

AACC Assembly

Kigali, Rwanda

Opening worship, Biblical reflection

Theme: “Respecting the Dignity and God’s image in Every Human Being” (Genesis 1:26-27)

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1. Introduction

You have chosen one of the most quoted, most loved, and most discussed biblical texts for the theme of your Assembly. This text has played a significant role in the history of the churches, and also in important reflections in the ecumenical movement. As you rightly say, it has to do with how we are - or how we are not - respecting the dignity and God’s image in every human being. Nothing less.

God’s image. Could there be anything more precious than that in the world? We cannot see God, the source of life, of all goodness, of justice, of love, and of dignity. However, we can see the image of God. Everywhere, every day. In every, absolutely every human being. Whoever we are, whatever age, colour of skin, gender, character, orientation or background, culture, position, whatever make us who we are - we carry all the image of God.

This theme is - unfortunately - very timely. In many places of the world, but also in this continent. The human history started - as far as we know - in this continent. The greatest richness of the genes of humanity can be seen and studied here. This continent and the human beings here have often been able to show to the world what human dignity means in practice, particularly through your traditions of sharing and belonging, expressed in the wonderful words of *Ubuntu*. As far as I have understood Ubuntu, it expresses how we are human *together*, that we cannot be real humans if we are not being humans together, and only together.

The peoples of this continent have experienced some of the most devastating attacks in human history on human life and human dignity. The slavery business became a system of inhumanity, a global system of suppression of people and their God-given dignity, treating people as

animals, selling them, transporting them to other continents as a commodity, often at the cost of their lives.

Later on political systems like apartheid were developed to suppress some parts of the population, according to their ethnicity and colour of skin, using them as cheap labour. It even got a kind of theological backing. People of African descent have experienced and do experience something of the same in different forms in other continents.

In addition to that, your lands and livelihoods were colonized by other countries and empires, mostly from the north. Today great commercial powers are exploiting your enormous natural resources for the profit and benefit of a few. The financial and economic systems has left millions systematically in more or less permanent poverty, unemployed, many with the sense of being second class or third class citizens. Even after de-colonizing there are many who experience that political and economic systems are not serving the wellbeing, the dignity and rights of all through systemic corruption and lack of good governance.

Many are uprooted due to conflicts or lacking perspectives for the survival of today and tomorrow. The numbers of refugees, internally displaced people, stateless people, victims of trafficking, and other migrants who move due to the economic realities are many, particularly in this continent. There are drowning people from this continent every day in the Mediterranean Sea, striving for another future, making the sea a graveyard. Ships who tried to rescue them from drowning - caused by risks created by cynical human smugglers - have been denied access to a harbour in Europe. There are in this continent people killed in internal wars and conflicts in many countries, much of these atrocities are so cruel we hardly can imagine it. The list is long to tell the attacks on human lives and human dignity. Yes, your theme is timely. Almost too timely.

Still, with all these threats to human dignity and human rights, I want to emphasize that there is a focus on human dignity in Africa - regardless of who you are - that corresponds to the Biblical way of describing the dignity of every human being. It can also be a challenge for all of us to reflect on the dignity of every human being in the light of the Biblical message.

2. Three Biblical texts about the dignity of every human being given by God

I want to read the text from Genesis 1 in the light of two other biblical texts that also have a lot to say about what it means to be created by God, in the image of God. God respects the dignity and God's image in every human being, and we are called to do the same.

Let us read all three texts: Gen 1:26-28; Mark 10:13-16; Romans 12:9-17.

How do we define, see, respect and protect human dignity today? As churches we have an enormous task in showing how our faith in God, and how the word of God to us as human beings gives us our dignity as human beings. The significant texts we have read can help us to open our eyes and to be courageous in our fight for human dignity.

Why read Genesis 1 in the light of the text about Jesus and the children? It is definitely about children, yes, and I will come back to that. But actually it is a text about all of us and to all of us, maybe not even first of all to children, but definitely about them as well.

The text from the letter to Romans describes the life as Christians together, "not being conformed to this world" (Romans 12:2). What does the life united with the crucified and risen Christ mean in terms of dignity and honour?

3. Dignity is a gift from God

To be created by God in the image of God is first of all a matter of relationship - to God. We are defined by this relationship to God our creator. It is by God's free decision we have been given life and have our identity as human. "Let us make humankind in our image" (Gen 1:26). It is our relation to God our creator that first of all makes us human with human dignity.

It is the same God that has created me and you and every human being. It is the same God that calls everyone out of the broken fellowships caused by sin from human beings. God calls us out of exclusion and into the kingdom of God. It is the same human being, belonging to this humanity with all our misery that is also invited into the arms of God, into the kingdom of God for time and eternity. It is the same God that gets angry when somebody tries to create obstacles for others to

sense that they belong to the creator, to the loving God, and to the fellowship God has created us for (this text about the children is the only text in the New Testament that talks about Jesus become angry, indignant).

It is the blessing from God that affirms our dignity given in creation. God blessed the first human beings. The text from Genesis is even pointing from the very beginning to the children, to the next human beings coming after the first, as a blessing from God. Jesus not only received the children, against the logic of ancient traditions that the dignity and the status of human beings only can be granted through maturity and age, or even positions of “honour” in family or community. Jesus received the children and blessed them, giving them all the status and honour God the creator and God incarnated in Jesus Christ gives to any human being.

It is this gift of God’s honour and dignity that the fellowship in the Church should provide in a clear and strong form through the mutual love and blessing of one another. It should even go beyond the limits we naturally would do: “Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse them” (Romans 12: 10.14)

4. Dignity is given in fellowship

We are created into fellowship. Human beings are unique persons, but we are never defined and understood in the Biblical texts only as individuals. Thus, we do not have our dignity separately, alone, isolated from one another. Fellowship it is really about being created as human.

This is also the core messages of Genesis 1: 26-28. Human beings have their unique value and dignity not related to a special capacity or ability. Human beings are created to fellowship, relationship with God and with one another. They are created with diversity, as male and female. They are different, but still belonging together. The strange plural form (let us create) has a corresponding expression in the creation of human beings as plural. They are always more than one, created for the sake of love and care in a fellowship.

This is also the message in the text where Jesus receives the small children. The text gives no occasion to romanticize about children. We can say a lot - as parents and grandparents - about how cute, how lovely they are. We also know the limitations of children in terms of capacity and maturity. The story about Jesus and the children is not

focusing on their not fully developed maturity as an adequate reason for not being fully integrated in the fellowship of the kingdom of God; to the contrary. The story has a very clear focus, raising the question: Who have or can have the right relationship to God, who can belong to the kingdom of God? The disciples did not understand this, to the extent that they actively obstructed the small children to be received by Jesus. There are important messages here - echoing the creation text - of utmost importance for our reflection on human dignity as being part of a fellowship:

The creator *God (represented in the incarnated God) that gives us our dignity that brings us into fellowship.* That becomes clear through *the word of God.* Like in the creation story, God speaks to human beings and make them connected to God and the dignity and the calling God gives them. The text in the Gospel of Mark chapter 10 about the children comes immediately before the text about the rich man who wanted to have eternal life. However, he was so great in himself and his richness so enormous that he became too small-minded and unable to make the necessary priority and commitment to be able to follow Jesus (Mark 10:17-27). His self-made dignity became an obstacle for receiving the dignity Jesus came to give that could include him in the fellowship. Again, the disciples where disturbed, astonished by the message from Jesus. "Who can then be saved?" they finally asked.

Again, Jesus has to emphasize that it is God who creates our lives, is also the one who can include us in the fellowship of God. "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." (v.27) The dignity God gives through action, through speaking to us, through receiving us, trumps any other opinion or action, and that is what makes us citizens of both the human fellowship and of the kingdom of God.

We are loved and called by God, being whatever age or level of understanding and maturity or capacity we have, we can belong to the fellowship God has meant us to be part of. The Church must, therefore, be very clear in the way we speak the Word of God, so that the Church is including and not excluding. The Word of God should be challenging those who need to be challenged, and encouraging those who need encouragement. We need to pray to God that we understand how we preach, in words or deeds, so that we are not excluding anybody from their dignity and the fellowship God invites them to.

It is the child's absolute *need for being part of a fellowship by being invited, by being received and recognized, that makes the difference.* It is not the capacities, skills, status etc in itself that qualify us for the dignity God gives us and we should offer one another in our fellowship. This is true for all who are marginalized, oppressed, excluded, and it becomes even more clear when Jesus shows it in the relation to children: It is by our pure being, human being, that we are loved, honoured, and therefore, should be fully included in the human fellowship.

Therefore, the text is a message to all of us. To be created is to be in need of fellowship, to be recognized and included in a fellowship of care, of guidance, of learning, of sharing, of playing, of worshipping, of creating new relationships to those who are strangers, or even more challenging: to those who see us our enemies: "Hold fast to what is good ... rejoice in hope ... extend hospitality to strangers ... bless those who persecute you... associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.." (Romans 12: 9 ff).

This is the alternative, the contrast to the system of honour and ranking and status of the world. It cannot be said more explicitly than this: "Outdo one another in showing honour" (v 10).

5. The image of God is everywhere, in all human beings

It is a blessing from God and a call from God to live according to God's will in this world, being the stewards of God's creation God meant us to be.

The terminology ("image of God") in Genesis probably comes from very ancient times, from this continent, from Egyptian royal practices. The image of the ruler was placed in every city and village, reminding everybody who is the king or emperor ruling there. The practice is well known today. In most countries, in every official building there is a picture, a photo or a painting, of the head of state.

That we all are carrying this image of God, shows the presence and the lordship of God in the whole world. It is in a way a "democratisation" of the concept.

The image of God. In the likeness of God. There are many ways to interpret what these expressions mean. Some have said that it is an analogy - a likeness to God in terms of substance of being a human be-

ing: our immortal soul. Others have proposed that it is an analogy related to our rationality and our ability for moral discernment, or an analogy to the “lordship” over the world.

If these concepts are understood as relationship, it is not something in our character or substance as human beings that is qualifying us to this dignity. Therefore, those capacities are not in itself changed by the reality of sin; it is the relations to one another and to God that are affected. The sin is that we are not accepting the role of being the image of God but attempt to be in God’s place.

The message I have emphasized here is how the beautiful words about the image of God leads us to recognize it in every human being, calling us to be open and inclusive fellowships, signs of the coming kingdom of God.

Let us not make it difficult or unclear what is clear. What is difficult for us, is to act accordingly: To do the will of God, to preach the word of God clearly, to show that we need one another and the recognition of one another. We need to learn from one another, to be inspired by one another, to honour one another, and to love one another. To be human. To have our dignity.

That is also why we have the one ecumenical movement.