

Waxing Lyrical

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By Rev Paul Graham

Read Genesis 9:1-7



It would have been sometime in 1983, possibly 1982, that the Graham family made the long journey from the familiar surroundings of Birmingham for a day out in the bright lights of London. Among the delights that offered themselves to us on that day was a trip to Madame Tussauds waxwork exhibition, where we spent a happy few hours wandering around the many mannequins and models that look uncannily like the people that they are meant to represent. A particular highlight for me was the Doctor Who exhibition, where a cactus-spined Tom Baker[\[1\]](#) greeted our arrival to the TARDIS and K-9 all but wagged his plastic tail in his enthusiasm to see human visitors for once, rather than alien foes.

The only disappointment for me was that I wasn't allowed a trip to visit the Chamber of Horrors, even though the stairs down to this most intriguing of displays was (to my memory at least) tantalisingly close to the Doctor Who exhibit. As a bloodthirsty 8/9 year old (and there were very few of my classmates who wouldn't class themselves as such), the chance to see the Iron Maiden (not the band) up close, or other instruments better suited to a Hammer filmset was tempting, but these hopes were dashed by my parents who were obviously more concerned by my sleep patterns than I was. Stuff of nightmares they might be, but to the rabid imaginings of that small child, the more gruesome the better. However, probably also mindful of my propensity to faint at the sight of blood, such delights were denied to me.

Your average Madame Tussauds waxwork dummy is still made in the same way using the same methods and materials as the founder, back from the days when she started exhibiting the death masks of victims of the infamous Reign of Terror to great acclaim around 19th Century London (bloodlust not limited to 1980s kids from Brum). Whether they are politicians, pop stars or characters from fiction, each model is

made with scrupulous attention to detail, so much so that the occasional prank by the real-life version goes unnoticed by the unsuspecting public^[2].

But even with all their creators' expertise and experience, these models are still just static likenesses of the real thing. They may look frighteningly similar, but they are no replacement for the actual person, their experience and essence. Which is just as well, as the ethical and theological arguments surrounding cloning take us into far muddier waters than we find in a London tourist attraction.

Today's reading contains advice given to Noah about life in the post-flood world that he and his family are now in. Much of this is a repeat of the message that God had given to the original inhabitants back at the beginning of it all (Genesis 1:27-28), including the message to "go forth and multiply." But there is a twist, as included in the list of available menu options are the very animals that Noah had just shooed out of the depths of the ark. This is a shift away from the purely vegetarian (even vegan) diet that had been ordained at creation, though fans of rare-cooked meat will continue to be disappointed. As usual, there is more to this than meets the eye, as blood has more significance in the ancient world than we probably give now.

In the time of Noah, blood was thought of to contain the very essence of the person (or animal), and to ingest this was seen as a violation of their (for want of a better word) soul. We lose some of the depth of this even in translation: the original Hebrew text plays on the close similarity between the word *human* (adam) and *blood* (dam) to bring extra emphasis that we miss in our English versions.

Bloodshed, therefore, has greater significance as representing the loss not just of life, but of the fullness of humanity. Such is the importance on the injunction against taking life; the actions of Cain (and proceeding murderers) had marred the image of God in themselves and their victims.

So, what does this all mean to us in our world of 2021, where the rise of vegetarian and vegan lifestyles could be seen as going directly against this edict of God, in the same way as those who like their meat still pink in the middle are just as culpable? Is this to be used as an argument for or against a certain diet? Certainly that's not my aim here, though there are plenty of people who you could refer to if you were interested.

There are also those who would want to make a case for capital punishment, as God's words here could be seen as justification for the full range of reciprocal justice. However, this is also not the place for that, though there are plenty of people who can present their arguments if you are so inclined to give them your time.

What I am interested though in our late-pandemic (we hope) world is the inclusivity of the message that God gives about humanity. If we were to read ahead, we would encounter Abram (latterly Abraham) and the covenant promises that God makes to him and his family (latterly the Jewish people).^[3] These future promises carry the story of the Old Testament forward, focussing on the descendants of Abraham as they go into slavery in Egypt, get rescued, wander around for a few decades before settling down back home, argue about who is in charge, try a few kings with varying degrees of success, ignore a plethora of prophets who warn that they will get overrun and taken into exile if they neglect God, neglect God then get overrun and taken into exile, return from exile to start a massive rebuilding project, all the time waiting for their long-expected Messiah to turn up in the second volume.

But all that is yet to come. The covenant that God makes with Noah is universal. Whether we believe that Noah is literally the father of all humankind once it was all wiped out in a global flood, or that this is parable of important theological intent (or something in between), the point is well made: all humanity is made in the image of God and should be treated with the same dignity and respect that the shedding of blood of any, from the greatest to the least, is of equal significance and tragedy.

And this is an important lesson for us to remember today.

Try this test: next time you read a newspaper (print or online) or follow the news (on screen or online), notice how deaths are reported. It is a sign of editorial prioritising when the main headline is not the loss of life in some remote far-off land, but the latest shenanigans of a celebrity or other personality deemed worthy of our attention. It gets even more noticeable if the incident relates to multiple fatalities, one of whom is a native of these shores. Suddenly, the presence of a Brit among the dead promotes the story in the editors' eyes so that we can mourn their loss as if it's more significant than those who were born on other shores.

But this goes against the whole message that God is giving to Noah here: no-one is more equal in his sight than anyone else. Orwell's pigs might want us to see it differently^[4], but the true understanding of all humanity is that we are equal in the sight of God, all made in the image of God.

Now this is a challenge to us all, especially when we are wronged by someone, or find someone disagreeable, or any number of other reasons that we use to justify ourselves. It's a hard message for us, particularly today when we hear and see so much that seeks to divide us and put us into our little boxes. All are made in the image of God, whether we like or not, and the shocking truth is that we are to treat each other as such.

If it makes it any easier, consider the waxwork models that we find in Madame Tussauds. At the beginning of the process, they are so much raw material: a lump of wax indistinguishable from the next. It is the skill and craft of the modeller that gently teases that lump of wax into a recognisable shape, adding contours, identifiable features and finally clothing to make the person come "to life".

In the same way, we are all made of the same raw material; it is our experiences, heritage, history, opinions, traditions, family, choices and so much more that shape us into the people we are, likeable or not. The challenge is to see the common thread that binds us all into one humanity: the divine fingerprint of the Father that gives us our meaning and identity irrespective of our experiences, heritage, history, etc.

If we can crack this, then we might just be one step closer to the world as God sees it.

Amen.

^[1] From the story *Meglos* (1980), where the Doctor's body print is used by the eponymous villain (who resembles a cactus in his natural form) to try to gain a crystal of great power, thereby conquering the universe, or something like that - the usual fare for *Doctor Who*, to be honest.

^[2] Arnold Schwarzenegger secretly replaced his Terminator alter-ego in 2015, all in the name of charity.

^[3] Genesis 15:4-5, Genesis 17:1-8

^[4] "All animals are equal but some are more equal than others", *Animal Farm* by George Orwell (1945)