosts for human DNA. Even if this is OK, could this be a first step on the path to genuine human/animal hybrids? I am sure that this further development would be hard to resist if scientists claimed that such hybrids might lead to cures for terrible diseases or even if someone foresaw that the creation of such hybrids might be to someone's commercial advantage.

The Bible says, however, that we are something qualitatively different from the animals. God formed us from the dust of the earth and breathed into us the breath of life. There is something of the divine in us. We are made in the image of God. The universe makes sense because it is the product of the Mind of God. We can make some sense of the universe; we can make some sense of our own lives because we are made in the image of God and our minds are capable of relating to His Mind.

Today's readings teach us much more. God cares about the human race en masse. He is involved in the destiny of nations. He cares about each one of us individually. That is why we can pray to Him in all our troubles and in all our joys. He cares for every single human being on this planet.

This makes us very cautious about abortion or the creation of foetuses or embryos for specific purposes. Human beings exist in their own right, in and for themselves, and for the glory of God. We cannot treat human beings as if they were commodities to use as we see fit or even as if they were animals whom we may own and use as pets or beasts of burden or for their wool or pelt or meat.

At what point of development a fertilised egg or embryo or foetus ought to be regarded as a human being, deserving of the respect we are obliged to give to all human beings, is a debatable point. Science helps us towards the answers we need, but it cannot alone provide those answers. For the scientist, as a scientist, experimenting on a human embryo may be little different from experimenting on an ape embryo, but, for the scientist as a human being,

it is something quite different. The embryo is alive. It is human. It is therefore human life and qualitatively different from animal life. There is a debate to be had about whether it is ever legitimate to perform an abortion, to carry out experiments on human embryos or to create human embryos artificially with the intention of implanting only some of them to develop in a womb and allowing others to die. It is also debatable whether, if we do create embryos and implant only some of them, it is right to choose those embryos which we believe are most likely to develop into the people we want – sibling saviours with the bone marrow a sick older brother desperately needs, a child we know is safe from the curse of some inherited disease to which his family is susceptible, a child who fits in to the deaf community because he is deaf, a child who is a he because his parents want a boy, a child who is intelligent because we need smart people, a child who is strong but dull because we want labourers to do boring jobs, or perhaps just good-looking because the parents fancy a designer baby. All these things are possible, at least theoretically. The question is, *Are they right?* We need to understand the science if we are to answer these questions, but science alone cannot give us final answers.

God also cares what sort of people we are. God is love and God judges us human beings by that standard of love. He cares whether or not we are good people. He judges us. That is why it is important for us to examine our lives and to confess to Him where we go wrong, to ask His forgiveness and to repent. It matters what we do. It matters what we don't do. And it matters to God what we do collectively as a nation just as it matters to Him what we do as individuals. Making laws is a moral activity and legislators must be guided by their consciences.

I think all this is implicit in today's readings. There is, however, of course, much more to the Easter message. God loves each one of us so much that Jesus dies for each and every one of us. That is how valuable human beings are and determines how we ought to treat one another. He says, *This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.* Jesus rises from the dead and pours out the Holy Spirit of God upon the whole of creation. If we individual human beings will only accept His love, He enters our hearts. We dwell in Him and He in us. This is what it really is to be fully human, to be one with Christ and He with us. We cannot treat human beings as being of less than infinite value.

Moreover, this unity with God is our eternal destiny. What God created human beings for is to dwell eternally in His Love. Any bill before parliament which treats human beings as less than the children of God deserves to be thrown out.

Being made in the image of God, we human beings are called to live in relationships one with another. Among the most precious of these relationships are our family relationships. The Bible and the Church teach that the basic family relationship is a heterosexual couple, who have made a life-long commitment to one another in marriage, their love for their children, their respect for their own parents and their wider responsibilities to their kith and kin. One can argue for polygamy, promiscuity, serial monogamy (i.e. marriage, divorce and remarriage) same sex relationships and all sorts of possibilities for relationships in which people may choose to live and find fulfilment of their various emotional and sexual needs.

One may be censorious, understanding or non-judgmental about other people's life styles, but one cannot get away from the fact that the Church has always taught, in full accordance with what the Bible says, that the norm is either to be celibate or to live in heterosexual marriage.

We must regard with some suspicion, therefore, deliberate attempts to create by artificial means families without fathers and to put misleading information on birth certificates.

These issues all raise very difficult questions. Scientific knowledge gives us some of the information we need as we search for answers. Science alone cannot, however, provide the answers. We also need other human insights from religion, moral philosophy, the arts and the wider culture. MPs have a difficult job legislating these issues and they need our support in prayer and in other ways.

God has made us free. He has given us the power to choose. He has therefore given us moral responsibility. MPs, no less than any other human beings, are morally responsible. They have to act according to their consciences. It is therefore improper for either government or the Church to attempt to force them to act otherwise.

We cannot, however, escape the difficulty that a society which no longer has an agreed moral framework within which to discuss these issues may be unable to reach generally acceptable conclusions. We used to discuss these issues in the context of the Christian religion. Now many of us are not Christians. Other people's conclusions will be based on the perspectives of other religions or on an atheistic secularism. My fear is that increasingly our laws are based on an atheistic perspective on what it is to be human, but that is another topic for other occasions. I am sure, however, that we Christians have no choice but to bear faithful witness to the Risen Christ as the Way, the Truth and the Life.