

Sermon: Embryo Research and the Human Person....

A moral outrage is being perpetrated in this country and it seems that hardly anyone is interested. Under new legislation, human embryos will be created for the sole purpose of being used in scientific experiments. These embryos will have no chance of growing and developing into normal life. Some Roman Catholic bishops have protested. But where are our bishops on this issue? I have so far noticed only one, Tom Wright of Durham, put his head above the parapet and denounce this technique.

Actually, some Anglican bishops support embryo research and none more enthusiastically than the former Bishop of Oxford, Richard Harries. Harries advocates experimentation on embryos and he even says that human cloning is *right and necessary*. He says, *This fundamental research needs to be done before any progress can be made in finding any cure to the range of serious diseases such as Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and others*

I must deal with the disingenuousness of Harries' statement. Such research is *right and necessary* he says – and the government agrees with him – because this science will lead to cures for serious diseases. The fact is that there has never been a single case of a human being cured of any disease by the use of human embryos. On the other hand, medical advances are being made in the use of adult stem cells, a process which does not result in ending the lives of rudimentary human beings.

Harries' primary confusion leads him to make assertions which are truly bizarre. He further seeks to justify cloning on the grounds that, in any case, *There is in nature a very high level of embryo loss*. This is an argument so absurd that it makes me recall the protests of the tennis player John McEnroe to the umpire: *You can't be serious!* Harries says that because a lot of embryos die natural deaths, it's OK for us to go ahead and kill them. This is like saying that because some people die in traffic accidents it's all right for me to push my neighbour under a number 56 bus.

Let us turn to the morality of this issue. Christian teaching since the first century has declared: *You shall not kill the embryo*. In the Gospels no difference is made between the unborn child and the infant. When, in St Luke chapter one, verse forty-one, John the Baptist leaps in his mother's womb, the original Greek word for him is "brephos" – the same word used of the baby Jesus lying in the manger in chapter two, verse twelve.

Supporters of embryo research tell us to grow up, listen to the science and learn sense. They declare that they are not experimenting on human beings but on almost infinitely tiny bits of cellular material. The embryo, they tell us, *is not a person*. I agree. But a two weeks old child is not really a person either. The word *person* refers to a being capable of advanced social interaction. A person is defined by his relationships with other persons.

There is no excuse for embryo research by saying that the embryo is not a person. It is a human being and it will grow into a person – unless you kill it. All the potential for personhood is there in the embryo. And no human embryo has ever grown into anything other than a human person. *You shall not kill the embryo*.

When God made the world, he said that it was good. This means that at the creation of material things, animals and human beings, morality was written into the scheme of things. From this it means that humankind is obliged to deal responsibly with the created world. I find it bizarre that so many of the same people, scientists, bishops and the like, who are so concerned that we should not destroy the environment recommend that we destroy our own kind with impunity. We have abolished the death penalty for murder – which now means that the only people we are allowed to kill are the innocent.

But let us put the embryo-researchers' case at its strongest. Suppose that the results of such research actually could bring about cures for serious diseases. From the Christian perspective it would still be wrong to kill the embryo. There are some things which are not permissible in any circumstances. These are those things defined in the Ten Commandments as *sins*. And one of the Commandments is, as you know, the prohibition of the wrongful killing of another human being. It doesn't matter how old or how young the human being might be. How large or how small – or what else, is it wrong to kill giants but not midgets?

Ever since God wrote the word *good* into his creation by so defining it, we have received the yuk factor – the queasy feeling that arises in us when we know we are abusing the good creation. Embryo research is regarded as morally acceptable only because the creatures we kill off in the process are so small as to be barely visible and so there is little or no yuk factor. But suppose you forced the embryo researcher to face up to the consequences of his utilitarian argument. This argument, as stated by him, is that a being simpler, younger, more primitive may be sacrificed for the sake of a being that is older, bigger and more developed. On that argument, what would prevent him from sacrificing a three weeks old baby if doing so would preserve the health of a twenty-five years old housewife?

Nietzsche said, *After the death of God, all things are permitted*. And this is how it has turned out in our godless modern society. In this argument about embryo-research, as in the issue of wholesale abortion, the Christian opposition is dismissed as if it was led by ignoramuses, primitives and backwoodsmen. I want to ask these modern types on what grounds do they thus set aside 2000 years of western philosophical tradition – and more than that when you count in the Jewish heritage?

A godless society is bound to be a lawless society because all just laws are rooted and grounded in the transcendent reality of God himself. I heard on *The Sunday Programme* this morning an argument so fatuous I nearly choked on my boiled egg. The prominent media philosopher A.C. Grayling was asked whether he thought it was possible to be moral without God. He replied that yes, of course it is possible, because there are many moral people who don't believe in God. *Belief* is not the point. It is God's *existence* which makes morals possible. It was as if Grayling had argued that it is possible to live without oxygen – if you don't believe in oxygen.

And the godless society always argues that it is permitted to do a little evil now that greater good might come of it. Thus the godless society has no real values. Benefit is always just around the corner – like the climax to an overture by Rossini. The only difference being that Rossini actually gets there in the end. Goodness is not a quantity.

It is a quality. And the calculation of consequences, the Utilitarian Calculus, is what Nietzsche said of it: *Pig philosophy*.

Since God wrote morality into the very fabric of the universe we inhabit, goodness is tangible. And there are things which we must not do. Experimentation on our own kind is one of those things.

In his brilliant new book *Untied Kingdom* Ian Robinson writes movingly about the murder of embryos by abortion. What he says applies equally to embryo research.

Some horrors are too easy to ignore. George Fox could sometimes not rest because he went on feeling so strongly for someone's suffering or sin. If I were a better man myself, I would not be able to write this. But I sleep o' nights. It is difficult to realise the killing of embryos, as it is hard to believe in the electric furnace behind the curtains in the crematorium.

Day in, day out, all these "terminations of pregnancy!" In hospitals up and down the land, in which, under the most hygienic conditions, needles are lethally stuck into the unborn before the hygienic surgical removal of the remains. What happens to the remains? Hygienic plastic bags to the incinerator? Are such things done on Albion's shore?