



## Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Second Sunday of Lent

readings: [Genesis 12.1-4a](#), [Romans 4.1-5, 13-17](#), [John 3.1-17](#)

5 March 2023

If we found ourselves being asked the question, 'Who am I?', I wonder what descriptors we would use. I imagine that most of us would begin by giving our names; but after that, in what direction might we head? Perhaps we might say where we live; refer to a role we fulfil or used to fulfil, professionally or as a volunteer; we might describe ourselves in relational terms, as a mother, or grandfather or brother and so on. We may want to declare our religious identity, or use verbs to describe ourselves; as someone who loves music or plays sport, or does a lot of walking, so what at first looked like a simple question, 'Who am I?' can start to reveal the multiple layers that make up ourselves. For there are many different aspects to who we are, and at different times and in different contexts, one or more of these aspects might be more prominent.

Interestingly, there may be some features of our identity that we don't think of mentioning, and might only notice their absence when we are in conversation with someone whose identity is significantly different to ours. For someone like me, those not mentioned or invisible characteristics might well include things like being 'male', 'white', or 'heterosexual', precisely because they are markers of a privilege in our own identities of which we are not always aware.

I begin with this brief exploration of who we are because ideas and language about identity are very present in public debate. What is referred to as identity politics is certainly very much to the fore at the University. Some of it is hard keep up with and understand, and we will, no doubt, have a variety of views on it, but what has triggered it is a desire to address the exclusion and discrimination that has been experienced by a range of groups, often over long periods of time. It's seeking to move us towards a more inclusive society, and sadly, there is still a long way to go.

It is not, though, without its difficulties, as competing identities can prioritise their own experience to the exclusion of what seem like shared human experiences. Finding the balance between ensuring that the long-ignored experiences of minority groups are no longer hidden but rightly and properly acknowledged, whilst not losing sight of what is common to all of us is, at times, very difficult but it remains a necessary one as we want not only a more just society, but one that is whole.

This question of identity, though, and of changing or perhaps emerging identities isn't new. In fact, it's alive and kicking in today's readings. In the one from Genesis, we heard of Abram leaving behind his country and kindred; in other words, leaving behind the identity with which he'd grown up, in order to become 'a great nation'. And if we read beyond today's passage, we know that he receives a new name. He becomes Abraham; 'father of many'; a new identity, a new role, but one into which he had to grow and own for himself.

And we find this being explored by Paul in the epistle we heard. For Paul, Abraham's new identity comes via faith rather than through adherence to the law. And, of course, this theme plays such a big part throughout Paul's letters, especially in his epistle to the Romans,

in which he articulates the relationship between his old self and his new self, between his rootedness in the Jewish law and his new found faith in Christ, a process that was far from straightforward.

And then in our Gospel, in which we heard that well known encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus, the question of identity also lurks. Throughout his Gospel, John loves to use the conversations between Jesus & different people to communicate particular ideas, & they tend to take a regular form; Jesus makes an

ambiguous statement, the listener misunderstands it, Jesus then clarifies or expands his original statement; today's Gospel is a classic example of this technique. Jesus says to Nicodemus that no-one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above; certainly an ambiguous statement which Nicodemus doesn't understand, so Jesus goes on to explain. He speaks of a re-birth, the emerging of a new identity, that comes, not from the law, but from water and the Spirit; in other words, from the process of cleansing and forgiveness, and from the guiding, renewing and transforming hand of God.

Nicodemus is sometimes regarded as a person of inadequate faith; but actually I think he is an enquirer who is on the road to a fuller faith, and, we find him re-appearing towards the end of John's Gospel, bringing spices to Jesus' tomb. It seems that he is someone, albeit tentatively, seeking a new identity in Christ, because he'd found in this person, something that surpassed his previous experiences, a person who was giving him glimpses of a fuller and richer life.

In all of these readings, though, and for all of the struggles involved, they all point to the conviction that our true identity lies in Christ. And that this identity isn't simply one more amongst a collection of others; as Paul writes elsewhere – in Christ there is neither Jew or Greek, male nor female, neither slave nor free, and so on. Here, identity in Christ represents a different sort of identity, rooted in the image of God in which we are all created, and thus lying beneath as well as transcending all others.

The name Dietrich Bonhoeffer may ring bells for some of you, and certainly the Dean has made reference to him in some of his sermons. A German Lutheran pastor, who formed part of the Church's resistance to the Third Reich in Germany, he was imprisoned by the Nazis in 1943 and then executed only a month before the end of the war. During his time in prison, he produced a whole series of letters and papers, including a number of poems. In one of them, entitled, 'Who am I?', he describes how his warders and fellow inmates saw him as a person with a calm, friendly and cheerful disposition; yet within himself, he felt restless and sick, angry and humiliated, and tired and weary at praying and thinking, almost ready to give up, and Bonhoeffer asks himself the question: "Am I then really all that which others tell of? Or am I only what I know of myself? Am I one person today and another tomorrow, or am I both at once? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine." For all of this questioning, though, the poem finishes with a powerful statement of faith - 'Whoever I am,' he writes, 'thou knowest, O God, I am thine'. Amidst all of the uncertainties and struggles about who he was, Bonhoeffer trusted that his true identity was, ultimately, to be found, in God.

Of course, this isn't to be dismissive of the multiple identities we carry, because they are integral to who we are. It is, though, to be reminded that in Christ we find the person who knows who we are, and the place where we are properly recognised and understood; where we discover our sense of inclusion and belonging, where we find forgiveness and renewed hope, and where we know ourselves to be truly loved.

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