

Who Am I?

We explore a key issue in life today: that of identity. These days we need identity checks for everything. Whilst I fully understand the need for it I find it tiresome. We need to be able to demonstrate we are who we say we are. Not just give our name and address but actually provide documentary evidence.

In our reading from Matthew Jesus is asking His disciples, the people closest to Him, "who do people say I am?" You would have thought they would have plenty of evidence as to who Jesus was. They had been with Jesus, nearly 3 years, seen so many signs and wonders. But no "Oh you are a prophet, Elijah, or some other holy man" they say; only Peter gets it right! Good old Peter who is forever putting his foot in it speaking before engaging brain! This time he is spot on! " You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus then responds telling Peter some amazing things.

Many of us who have visited the Holyland will have visited the site where this conversation took place. Caesarea Philippi is a quiet tranquil spot, well it is if you aren't there with coach loads of school children! It's about 2 days walk north of the Sea of Galilee or 30 mins in a coach!

Caesarea Philippi is one of the few places where a church hasn't been built. A wide clear stream runs through a valley, the phrase "streams of living water" comes to mind. There's a steep cliff on one side which was once a site of a pagan temple, you can see the remains still carved into the rock. So when Jesus tells Peter "on this rock I will build my church" there really is a rock! But Jesus is speaking, as he so often does in metaphors. By "rock" he means Peter himself will be the rock, the foundation, the leader of a new community, that will grow eventually into the established Christian Church.

This issue of identity is a big one. Who are you? Who am I? I could say my name is Jane, I'm married to Terry, I'm a mother, grandmother who likes cooking and works as a Spiritual Director. All those things are true but they are all facts about me not who I am? Do I even really know who I am myself? Last month I spoke on Psalm 139 and shared that it's God who knows us through and through. I would suggest to you that it's God, my creator, who alone, knows me in the entirety, the good and the not so good!

This passage reveals a stunning dynamic of the Christian life. By Peter recognising and declaring who Jesus is, that Jesus is the Messiah, the true king, this somehow opens the door to Jesus revealing to Peter, his true identity, and what his role in the Kingdom of God will be. This principle will apply to us too. It links into what Terry was sharing 2 weeks ago when he spoke of the faith of the Canaanite woman. The more we are truly able to acknowledge Jesus as Lord the more the door opens for Him to work in our lives.

Many of you will know that I have studied Ignatian spirituality. A key aspect of this are the Ignatian spiritual exercises which St Ignatius developed from his own spiritual experiences. Central to these prayer exercises is getting to know, love and follow Jesus. Ignatius found, like Peter, that the more time we spend with Jesus, the more we get to know him, the more we are able to know who we are. We find ourselves when we see ourselves in Christ.

If I can accept my identity and relax into being myself I can learn more about God's unique purpose for my life. I realise these words are easy to say but are taking me a life time to live out.

Maybe this quote from Thomas Merton will help us "Our deepest freedom rests not in our freedom to do what we want to do but rather in our freedom to become who God wills us to be". That's how we discover our identity. By being free and we know Jesus died on the cross to set us free. There is no freedom in performance or people pleasing, fulfilling roles of what others expect from us. I've tried that, it just leads to disappointment and dissatisfaction. Our true identity comes from being ourselves, the unique human being God had in mind for us to be before the creation of the universe.

A closing thought. It's ok to get things wrong. Peter was always doing it. Just a few verses later Jesus has to reprimand Peter for speaking out of turn. And as we mess up, and say sorry, the good news is, Jesus has no need to ask us for an identity check because He knows, loves and accepts us, more than we can ever imagine, just as we are. Amen.