

A QUESTION OF IDENTITY

There are many situations today in which we're asked to prove our Identity. Usually that means looking at your name, or a picture- what are your physical characteristics – your hair colour, eyes, shape of your face. Going further it might include taking fingerprints, digital eye recognition, your DNA.

But is that all I am? Is that my identity? Or is it about what you 'do'? You're the Vicar, the man who works in the school; is it about your family- I'm Peter's sister and my parents were Kenneth and Doreen; for some people identity is about what people thought of them when they were young – I met a lot of young people in Wales who had been given the impression they weren't likely to amount to much because that's just how it is for the Welsh! So they stopped trying very hard and became the people who didn't amount to much; in contrast, if someone tells you that you can do anything you may start to believe that.

Some people think intelligence is the main feature to identify you – he went to Cambridge; others put you in a box according to sexuality or disability as if that's all you are, or decide they know all about you if you're Polish or black or Muslim. A person no less than Barack Obama, President of the USA writes in a book published a few years ago about his search to know just who he is. He moved from African to American cultures, was black living in a white dominated world, moved from one idea of family to another, with a mother who had different partners and well into adult life he doesn't quite know where he fits in.

Identity can often seem very precarious. It affects our self-esteem and it can be easily damaged. It *is* about physical features and name and family and culture and origins. But there are a lot of people still not sure who they really are and who they matter to in spite of knowing all the facts about those other things.

At the baptism of Jesus God says: *'You are my son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'* (Mark 1:11) His ID is established in a sentence.

John the Baptist takes a radical step of calling religious people to be baptised. This isn't just a ritual washing with a vague idea of purity behind it. This is about turning away from anything that gets in the way of meeting God, even if that sometimes means religion itself.

When Jesus comes, his baptism perhaps symbolises that in the ministry to follow he will be about helping sinners to find forgiveness. He shares in the circumstances where people recognise their needs, in order to meet their needs.

And God endorses that by letting him know who he is and where he fits in: *My son- the son of God- I love you, I'm pleased with you.*

There are so many people who need to know God is pleased with them, whatever other people may think of them. So many who need to know that if they mess things up, God still loves.

The ID of Jesus related to God himself. How he would need to cling onto his place, his knowledge of being loved, as time went on! In the very next sentence we read *'At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert and he was in the desert for forty days, being tempted by Satan'* (v.12-13)

Mark doesn't tell us all the details of what the temptations were. He doesn't talk about stones and bread and kingdoms of the world and Jesus being tempted to throw himself down and see if God will catch him.

I wonder if he leaves all that out because the biggest temptation of all – for any of us but also for Jesus- was the temptation to wonder if God really cared, if God really had power to save, if he really mattered to God at all. This testing time was about whether he would hold onto his identity as belonging to God and God loving him when things were really tough. When the conflicts came, when the opposition mounted, when he was threatened and unpopular, when he may have wondered if he'd got it wrong, when friends couldn't take any more and he was suffering and apparently God-forsaken could he still hold onto the belief that God cared, would save, love and bring new life? *You're my son, whom I love; I'm pleased with you.*

The desert is a very significant place in the Bible. When Moses was called,

so many centuries before, to ask Pharaoh to let the Israelites go from Egypt, he asks 'Who shall I say is sending me?' and God answers *'Tell them I AM has sent you'* . I AM – the God who is real when others are false. The one who has power and love when other things or gods or people or temptations seem appealing but don't give what's needed.

The Israelites struggled to hold onto that when they were in the desert. 40 years of learning to trust that they mattered, that they were chosen by God, that in spite of difficulties he wouldn't abandon them completely. When things were out of their control in the desert and there was no guarantee of food or safety or outcome, would they believe in the God who promised to give what they needed, to keep them safe and to bring them home?

Jesus is faced with the same tests of trust. Will he try to get what he wants his own way? Will he try to gain popularity and power? There are plenty of reasons for believing what the devil often seems to say to us: *'you won't amount to much, you're lonely, you're hungry, they don't really believe in you, you're a loser, you got it wrong, you misunderstood what he wanted, they hate you. Why not give in and do what everyone else does? Saving people is too much like hard work!'*

In 40 days in a desert and many times later how much he needed to hold on to: *You are my son whom I love; I'm pleased with you.* So much so that those words were repeated again on the mount of Transfiguration before he walked straight into the paths leading to his death.

I spend a lot of time worrying about whether I'm doing the right thing. Maybe some of you do too. I try hard, I pray, I think, I talk things over and then I can still end up thinking I messed things up. Why has this gone wrong when I was so careful? Why doesn't God just sort it out? Why's it so hard? I'm letting people down so why doesn't he just let it work out for the best?

And really I can't get the answers to those questions. I just have to keep trying to hold on to a belief that my identity is also, like Jesus, wrapped up in God. That I am also loved and that he is also pleased with me – not because I get more things right than I get wrong but because I belong to him. Nothing more.

The identity of Jesus had to be something he knew from the outset. Think of how many times you hear him say in the gospels – *I and the Father are one, I do what I see my Father doing,* or telling people just who he is- *the Son of Man, the light of the world....* is it arrogant? Or is it the kind of assurance we'd all love to have- I know who I am and I belong to God and he loves me, whatever anyone else thinks?

So when you're in your desert time what will you hold onto? In his letters Paul talks about being *'In Christ- a new Creation'* as if we're engulfed by that whatever else happens. There will be so many things to knock us off course and so many things that shape our sense of who we are – the person who's lived with constant criticism; the one whose family was such a mess that they don't feel connected to anyone...

If we have recognised our need – of forgiveness and love- the our ID is found in Christ. That should affect our confidence now, our hope for the future – and our behaviour. We need to live as if we belong to him.

The biggest temptation of our lives is to let go of our identity as being in God's family and to let go of a trust in God's power and knowledge and love, so that we give up doing things his way and take charge ourselves instead. It's then we need to remember and to pray that it will become ever more embedded in our hearts that we too have god's voice saying: *You're my child whom I love; with you I am well pleased'*