

OUR IDENTITY IN CHRIST

**Sermon preached at 10.00am Sung Eucharist,
St. Edmundsbury Cathedral
22 January 2017**

In my house there are five passports to manage. Over Christmas, it was time to renew my daughter Phoebe's passport. This included the passport photo trials. I'm convinced that the person who sets the strict requirements for passport photos is not a happy or attractive person and seeks revenge on everyone else: hair abnormally positioned; no smiling allowed. The female image standards board in my house rejected the first attempt. The second was much better. Passport/Nationality. Identity. Sense of self.

You'll remember how last year the Archbishop of Canterbury learnt that his father was not his biological father. Archbishop Justin's mother had a fling just before she married his father and was pregnant by another man. In his public statements, Archbishop Justin showed remarkable grace and wisdom. He said "This revelation has been (of course) a surprise, but ... I know that I find who I am in Jesus Christ, not in genetics, and my identity in him never changes." ¹ As someone who has idealised my parents for most of my life, I'm not sure my response would be so dignified. Parents. Identity. Sense of self.

This week I bumped into a woman who used to be a teacher at St James School. She was dressed very well and stood out from the crowd, so I told her she looked great. She said that she had left teaching and is now an Estate Agent. She said that people remember her if she dresses brightly and stylishly. I kept my thoughts about estate agents to myself. Work. Identity. Sense of self.

You may know the story of the woman who was close to dying. She suddenly had a feeling that she was taken up to heaven and stood before the Judgement Seat. "Who are you?" a Voice said to her. "I'm the wife of the Mayor," she replied. "I did not ask whose wife you are but who you are" said the voice. "I'm the mother of four children." "I did not ask whose mother you are, but who you are." "I'm a schoolteacher." "I did not ask what your profession is but who you are." And so it went. No matter what she replied, she did not seem to give a satisfactory answer to the question "who are you?" "I'm a Christian." "I did not ask what your religion is but who you are." "I'm the one who went to church every day and always helped the poor and needy." "I did not ask what you did but who you are." She evidently failed the examination, for the woman was sent back to earth. When she recovered from her illness, she was determined to find out who she was. And that made all the difference.

Some years ago, after hearing that story a man said to me, "The problem is I know what I do, but I don't know who I am." Discovering who we are requires as much effort, if not more, as we put into our work and activities, our image, our status. It requires time and focus. Time spent reflecting, praying, reading, talking. Time not filled with breathless and endless activity. Time in silence. President Obama put it well in his final press conference. He is looking forward "to being quiet a little bit and not hear myself talk so much."

You know there are many subtle areas in our sense of identity. Work is one. Work is good, but it can become too closely linked with a person's persona. Our opinions, our beliefs are another example. These are often positive, but if we cling to them too tightly they can become damaging. Often what makes us miserable, what causes us to be in conflict with one another, is our insistence on our particular view of things: our view of what we deserve or want, our

¹ Full statement at <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/5704/a-personal-statement-from-the-archbishop-of-canterbury>

view of right and wrong, our view of self and our view of other. It's good to remember that most of the time views are just views, not ultimate truth. Views and opinions are colourful and interesting and life-enhancing as long as we know they are views.

As we travel the journey of faith we learn to let go of the things that have built up around our sense of identity. Slowly, God strips away the unimportant, the impermanent, the damaging. And we learn that our true identity rests in God's love and in being God's children. As Archbishop Justin said "I know that I find who I am in Jesus Christ ... and my identity in him never changes."

This is one of the themes of Epiphany. In Epiphany we celebrate our identity in Christ. We celebrate that Christ is for the whole world, Gentiles as well as Jews. We celebrate the baptism of Jesus and our baptism into Christ. Notice how being in Christ always takes us beyond ourselves to look wider. Being in Christ is never narrowing, like some kind of exclusive club membership.

In this morning's Gospel the disciples leave their work to follow Jesus.² Matthew's account gives the impression they just abandon the security and familiarity of their livelihoods and take on a new identity with Jesus.

The reading from 1 Corinthians refers to identity as well. Paul is reprimanding the Christians in Corinth for finding their identity in factions, rather than being united in Christ.³ It's a trend we see in our world today. People staying within the bubble of their group, their race, their religion. Only hearing views and news that support what they believe already. Opting to have their sense of identity affirmed, rather than enlarged.

Learning that our true identity rests in God's love and in being God's children is a complicated process. It is God's work. But we can help by careful reflection, being honest with ourselves, using silence.

There was once a very busy parish priest. The priest's incredible activities were amazing. Then someone noticed The priest seemed in large part motivated by fear of what he would discover when he come to a standstill. The priest confessed "I guess I am busy to avoid a painful self-concentration."

It's a familiar story to many of us, whether ordained or otherwise. But we don't need to be afraid of stopping and looking inward.

Ours ego resist because they know the truth: that most of our sense of self is constructed, superficial, dependent on passing, impermanent things. And if we attend to what is most important, in the end we learn that our independent, autonomous sense of self evaporates and we see clearly that the only self that really exists is our identity in God. We realise that is the only sense of identity we need.

*Canon Matthew Vernon
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² Matthew 4.18-22

³ 1 Corinthians 1.10-17