



**50th Anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*
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SPEECH

Perth Hebrew Congregation Synagogue
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I would like to begin this address this evening first of all by saying how grateful I am, and how privileged I feel, to be invited to speak to you all on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the publication of the document, *Nostra Aetate*, which is of course one of the documents issued by the Second Vatican Council. This council was a gathering of the bishops of the Catholic Church, called to Rome by Pope John XXIII in 1962, to consider the place and role of the Church in the modern world. The council took five years, finishing on December 8 in 1965, fifty years ago this year. I do want to assure you that my address won't last that long!

While my thanks go to all those involved in organizing this important event, I do want to thank in a special way Rabbi David Freilich and to express my admiration for you Rabbi David. The Jewish community in our city and state is extraordinarily fortunate, and blessed, to have you as their leader. Thank you for your inspiration in conceiving and promoting this event and for your generosity in allowing it to be held in this sacred place. I am honoured to be here.

As some of you may know I was privileged earlier this year to address a meeting of the Western Australian Council of Christians and Jews. This evening I want to share with you all some of the same thoughts I expressed then, albeit in a different context.

I am very conscious that I come among you this evening as the representative of the Catholic community in Western Australia. I hope that my presence with you can be a sign of the growing friendship and mutual respect which is developing between our two communities, Jewish and Catholic. The long history of relationships between our two communities of faith has been a troubled one, to say the least. This evening marks another step, small though it might be, in the journey towards reconciliation. It is a journey which calls our two communities forward, never forgetting the past, but determined to make the future look very different.

I was appointed an assistant bishop in 2007 in Melbourne and Archbishop of Perth in 2012. Prior to that I was a lecturer in theology both here in Perth at Notre Dame University and also, for much longer, at the Catholic Theological College in Melbourne which is a



constituent College of the Ecumenical Melbourne College of Divinity. As a young man I also trained as a teacher. I mention this only to warn you that I can easily slip into lecturing mode. I will try not to do that this evening. Rather this evening I would like to share with you something of my own faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, in the hope that this might encourage all of you, together with me, to reflect on the God who has called us into life and who asks us to live that life as a precious gift given to us by him. A part of God's call to us, I am convinced, is his will that we should live in harmony and mutual respect with all our brothers and sisters, members of the human family. How much more then should Jews and Christians, who acknowledge the same God as Father of us all, reach out to each other with familial love.

At the time of the Second Vatican Council the Catholic Church opened the door to respectful and sincere dialogue with the followers of other religions. It is a door which should never have been closed. As a contemporary Catholic and, in a sense, a child of Vatican II, it is a source of both great puzzlement and deep shame to me that it took close to two thousand years for the Church to arrive at the point at which we now find ourselves. As I will mention again in a moment I carry in my mind's eye the image of an ailing Pope John Paul II standing in prayer at the Western Wall in Jerusalem and placing into a crevice in the Wall a written plea to the Lord for forgiveness for the pain and suffering inflicted on the Jewish people by members of the Church. I'm sure the Pope's words on that occasion are very familiar to many of you:

We are deeply saddened (he wrote) by the behavior of those who in the course of history have caused these children of yours to suffer, and asking your forgiveness we wish to commit ourselves to genuine brotherhood with the people of the Covenant.

Tonight, both personally and as the Catholic Archbishop of Perth, I want to associate myself and, I hope, the community to which I belong, with these words of Pope John Paul II. And of course in asking for the Lord's forgiveness we also ask, humbly, for forgiveness from those who have suffered so much at our hands.

Although when we read it now the *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions*, known by its Latin title of *Nostra Aetate*, and published in October of 1965, may seem rather tentative and timid, it did in fact usher in a new era in Christian and Jewish relations. In the Catholic Church this new understanding, which in many ways was initiated by Pope John XXIII, was confirmed, fostered and deepened by Pope Paul VI, by Pope John Paul II, by Pope Benedict and now by Pope Francis. The leadership of our Catholic Church has been explicit, clear and unequivocal in this matter, not just in words but also in actions, both official and personal. Many of us would be aware of the deep friendship which has existed for many years between Pope Francis and Rabbi Abraham Skorka of Buenos Aires. We will remember, too, the images of the pilgrimages made by Pope Benedict and, as I have already mentioned, by Pope John Paul II to the Holy Land and also of course to the Chief Synagogue in Rome. We might also be aware



of the close boyhood friendships which existed between the young Karol Wojtyla, later Pope John Paul II, and some of the children of his Jewish neighbours in Wadowice, especially the young Jerzy Kluger.

I am very conscious that it was Pope John Paul who in 1986 reminded Catholics that the members of the Jewish faith can be thought of as what he termed "*our elder brothers in the faith of Abraham*". Pope John XXIII had used a similar phrase before him. Pope Benedict would instead call the Jewish people "*our fathers in the faith of Abraham*" as he felt that "*elder brother*" carried echoes of the story of Jacob and Esau, in which the elder brother was rejected in favour of the younger brother. In Pope Benedict's mind at the time, I am sure, was the fact that it is formal Catholic teaching that God has never rejected or repudiated his covenant with the Jewish people.

I am not sure how Jewish people react to either phrase, elder brother or father in the faith of Abraham, but it does occur to me that for most of our 2000 year history, we Catholics, and most Christians generally, have not treated our elder brother, or our father, with the respect and deference he deserves. As the younger brother or a son we have taken a different path in faith to our elders and this inevitably can give rise to resentment, anger, suspicion and even worse. But just as in other families such reactions are in the end a sign, and therefore a cause, of deep and destructive immaturity, so it is with us. And as we know to our cost and to our shame, immaturity, arrogance and hard-heartedness can have terrible consequences. "*Nostra Aetate*" with the full authority of our Church called on Catholics to repudiate all of this. Hopefully we, and all Christians, are learning to do so.

Towards the end of "*Nostra Aetate*" the document reminds us that, and I quote, "*We cannot truly call on God, the Father of all, if we refuse to treat in a brotherly way any man, created as he is in the image of God*" (NA 5). For some the exclusive language may grate, but the sentiment is sound. It is captured beautifully in the prayer composed specially by Rabbi David for tonight's event.

That prayer speaks of God as our heavenly Father, our merciful Father, the Master of the Universe, whose name will be sanctified when we are true examples in fostering harmony, respect and love, not only between our two communities but among all people.

The Fatherhood of God is deepened and in a sense illuminated by the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis. There we are told, in the inspired words of the Torah, that human beings are created in the image of God. This pivotal idea, certainly in the Christian tradition of scriptural reflection and interpretation, is fundamental to our understanding of what it means to be a human person, called into existence by a loving Father. To my embarrassment I must confess that I have very little understanding of the undoubtedly long history of Jewish reflection and interpretation of the particular phrase, "the image of God" or of its meaning within the Book of Genesis or indeed within the whole of the Torah. I am conscious too that my own understanding of the Book of Genesis has been forged



in the context of a typically western philosophical, cultural and linguistic context, as well of course in a Christian context, and this may well differ radically from the contexts in which Jewish thinkers have approached these sacred texts. My hope tonight is simply that as I share something of what my own theological tradition has bequeathed to me it might stimulate all of us here to revisit and deepen our own understandings of this important idea and rejoice in, and allow ourselves to be challenged by, what we perhaps share as our common inheritance.

In the Christian tradition the books of the bible are divided into chapters and verses. The phrase "image of God" comes in the first chapter of Genesis in verse 26. It goes as follows:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen 1:26-28).

From the beginnings of Christianity, there has been a long history of reflection on and interpretation of this phrase. In the past I have had to spend some time studying this tradition and have I think some sense of the many strands of interpretation in Christian thought. Nevertheless, important and valuable as it is to know the history of the various interpretations in our traditions, sometimes it is also good to simply go back to the text and try, difficult though this might be, to read it with fresh eyes.

The fact that the phrase occurs in verse 26 means that there are 25 verses which precede it. It is worth asking ourselves if these earlier verses might give us a clue as to the meaning of the phrase upon which we are reflecting. To help us do this let me make this suggestion. If you were to read this passage, from the first verse to verse 28, to a child and then ask him or her "*What kind of God is being talked about?*" I feel quite sure that many children would say, "*Well, it's a God who makes things*". In the first chapter of Genesis God makes the sun and the moon, the day and the night, the stars in the heavens, all the plants and the animals and then finally people, human beings. It is these, the first humans, whom we are told are made in the image and likeness of God.

Because of the context in which the phrase "image and likeness" occurs, because it comes in other words at the end, and as the high point, of a long presentation of God as a creating, life-giving God, it seems to me quite possible to suggest that we human beings most truly fulfil our calling, our destiny, our vocation, to be the living images of God in the world when we are creative and life-giving. And for this reason I think it is no coincidence that the text goes on to immediately say that God created humanity as male and female and directed them, us, to be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it. To give



life, to nurture life, to care for life, to be at the service of life - this, if my understanding of Genesis has any value in it, is the most God-like thing we can do. And of course, to do the opposite, even if we do so in the name of religion, is the most unlike-God thing we can do. It is to repudiate in the most drastic and destructive way possible the very meaning of our God-given existence.

Of course there is a second presentation of the story of creation in the Book of Genesis. It comes in chapter two. It is it seems to me a much more earthy story. It tells of God making a man out of the dust of the earth and then creating the rich tapestry of animal life among which, however, no companion suitable to be a helpmate was found. And the reason for all this? God expresses it in these words: *"It is not good that the man should be alone. I will make him a helper fit for him"*. It is then that God puts the man into a sleep, takes one of his ribs and forms another human being to whom the man, when he awakes, gives the name "woman" for *"she is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh"*. And this is why, the text goes on, *"a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife and they become one flesh"*. Soon after, in the logic of the story, the man and the woman have intercourse and their son, Cain, is born. In their coming together, in their being fruitful, they are, in the most evocative and powerful way, living out their vocation to be the image of the life-giving God.

As I read and reflect on these extraordinary stories at the very beginnings of our shared sacred texts, I am struck by the fact that it is only when the man and the woman encounter each other, and enter into a relationship with each other, that they really begin to be the images of God they were created to be. They could not do it alone: they had to do it together.

There is a profound truth in all of this about what being human is really all about. It is a truth which is confirmed by our human experience even though at times we can seem to be pushed by inner and outer forces in the opposite direction. Human beings, men and women, you and me - are made for communion, not isolation. We are made for interdependence, not independence. We are made in such a way as to need each other, not in such a way as to be able to stand on our own two feet and go it alone. We are made, in opposition to what Cain seems to be suggesting with his famous question put to God in chapter 4 of Genesis, to be "our brother's keeper". This is why marriage matters, why family matters, why community matters. It is why religious freedom, and religious tolerance, and religious sensitivity matters. It is in fact why any of our rights, or freedoms, or mutual responsibilities, exist. We are, as human beings, inextricably woven together, and the good of one is the good of all. We are made by God to be, in God's creation, the living images of the transcendent one, giving expression to God's creative, life-giving presence in the world through our own life-giving and creative lives. Pope John Paul II, writing to his Catholic brothers and sisters at the beginning of this present millennium, reminded us that, *"my brother or sister is a part of me"*. It is a conviction that comes, initially, from his belief that every human person is made in the image and likeness of God. It is perhaps a vision to which we could all subscribe.



Let me conclude with a further thought which can deepen our reflection, and our prayer, even more, and which takes us back in a sense to where we began. If we are made in the image and likeness of the God who is creative and life-giving, God's ongoing revelation of himself to his Chosen people also enables us to understand that we are made in the image of the God who is Father. Of course fatherhood is intimately related, in our human experience, to the call to be creative and life-giving. But in coming to understand that God is our merciful Father, as Rabbi David's prayer expresses it, we realise that God is not like our fathers, but rather that our fathers, and we as fathers, and also of course as mothers, both physical and spiritual, are called to be like God. He is merciful, he is loving, he is life-giving, and as David's psalm reminds us, his fatherhood finds expression in his shepherding care, as he leads us to green pastures and quiet waters, and as he guides us along the right paths for his own name's sake. Made in his image we too are called to live our lives, and our relationships, in this way. This is the path along which he guides us. This is the way we can sanctify his holy name. This is the gift we can offer to each other as members of the Jewish and Catholic communities, and which we can, together, offer to our society as a precious gift.

May the God of our ancestors, the living God, our merciful Father, enable us through his presence in our lives to be faithful to all that he is asking of us.