

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	19 July 2026
Service:	Eucharist, Seventh Sunday after Trinity
Preacher:	The Dean, The Very Revd Dr Edward Dowler

When we cry, 'Abba! Father! it is that very spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.

The dignity of human beings – the belief that each man, women and child is worthy of honour and respect just because they are human – is a subject that regularly surfaces in debates and discussions. The Bible teaches us that human beings have such dignity for two main reasons.

The first is that we hear right at the very beginning of the Scriptures – in the opening chapter of the book of Genesis that those of us who were at last night's concert heard strikingly set to music by Aaron Copland – that all human beings are created in the image of God: 'God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them'. Each human being, willed, known and created by God, has a dignity that can never be taken away.

Secondly, this dignity is emphasized even more strongly when God unites himself with every human being who has ever lived. By becoming incarnate – by being born as a human person; living and dying as one of us – Jesus gives to every other human person a dignity that, once again, can never be removed, however weak or scorned or suffering or degraded any of us may be.

In today's New Testament reading from Romans, this human dignity finds its expression in the relationship that we have with God. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, we call upon God as 'Abba, Father' and this bears witness that we are God's children; in relationship with him. 'Abba' in this context is an intimate term for Father, rather than the 1970s pop group. For sure, we are not perfect: sinful and mortal. We often as St Paul says earlier in the letter to the Romans, do not do the things we want to do but end up doing the things we do not want to do but none the less we are given this

This dignity is there at the very beginning of life. Newly born babies, or indeed unborn babies, may not seem to be very dignified creatures, because they are completely helpless, cannot speak and soil their nappies – or in the case of the unborn completely depend on their mothers. But our Christian faith teaches us that their dignity does not rest in what they can or cannot do, but because they have been created in the image of God and raised up by Christ.

The same can be said of people at the other end of their lives; of those who are very elderly or ill or debilitated. They too can seem undignified: helpless and dependent on others. And yet they too for the very same reasons are infinitely valuable, infinitely dignified in God's sight, and no less loved by him because their powers are failing.

Perhaps it seems obvious that we should accord human beings such dignity, honour and respect. But that has not always been the case. For example, in the Roman Empire if you had said that all human beings have an inalienable dignity, the vast majority of people would have thought you were quite mad. In the Roman Empire, unwanted babies were often abandoned or exposed to the elements and there was a strict hierarchy of human value from the father of the family at the top to the lowest slave at the bottom: they were totally unequal in dignity. Something quite similar would have been the case in the other empires of the ancient world.

It was into this context that the message of Jesus and the gospel erupted in the first century AD as something new and revolutionary. For the Church insisted that all human beings are made in the image of God and all are raised up by Christ; all relate to God and are able once baptised to cry out in the most intimate of terms, 'Abba, Father', our spirits bearing witness with the Holy Spirit that we are God's children.

The Church has sometimes witnessed effectively to human dignity, for example by caring over the centuries for the poor, the sick and the sorrowful, or by building schools to educate the young. At other times, it has been an imperfect witness to human dignity – for example if we think of religious persecutions, abuse scandals. But that core belief in human dignity remains intrinsic to the witness of both the Old and New Testaments.

If a society no longer had the Christian faith or the Church in any form – if we became what is often called 'post-Christian' – would we continue to keep this respect for human dignity? We can speculate on that, but the evidence of countries like China and the Soviet Union in the twentieth century does not inspire us to be too confident.

Similarly, as it seems that just as – despite some recent encouraging signs – the Christian faith is getting weaker in western countries, new threats to the fundamental dignity of all human beings start to emerge that might previously have been unthinkable.

Just to give a few examples. Recent legislation in this country has permitted pregnancies to be terminated in certain circumstances up to birth. And further legislation continues to be proposed under which doctors, whose guiding principle has always been 'first do no harm', would actively help their patients to commit suicide.

More widely, questions abound about modern warfare and whether respect for human dignity can ever be compatible with modern

weapons capable of killing large numbers of civilians. Moreover, respect for dignity can surely never be compatible with people trafficking which treats human beings as commodities for sale, nor with very widespread pornography which objectivises and dehumanizes them.

In more recent months, questions have abounded about the rise of artificial intelligence. For, while AI will quite probably be able to bring many benefits to humanity, the extent of its use means that plans and decisions that would formerly have been made by human beings will now be made by algorithms which are incapable of seeing the human dimensions of what they do, or the human dignity of those to whom they do it.

There are even some strains of the modern environmental movement that question belief in human dignity. For example, the much-loved national treasure and maker of many wonderful documentaries David Attenborough has described the entire human species as 'a plague on the earth'.

So, finally, what do we do about any of this? Perhaps, as always in the Christian life, the first thing is to look to ourselves: to the ways in which we, intentionally or otherwise, may fail in our own lives to honour the God-given dignity of each human person, to which our Christian faith so clearly attests.

And, more widely, as threats to human dignity seem to grow up everywhere around us, perhaps we might also think of the parable in today's gospel reading. Here Jesus tells of a householder who allows the wheat and the weeds – the good and the bad crops – to grow up together in his field until they are finally separated at the harvest. Ultimately, he encourages us to remember, God will not be mocked. The dignity that he has given to all his children will be recognized and there will be judgment for when it has been ignored. Until then, brothers and sisters, we are entrusted with a hopeful message about the value and dignity of each human

person, created by God and raised up by Christ, which it is our responsibility to honour and joyfully proclaim.