

Humanity and Community



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As we explore the question ‘What is it to be human?’, it is interesting to reflect on the impact that community has on this concept. Is community necessary for us to be fully human and, if so, does this impact our Christian communities? Critical to this reflection is how we allow community to inform our faith and mission as a Church.

Community is defined ‘as a group of people living together in one place, especially practising common ownership’.¹ The Oxford Dictionary extends this definition to a group of people who have religion, race or other characteristics in common. How do we understand ourselves as human within this context? Does community define us or assist in our actualisation as individual humans? More importantly, do we require a community identity in order to understand our humanity? These questions have a direct impact on the way that the church understands its context of mission and on our defence of the Christian faith in an increasingly pluralistic context.

Humanity and Community

Smith² asserts that since the late 19th century the term community has been associated with hope. Community has attempted to nurture our sense of place and being, at times for political advantage and at other times to develop a common language of value and trust. If this is true, then our understanding of humanity within the context of faith is critical to our part within the community. Christianity is contextual. Paul Lehmann³ reflects that there are many ways to do theology but whatever method we choose, we must take seriously its relationship with reality. It is difficult to get any more real than being human; living each day as an individual is existence, the fullness of our humanity.

This fullness or reality of humanity is difficult. During the Easter Vigil this year I wrote this reflection in my journal.

We are never who we really expect to be, or even who others think we are! We can only hope that at some point a dream or belief might be realised. This is how it has always been, though sometimes our dreams and expectations have grown out of all reality. Living is about coming to terms with our current circumstances. So how do we live with our shattered dreams and still not let go of our reality? The pain of resurrection theology is that we need to live with our realised humanity.⁴

In essence, this church was embedding the nature of our humanity into its current community context.



In light of the resurrection readings, I had been thinking about who I was, and who I would become. But more importantly for me, where did I belong? I cannot be a human in isolation; it is a relational existence. Just as God exists as three-in-one,⁵ so we as human beings exist in relationship with others and in relationship with ourselves.

The Easter narrative is a key to this understanding of humanity, as the very human Jesus is crucified and transforms to a risen divine Christ. This understanding of self relationship, which reflects both our relationship with each other and with God, is definitive to our Christian understanding of self. The manifestation of God embraces the whole of reality.⁶ At times this seems like a post modern debate, yet the question of who we are as human beings is not only the remit of our post modern society. Since the time of Christ's resurrection, Christians have struggled with the question of humanity and divinity. In the heart of Paul's letters, Paul himself wrestles with what being human in Christ means.⁷ Is this humanity in Christ any different from our humanity in any other community context? Walter Wink asserts that this question is at the centre of why we need to discover the historical Jesus, so that we can more fully understand our own humanity within our current context.⁸

Wink explores biblical and historical references to the 'Son of Man' by unpacking the significance of Christ's humanness and the implications for this on our understanding of the divine. He tries to recover an archetypal meaning for this concept.

'In our better moments, we may perhaps not only create God in our own image and likeness (which we undoubtedly do), but we may allow ourselves to be created in the image and likeness of the Ultimate in moments of peak insight'.⁹

Understanding our humanity within community

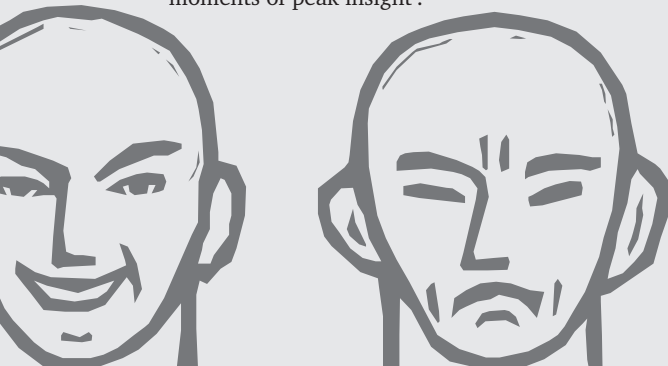
But how do we understand our humanness as being in the likeness of God, and what relevance does this have on our community relationships and our mission? The world wide church has played with this concept in a variety of settings. At the Eighth Assembly meeting of the Uniting Church in Australia in Perth, July 1997, the Assembly affirmed the following statement:

"That male and female are created in the image of God. Inherent in this affirmation is the acknowledgement that:

- each one of us has dignity and is of value;
- each one of us has a right to be welcomed and to participate within the community of God;
- we can celebrate the uniqueness of each individual and be encouraged to respect our differences;
- we allow opportunities for each individual to use their gifts within the community of faith;
- we use and hear language that helps us to feel included within the Church;
- we express our sexuality as the embodiment of God's creation through right and just relationships."¹⁰

In essence, this church was embedding the nature of our humanity into its current community context. This statement was a response to the World Council of Churches (WCC) mandate during the Ecumenical Decade in Solidarity with Women. In the WCC report of the 8th Assembly the following was recorded:

As the church, we seek to live out the biblical affirmation that we are created in the image of God, male and female (Gen. 1:28) and the baptismal vision that there is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave or free, no longer male or female for all of you are one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28)¹¹



The WCC wrestled with how we hold onto the historical wisdom of scripture within our contemporary understanding of humanity. While these appear to be grand statements of hope, and in some ways seem distant from the reality of being human; they remind us that by lifting up themes of liberation and hope in the sight of God we may recognize ourselves in the context of other relationships.¹² Transformation of self occurs when we dare to engage within the mutual support of a community.¹³

Christianity offers a vision and promise of salvation. At times this is recorded as salvation from our humanness, and yet it is in this very humanness which is itself the image of God. We exist in the ultimate mystery of God,¹⁴ discovering our humanity and God in unison. It is this message that is at the heart of our apologetics, and therefore should be at the heart of our understanding of community. It is not enough for us to read, or talk about the incarnation of Christ in our community, we need to live it!¹⁵ The Faithful Cities report published in 2006 posed the challenge that the wellbeing and renewal of cities must be grounded in a vision of justice and human dignity.¹⁶ It is this interrelationship between community, justice and human dignity which is at the interface with our understanding of humanity and community and its formation of our mission and apologetics.

This vision for justice relates to how individuals not only relate to the community within which they live, but how their identity is formed within this community, if our self understanding changes from community to community, and how this impacts our sense of self dignity. Brueggemann¹⁷ observes that for individuals to build identity within society, they must come to accept power. The challenges of life reflect our engagement with community: employment, relationships, death and disappointment. Brueggemann quotes Durkheim's research that meaningful relationships provide us with a more positive self image.¹⁸ When we are part of a community, our relationships nurture us in times of need and in fully realising our potential. This argument seems to indicate that our humanness cannot be fully accomplished outside the bounds of a community, however fragile or nebulous that community might be.

Community Context

Our sense of self then seems strongly linked to our engagement with our community. It involves venturing out of our self isolation;¹⁹ risking friendships and relationships with others and ourselves. But how much does our community define who we are? In many ways our current society allows us to self select our community. We are no longer bound by geographical boundaries which restrict our local community. Many geographical communities are transient or have high levels of transient members. This creates a significant impact on our self perception. The level of internal migration within Britain, while slightly lower in 2006, it is still extensive.

'At the local and unitary authority level within England and Wales, the top ten largest net outflows were all recorded by London boroughs with the exception of Birmingham, ranked second, and Luton, ranked ninth. Of the 32 areas that recorded a net outflow of 1,500 or more, 22 were London boroughs. Of these, 16 also had proportional net outflows equivalent to at least one per cent of their mid-2005 population estimate.'²⁰



This is a significant amount, and is not just about individual units who move and the make up of the community; it also impacts those who are left behind and their image of self.

Geographical community is not the only community which impacts our sense of self or even our sense of place. Communities are found in many systems which attempt to bring order to the chaos of interrelated beings. God and others attempt to bring order to this chaos. God's purpose is often to restore order;²¹ other systems which are imposed do not always have the desired affect.

I recently moved to a new congregation and heard the following comment from a young mum²² in the congregation.

'I am really struggling at the moment; life is hard, particularly at home. I know I need to come to church; I need it 'cause it is tough and it gives me space, but I don't know how to fit it in with the boys' football, school, work, the community centre, mum and all that is going on at home. I know that the church community would help but I feel really pressured. It's all really difficult.'

In context, this woman is really struggling at the moment with who she is, with her sense of human identity. Her communities, which Smith²³ describes as providing signs of hope to identity, are actually strangling her sense of human identity. The disturbing part of this comment (which I have heard in many different contexts) is that the Church community is listed as another pressure, rather than as a sign of hope. This is not about what the church does (it provides the space that she and others are longing for) but, because it is "another community", the pressure is on!

Understanding Humanity within Community – Witness to mission!

The challenge for both our understanding of human identity and for our mission is how the Church is a community which is different from the other communities of which we are apart while still being a community in itself. How are the hope we offer and the positive relationships of power we aspire to signs of human fulfilment rather than pressure? If we return to Walter Winks²⁴ comments about realising God's divinity and our humanness in the everyday experiences of life and community, we may find an answer – how can we create spaces that allow reflection on the essence of being human, and how do we enable this to be life-giving?

A New Mission – or reclaimed humanity

How do we reflect on how we are human in a way that captures the fullness of our individuality rather than our individualism²⁵ and its relationship to the many communities of which we are a part? In many ways it takes us back to the question of whether we are formed or shaped by our community. Or like my young mum, do our communities stress our identity or enable us to realise our potential? For this,

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we need to look deeply into life and extract the good in living.²⁶ We need to be able to recognise the impact that communities have on our individuality, and use this as a tool to reach our full potential – otherwise our humanity is wasted, and we are unable to be the full people we are created to be! As Elaine Storkey reflects, our concern for the individual risks that individual becoming devalued.²⁷ This is the challenge that faces the mission of the Church. We must be the frontier of this realisation of humanity through our understanding of God's incarnate divinity within us. As we see in the material from the WCC, we are created in God's image, and our mission and apologetics need to be at the heart of this self understanding as human persons.¹⁰

The Mission Shape Church²⁸ report stated that a mission opportunity is to connect the church and gospel with the culture it is engaging with, to look at the way that people are living, the communities that they are part of, and begin there. We need to have a passion for the communities of which we are apart. Alister McGrath points out that the Church needs to be firm that 'Christians are special'²⁹ and we are offering something different. We need to hold onto our heritage and assert the values of our community which are realised when our humanity embraces the fullness of Christ's incarnation and in doing so the fullness of our engagement in our communities. As such, Church is not about offering another community to belong to, but is the community that sustains our human identity as creations of the one true God in all our other communities.

Conclusions

'The Christian encounter with God is transformative',³⁰ and as such our understanding of our humanity is critical to our engagement with ourselves and with our communities. We are beings created in the image of God and as such we are required to engage with the human and the divine simultaneously;³¹ we have no choice! This engagement causes us to relate to each other in a particular way as we long to actualise ourselves as fully human. This actualisation cannot happen alone and is only realised in our engagement within community. In our current, and probably historical, context this community is plural and reflects the diversity of circumstances we are faced with in our humanity. As such, the Church's apologetics need to reflect a strong understanding of how the incarnation impacts our humanity and our engagement with our fellow humans. We are not human individuals in isolation. As a missionary community, the Church must offer its truth – we believe in Jesus Christ, the incarnation of God amongst us. This belief requires faith communities to be different and not a replication of other communities of which we are a part. Our Church needs to be a space to reflect on the nature of our humanity, as persons fully engaged with Christ. Our mission is to provide worship, reflection and hope, free of individual power and embracing God's gift to us all – Christ, the incarnation of humanity and divinity, of whom we are created to be part of. We come to understand that, as Wink points out, the son of man is a difficult role model, but our humanity is capable of this embrace!

What we seek is love itself, revealed now and again in human form. The love we seek overrules human nature. Love never counts the cost, to itself or others, and nothing is as cruel as love. There is no love that does not pierce the hands and the feet.³²

This is the essence of our humanity, realised as we engage with God, ourselves and our community - to live out the mission of our faith.



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