

In 1933 the Chicago world's fair heralded the theme, **A Century of Progress**. What a Century of progress the 20<sup>th</sup> century was. A woman who celebrated her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday remarked on what she had seen in her lifetime; the modern automobile, instead of horses and wagons, trucks move and carry everything, trains that can travel at over 100 mph, bus transportation, the airplane, the telephone, the radio, TV, rural electricity, atomic nuclear power and energy, x-rays, organ transplants, exploration under the sea and in outer space, a man on the moon, computers, laser technology etc. The list of scientific and the technological wonders goes on and on. Truly it was a Century of great progress!

There seems to be endless possibilities for what we humans can do. We have come to believe that nothing is impossible if we set our minds to it. The new is considered better than the old. Anything 100 years old is a genuine antique. When something breaks, we do not fix it, we throw it away and get a new one. Some children are now able to tell time only from a digital watch. Math teachers complain that students can no longer add or subtract without devices

We have looked to science and technology to solve all our problems. Surely, medical research, given enough money and time, will find cures for all our illnesses. We hold out the hope that sophisticated defence equipment will protect us from all the bad people who might want to ever hurt or harm us.

Throughout human history, people have maintained some kind of relationship to the world of nature and to the gods as they perceived them. There was much about life they could not understand or explain. Life continued to be, in many ways, a mystery. Typical of this sense of awe and wonder is the questioning of the Psalmist when he asks in Psalm 8: 3-5,

*When I look at thy heavens,  
the work of my fingers,  
the moon and the stars which thou hast established,  
what is man that thou art mindful of him,  
and the son of man that thou dost care for him?  
Yet thou hast made him a little less than God,  
and thus crowned him with glory and honour.*

In modern times, particularly since the period called the Enlightenment, people have increasingly relied on their own wisdom, convinced that they could break through the mystery surrounding human existence. In our contemporary time, more and more, many have rejected traditional concepts. And God has been pushed from the centre to the perimeter of our world.

You may recall a time not so long ago when it was officially declared that God was dead. For many sophisticated, modern men and women, God is indeed dead so far as they are concerned. If there is no God, then we must save ourselves.

Humanism has become the religion of our day, placing faith not in what God can do, but in what we can do. Human progress with all its marvellous advances, has resulted in a certain arrogance that nothing is impossible for us to accomplish.

Thus, we see that more and more, we live in an age of anxiety. We are anxious not only what we shall eat and what we shall drink or what we shall wear, but also about many other things. People are frantically building skyscrapers, merging larger conglomerates, acquiring more possessions, more wealth, more prestige, and power.

In the beginning, God said, *let us make man in our image, after our likeness. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them.* Ever since, men and women have been creative, spirited creatures, a little less than God.

Instead of being content to be in the image of God, to be like God, many of our society has set about taking the place of God. Trying to be God, placing ourselves at the centre of the universe. Lacking faith in a Creator, we have turned our faith inward, becoming self-centred, narcissistic, and egocentric. Our goal in life is self-fulfillment, self actualization, self-expression, self realization, achieving our human potential. Too much possibility thinking has gone to our heads.

There is another side to our human story. In Genesis, we read how the Lord formed *man out of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being.* We are dust from the ground. We are like God, but we are also like all the other creatures of the face of the earth. We have a soul, but also a body. We are spiritual, but we are also physical with possibilities but also with limitations. We are finite, but also infinite; facing life, but also facing death; like God but not God.

Our human possibilities are limited by the parenthesis of birth and death. We are creatures with a name, a life history, and a mind that speculates about atoms and immortality. Also, we are of nature and we are hopelessly in it. We are dual, up in the stars and yet housed in a heart-pumping, breath-gasping body. We are literally split in two, having an awareness of our splendid uniqueness, yet we go back into the ground and disappear forever. This is the basic insight of psychology; that we are a union of opposites. This is the constant thing about people in all periods of human history and society.

Paul describes the inner conflict produced by our human paradox. I will paraphrase: I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. So, then it is no longer I that does it, but the sin which dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. For I delight in the law of God, in my in-most self, but I see in my members, another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am. Who will deliver me from this body of death? (Romans 7:15-24).

It is the fear of death, of facing our mortality, that we struggle against. In our self-centredness, we are indispensable. We seek to extend and prolong life, putting off for as long as possible the time when this world will no longer be blessed with our presence. The fear of death motivates our efforts to accumulate possessions, to seize power, to seek frantically to fill up every minute of every day with restless activity. In the process, we become more concerned about the quantity, rather than the quality of life.

As we reflect on the quality of life, we may think of the inscription on a tombstone in a cemetery: ***Remember all who pass me by, as you are now, so once was I. As I am now so you shall be. Prepare yourself to follow me.*** Some passerby, noting those lines, had written underneath: ***To follow you is not my intent, unless I know which way you went.***

This then, is our human paradox. Each of us is a mystery mixture of spirit and body, possibility and limitation, altruism and selfishness, love and hate, good and evil. Like Humpty Dumpty or Adam and Eve, after they had a great fall, we have difficulty in putting things back together. Either we lean too much toward believing that our possibilities are boundless, or we become earthbound by our

limitations and are unwilling to take risks. So unwillingly are we to face our human paradox that we run away from it, refusing to deal with its implications. It is much easier to devote ourselves to trivial pursuits. It is much easier to become compulsive workers or players or drinkers or gamblers, just to keep busy so we do not need to resolve this tension, face this paradox.

In other times, peoples' faith in God, in the Creator, enabled them to live with this paradox. They realized that life had its limitations and its mysteries. They stood in awe and reverence before that which they could not comprehend. But it is not so with us today. In trying to stand on our own feet, without outside support, we have nowhere to turn for help. We must turn to those who are closest to us, a loved one, a teacher, a boss, a leader, a doctor, a therapist, some outside support, someone to lean on. Alas, all of these are also men and women like you and me who have their human paradox to face. No one can fill the role of God for another person. We need then to acknowledge the reality of our human paradox. We need to see the world as it really is in relation to our situation as creatures. It then means facing up to our natural impotence and death, rather than living a lie of pretending we can do everything.

We are not so much biological as theological beings. We share not only this worldly existence, but also another worldly existence. As such, we need a second reality, a better world than the one given us by nature. Inherent in our human nature is the need for a truly religious outlook.

For Kierkegaard, the basic formula for faith was that mankind is a creature who can do nothing, but he exists over against a living God for whom everything is possible.

I invite you now, in your mind's eye, to picture a circle. If there is someone here with you, picture two circles, or one for each member of your family, pushing and shoving, bumping into each other as each of us is the centre of the world, of our world, a self-centred kind of existence in which we are constantly struggling, pushing and shoving against one another. Now please imagine a compass, drawing one large circle. In the centre, at the compass point, is God. Each of us is at some point on the circumference of that one large circle. As you begin where you are to draw a line, or to move from where you are toward God, at the centre, you will also notice you are coming closer to one another. In this way, we come to see the difference between making ourselves the centre of the universe and recognizing that God is the centre of all things.

*The Lord spoke to the prophet Jeremiah, saying, arise and go down to the potter's house. So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do. Then the word of the Lord came to me; can I not do with you what this potter has done? Behold, like the clay and the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, says the Lord. Jeremiah (18:1-26).*

Have thine own Way Lord, have thine own way!  
Thou art the potter, and I am the clay.  
Mould me and make me after thy will,  
while I am waiting, yielded and still. Amen.