

PLANNED FOR GOD'S PLEASURE

Unless you are a bishop, a preacher in this pulpit is required to follow the themes established by the Vicar. These themes are, of course, decided in the power of the Holy Spirit and through much prayer and fasting by our good and devout Vicar, Ken, so I have no argument with simply accepting his topic suggestions.

Like the Centurion who came up to Jesus I can say "For I also am a man set under authority." I know how to give orders, and I know how to accept orders. I have no problem in doing as I am told.

However...

Sometimes, I think God in his infinite goodness gives Ken a particularly tricky topic to deal with. And Ken, overflowing as he is with the milk of human kindness, delegates the tricky topic to some poor lay preacher.

And so this week's struggle with the topic began.

We are preaching these few weeks from Rick Warren's marvellous book, *The Purpose Driven Life*. It's a terrific book. I heartily recommend you buy a copy. I recommend you spend the 40 days going through each of the daily devotions. Even the most mature Christian will benefit from doing it. For the new Christian it is full of great stuff to think about our faith, about God, about Jesus, about the Christian life, about eternity. For the mature Christian it can cause you to reassess your Christian life. It will remind you of stuff you have let slide away. It will refresh your soul and improve your life and help you to lose 5 kilograms. OK. Maybe not that last bit, but apart from its weight loss impact, everything else I said about Rick Warren's book is true.

So why am I crooked on Ken for giving me today's topic?

Well, to start with. The title.

The topic is titled *Planned for God's Pleasure*.

I read this title, *Planned for God's Pleasure*, and said, *What is he talking about? Am I some kind of God Toy? Did God create me just so he could have fun watching me screw up? What does it mean to be made for God's PLEASURE?*

OK, I said. I guess I had better read what Rick Warren is saying here. So let me read it to you. Rick writes:

You were planned for God's pleasure.

The moment you were born into the world, God was there as an unseen witness, smiling at your birth. He wanted you alive, and your arrival gave him great pleasure. God did not *need* to create you, he *chose* to create you for his own enjoyment. You exist for his benefit, his glory, his purpose, and his delight.

OK. But you know, this didn't help me. I love the idea that God created me *on purpose*. It is true that God creates us on purpose and for a purpose. But I still felt uncomfortable about the idea that this purpose is simply to give God pleasure.

Well, fortunately, Rick Warren's book is not the final authority on theology, and it is equally fortunate that Rick relies on the Word of God as found in the Bible. So maybe we should go to the source of these Rick Warren ideas, and see if we can understand what Rick is saying a little better.

Rick quotes Ephesians 1:5 as evidence of his proposition that we are "planned for God's pleasure." Ephesians 1:5 says "he predestined us to be adopted as his children through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will."

So this is wonderful. It says we are all children of God, because of what Jesus Christ did. And that this was "in accordance with his pleasure and will."

But wait a minute, this does not say we are planned FOR God's pleasure. It says that he created us because he was pleased to do it, and wanted to do it. The Greek word Paul uses here means *satisfaction* or *delight*. This is a statement about how God feels when he creates you and me. He's a happy God. It gives him pleasure to create us. And he WANTS to create us.

It says less, or perhaps nothing at all, about the purpose for which God creates us.

Let's look at the other references we heard this morning read to us by our faithful lectors.

The passage from Revelation is about the worthiness of God to receive our praise. God is worthy to have our loyalty. After all, he created us and the universe. He created us not just for now, but for Eternity. He deserves the credit. Our response ought to be to live lives of worshipful activity in appreciation of all that God has done.

In the version read in church this morning, the 11th verse reads "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."

But the old KJV translation of the Bible puts this a different way. "Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created." *For thy pleasure* we were created. Now perhaps we begin to see where this idea of being planned for God's pleasure came from. This idea of being created *for* God's pleasure, as opposed to being created *at* God's pleasure. They are not quite the same thing, are they? And one has to say that the KJV translation is much the less reliable here. The Greek word translated as *pleasure* in KJV and as *will* in NIV literally means *a matter of choice*.

Literally, the writer of Revelation is saying that we were created by God as a matter of His choice. That's pretty cool, of course. But being created *at* his pleasure is not the same as being created *for* his pleasure.

Likewise, if we look at the psalm we read this morning, Psalm 149, we see a similar difference. As read in church today, verse 4 says "For the LORD takes delight in his people."

The KJV translation renders it "For the LORD taketh pleasure in his people."

It's a wonderful and blessed thing that we were created by a God that takes delight in what we do. God takes pleasure in seeing how we are going. God really cares about you. He is enjoying our worship today maybe even more than we are.

But there is a difference here. Taking delight in us does not mean that we were created for that delight. I hear that Ken takes pleasure in eating chocolate. But that does not mean he considers himself created for the very purpose of eating chocolate. Ok, bad example.

As a parent you may take a great deal of pleasure in watching a son or daughter do well in exams, but few of us would suggest that our children were created for the PURPOSE of doing exams. There is more to life than study. Hard to believe, perhaps, at this time of the year, but it is true.

Rick Warren goes on to say that the way we give pleasure to God is through our worship. In this he is right. He is trying to answer the question, why were we created? What were we created for? And worship is absolutely the right answer.

But I think he's missed a step.

Before we can answer the question, "What was I created for?" we have to understand who we are. What is it that God has created? What kind of a thing is a human being? How has he created us? What is our nature? What we are like?

In answering this question, I believe we find a key to understanding just why worship of God ought to be our central human activity.

We were created in a certain way. A certain way that leads me to the conclusion that God intended us for worship. Rick Warren is perhaps saying the same thing, but I think he's distracting me with this word *pleasure*.

There is a unique and fundamental characteristic in the way God has made every human being. A unique and fundamental characteristic that reveals what God had in mind when he created us.

What is this unique and fundamental characteristic?

Let me show you. 1

Let's assume I come to the St Paul's Boronia fete last week. I'm wondering around kinda aimless. I'm avoiding the face painting for reasons of pride. I'm staying away from the hamburger stall until later, for reasons of weight. I've read the spines on all the books in the second-hand book store and realised I don't want to read any of them.

Then I find myself standing in front of the widget table. The widget table has a wide selection of similarly sized widgets, but in a range of colours.

I have nothing to do, so I randomly pick up a widget, inspect it and put it back on the table. After looking at a few widgets, a red widget, a green widget and finally a blue widget, I decide that I already have quite a lot of perfectly good widgets at home and I decide that I don't need another one right now.

I put the blue widget back on the table and am about to move away from the table when someone comes up beside me and picks up the blue widget I just put down.

1 What follows borrows heavily from Gil Bailie. He deserves the credit.

I pause in my departure from the table and observe that he is looking rather admiringly at the blue widget that I had just put down. And as I watch him I realise that actually, that blue widget does look a bit special. I realise that although I do have a blue widget at home the one this fellow now has in his hand is a rather better shade of blue than the one I have at home. I realise that I was mistaken to have so quickly discarded this blue widget. I realise that I had been a bit too lackadaisical in my approach to the widget table moments before. I should have been taking more care. I would have realised that this particular blue widget is actually a very fine example of the widget genre. This blue widget would be a perfect addition to my widget collection.

I want that widget.

Now, I have a dilemma. How can I get the widget, when he's got it? But, you see, I know something about human behaviour, so I nonchalantly pick up a red widget. Admittedly, it is not as fine a widget as the blue one, but I hope it will serve the purpose. I notice out of the corner of my eye that the other widget aficionado has seen me pick up the red widget. I pretend to consider the red widget admiringly. I do it in a way that I know he can see my facial expression of intense admiration. Then, with a sigh I put the red widget back on the table. I hope my sigh communicates to him that this red widget is greatly to be valued, but unfortunately, I am too poor to acquire something of such great value.

I nonchalantly stroll away from the table, keeping him in my vision out of the corner of my eye. And, you know what he does?

[How did you know that?]

He puts down the blue widget, and picks up the red one. This leaves me free to appear to have second thoughts about the blue widget. I move in for the kill, cool as a cucumber I pick up the blue widget and take it to a person with a sign on their shirt that reads "Please Pay Me."

Have I described a human interaction with which you are in any way familiar? Of course, I have. Everyone identifies with that story, because everyone of us shares a common human characteristic. A characteristic that God has created within every person. A characteristic that God has created with some purpose in mind.

What I have described is given a number of names. Metaphysical desire, mimetic desire, triangular desire (triangular because there are three objects involved—in the case of the blue widget there is me, the other customer and the blue widget), or borrowed desire. It is called borrowed desire because I borrowed my desire from the other customer's admiration. I showed no desire for the blue widget. But when someone else showed desire for the blue widget, I borrowed his desire so I could want it myself.

This phenomenon is rooted in imitation. The French scholar, Rene Girard, has articulated this concept in a way that has the power to revolutionise our self-understanding as humans. Better than that, it helps us to understand God's purpose in creating us the way he has.

The basic idea here is that all humans are terrific copycats. In the best sense of copycat, of course. We are great imitators of one another. We are excellent mimics. We copy each other.

This is the foundation of all human learning. Children learn to speak by imitating the sounds their parents make. We learn how to value things, by imitating what other people value.

Some of you look a little unsure. Let me give you another example.

For the past month, we have had Melanie, our daughter and her two children, our grandchildren, Sophie and Emily in residence. Emily is 2½ and Sophie is just one.

By 5 o'clock in the evening, any evening, every evening, our family room resembles Toy's 'R' Us after it's been trashed by a bikie gang. The room is wall-to-wall toys. There are bits of Lego, stuffed animals, Bananas in Pajamas books, and actual Bananas in Pajamas. From one wall to another the room is ankle deep in children's playthings. You can't see the carpet and occasionally the one year old disappears under the taller mounds of fluffy toys.

In the middle of the room Emily, aged 2½, picks up a single teddy bear dressed like an Austrian peasant. She cuddles it to her chest and starts to sing an unrecognisable lullaby.

Two metres away, her sister, Sophie, aged one, wobbles into the room. Sophie now has the choice of 3,279 excellent toys to play with.

Which toy does Sophie want to play with?

[How did you know that?]

Everyone knows which toy Sophie wants, because we all understand this basic characteristic of human behaviour. We recognise imitation and borrowed desire because it is in our blood. It is part of the way God made us.

God has made us, in the best sense, to be copycats. We form and shape our personalities through the observations and interactions we have with others. We watch one another, and we copy one another, and we model behaviours for others who are watching us.

When we entered those dreadful, so-called orphanages in Romania 15 years ago, we found children of 4 and 5 years of age who had never learned to hug or express pleasure. Because they had never seen anyone else do it.

That experience taught me that so much of what we take for granted in human behaviour is learned. It is learned by imitation. It is learned by copying. It is learned by following others. It is learned by following others who show us the way to be human.

God made us this way. And he made us this way for a purpose.

God made us to be imitators, to be copycats, to be followers. God made us so that we would look for models to copy, leaders to follow, mentors to be apprenticed to.

Why did he do that?

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When Joshua was near the end of his life, he stood in front of the assembled tribe of the children of Israel and addressed them.

He reminded them of everything that God had done to rescue them from slavery in Egypt. Everything God had done to bring them through the desert. Everything God had done to bring them back home to the land of Israel.

And then he said, "Now revere the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshipped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD."

"But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

I believe this is the question we are asked every day. Which God are we going to serve? Whom do we follow? Who is our model for the way we want to become as humans? Whom do we choose as models to imitate?

"Keeping up with the Joneses" is just one form of human imitation at work. Do we establish our neighbours as the ones we choose to copy? Do we copy our friends?

Are we allowing the lesser god of advertising to be our model? Remember that Eve did not recognise the desirability of the fruit until the serpent pointed it out to her. The serpent mediated her desire. The entire advertising industry is based on exploiting borrowed desire. Television advertising proves that you do not sell your product by saying much about the product itself. Television advertising works by emphasising the people in the advertisements who are selling the product.

We want to become like the people in the ads. And we'll buy the products to do it.

On the other hand, are we spending our lives putting other people onto pedestals so that we can imitate them. It's natural and right that children should learn and grow by imitating their parents. This is clearly one of the reasons God made us this way, so that we would naturally copy role models and become like them.

Obviously, this creates problems for children who have parents who are not good role models. How many children do you know who had bad parents, and grew up just like them? It's a too common phenomenon.

To some extent then, copying adults is normal and right for children. But as we move into our teen years and become adults, the question is *to whom do we transfer our copycat tendencies?*

Mostly, we transfer them to other humans. We admire a teacher and grow to be more like them. We admire a movie star, or a rock singer or a sporting hero. We read everything we can about them. We go to see all their movies. We watch their games. We allow our minds to become full of their attributes. We allow our lives to fall into patterns like them.

Is this what God intended when he made us to be such good imitators?

Joshua's challenge to the children of Israel is still the challenge for us today.

Choose whom you will serve?

"Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods of your ancestors, or the gods of the people in whose land you are living."

Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve. Will we copy the same gods that society has traditionally followed? Will we copy the same gods as the people around us? Whom will be our models?

Joshua is asking his people whether they have grown up. Have they matured? Are they smart enough to see that what they did as a child in imitating their parents, now needs to be transferred to some new object, some new model, some new example to follow. Who will it be? he asks.

And then he himself provides a model to follow. "But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

This is the same thing Paul said many years later. In writing to the Thessalions, Paul demonstrates clearly that he understands how God made us to be copy cats. And he shows he knows how this can be a good or a bad thing.

Paul is confident to hold himself up as a model. He talks about the way he behaves himself, how he works to support himself, and then he says in 2TH 3:7 & 9 "For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We did this ... in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow."

But be assured that Paul does not hold himself up to be the perfect example. He does not want anyone to imitate him fully, except in one respect. When writing to the Corinthians he makes this clear. 1CO 11:1 I think it's one of the most important things Paul ever wrote. *Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.*

This is why God made us the way He did. We were made to follow Christ. Our perfect example to copy is Jesus, for he shows us God.

We were created by God to be copycats. We were created that way for a purpose. And that purpose is to follow Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is our model. Jesus Christ is the one worthy of our natural imitating responses.

We were created to imitate Christ. And when we do imitate Christ, nothing gives God more pleasure.

Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve. As for me and my household, to the best of our ability we shall serve the Lord.

A-men.