

MATTHEW 3:13-17  
OUR TRUE IDENTITY!

Who am I? “Ask matron; she’ll tell you, dear!” It is the punchline of a joke. Who am I? It’s One of the big questions of life, to discover who we really are, deep down. I’ve met the teenager who is slightly eccentric and doesn’t fit in with others, who wants to be this and that, but her parents want her to be other things – so she is struggling to discover who she really is and how can she be the person she really wants to be when her parents are telling her something else? This is not just teenagers: there are adults who their whole lives have tried to discover who they are; their parents have tried to shape them in one way; the culture has suggested another way to be, a way to dress, a way to behave, what to do with your life, work to do, bring up children; there are so many people who feel as if they have been forced into a box that is not of their making and that is not who or what they really want to be; “it is not me!” There are also expectations others have of you: you have expectations of a minister; can I be myself? Sometimes! But we go along with these expectations because rocking the boat is too hard and too costly. I have met at least one person in her seventies who discovered that sense of freedom; “now I am free to be me and not the person someone else forced me to be!”

The Bible has two answers to that question “who am I?” The first is from Psalm 139 and tells us that we, each, are unique individuals wonderfully made by God; each with a unique personality, a unique set of qualities and gifts, each one made in the image of God, to love and to be loved; we are unique; there is no-one else like us; you are as unique as your fingerprint; each One is made by God to be unique and to be uniquely you, uniquely me! You are not a clone of someone else; you are not your parent in miniature; you are you, uniquely so, wonderfully made! The second answer is from Romans 8: we are children of God, people whom God delights to call His children and whom He delights to love. We have a status in the gospel that is magnificent, as God’s children. When the Bible talks about us being “sons” of God that is not a gender thing; that is a status thing; in the New Testament times and culture, sons inherited everything, daughters got nothing, but the New Testament tells us that we all inherit, with no distinction between men and women, revolutionary in its time! We all inherit God’s kingdom and glory; there’s an honour money can’t buy!

One of the key themes of Jesus’ baptism is this sense of His true identity. He turns up as part of the crowd on the banks of the river. He has left home and has travelled the sixty miles to the Judean desert to find his cousin to be baptised. John is clearly uneasy about the whole thing and recognises that this is wrong way round. How much he knew about Jesus is not clear, but at least there is some recognition that this is not right. “*I need...*” (*Matthew 3:14*) “I need your Spirit-and-fire baptism, not you my water baptism.” (France) But Jesus persuades him: “*Let it...*” (*Matthew 3:15*) We will come back later to that; what does Jesus mean? John baptises Jesus and then we have these two pieces we spoke about earlier: “*As soon...*” (*Matthew 3:16f*) The Spirit of God, as a dove, comes on Jesus to equip Him for ministry; and the voice of God declares His true identity, the Son of God, loved by God. This is who Jesus is; this is His true identity!

“*This is...*” (*Matthew 3:17*) Who heard? Did the crowd hear the voice of God declare about Jesus? Other versions of the story have “you are...”, suggesting that the voice was for Jesus alone! Maybe it was only for Jesus, the Father declaring to His Son “this is who you are!” Jesus will have heard the early stories from Mary; Jesus spoke as a teenager about being about the Father’s business, so He has a sense of who he is, but perhaps for the first time, He hears this clearly declared from God. This is His true identity – the Son of God. Some suggest that this is Jesus *adopting* a new identity, that here He is *becoming* the Son of God in way that He hadn’t been before, but that is not what Bible story says; rather this is a declaration of an identity Jesus always had; He always was the Son of God and here is God declaring it. God is declaring not just a new identity, but the Father is declaring His love for His Son in a way that Jesus had perhaps never heard before. Maybe some of the things for which Jesus

growing up and as an adult had a feel, He now hears said for the first time; “this is my son; whom I love.”

What is the impact on Jesus of this declaration? There is a psychology here. Have you heard of “positive strokes”? You say good things about and to someone; you give someone a hug; you show that you care in other ways. What impact does that make on you when you are on the receiving end? You feel ten feet tall! Someone does think that you matter, that you are important, that you are lovable! It is such a good thing to do and such a contrast to the ways in which people criticise, undermine, bully us! The Church in Wester Hailes laid out a red carpet in the shopping centre; people came along and asked who the red carpet is for? “It’s for you” and they would walk along it and have their picture taken; it was all designed to make people see they are important and are loved, and make them feel ten feet tall! So when I quote these two bible pieces that say “you are unique and wonderfully made” and “you are a child of God, loved by God” how does that make you feel? They should make you feel ten feet tall; this is who we are. This is where grace begins, God telling us that we are accepted by Him as we are and before we’ve done anything. In the baptism service we read these words: “For you (and we call the person by name) Jesus came into world: for you He lived and showed God’s love; for you He suffered the darkness of Calvary and cried at last “it is accomplished”; for you he triumphed over death and rose in newness of life; for you He ascended to reign at God’s right hand. All this He did for you though you do not know it yet.” There is something immensely powerful in reading these words to anyone, but most perhaps to a child of a few months old; this is grace; the same is true for all of us; this is our true identity in Christ, in the grace of God. How does it make you feel?

The other impact of this on Jesus: it is His commission to ministry. This was the beginning of everything for Jesus’s ministry. For thirty years Jesus had been in Nazareth and nobody had noticed He was there, but His baptism is the start of something new, the start of His ministry and of His mission as the Messiah sent from God. But what kind of ministry? There is a danger in giving people a sense of their value and worth: for several years some schools have been working on Rights Respecting material that has come from UNICEF and you can well understand why they would do this in a world where so many children are abused and oppressed and trafficked. It is done to give children a sense of worth and value. “Children are respected, their talents are nurtured, they are able to thrive.” It is all good. To start with, this rights respecting programme was balanced by “here are the responsibilities that come with these rights”, but some schools then decided to soft pedal that sense of responsibilities. The result: a group of children who know and demand their rights to the extent that they even begin to make demands of the teachers in aggressive and almost bullying way; “Don’t you know that I have right to...” “Don’t you know who I am?” Is that the kind of leader Jesus will be? Is that the kind of mission Jesus will engage in, given His God-given sense of who He is? Clearly not!

Let’s go back to John’s unease: “*John tried...*” (*Matthew 3:14f*) The perfect Jesus baptised? John’s baptism was all about repentance for sin. The two don’t go together! Why did Jesus want to be baptised? There is a clue in his rather enigmatic answer to John; “*to fulfil...*” (*Matthew 3:15*) That might mean other things as well, but it certainly means that Jesus needs to do this so that He can become the Saviour of the world. Here is Jesus identifying with us; here is Jesus making Himself part of our world, standing alongside us and saying that He is part of our world so that He can save us. Jesus stands alongside others in the crowd and the others in the crowd are there because of their sense of their sin, their faults and mistakes, how they have fallen short of God’s demands and are saying “We repent; we are sorry; we want to change!” Jesus is part of that crowd, One of that crowd, making Himself One with that crowd. Already, at the very outset of His mission, the cross overshadows Him, because Jesus standing with this crowd will ultimately lead Him to the cross; He will die as the One who bears and takes away the sin of the world, our sin. Here is Jesus saying to us “I am standing with you; I know your sin; I will save you from your sins.”

This is a servant style of leadership. What a great model! It is very different from the style of leadership we see in world around us, that dictates, bullies, and harasses, that undermines people who don't agree, that closes down dissenting voices. Instead, Jesus came with model of leadership that was servant-shaped. The Servant of the Lord is here. "*Here is...*" (Is 42:1-4) Are you a Christian in a position of leadership? Here is the model! Are you in Church leadership? Here is a model! It is all about being a servant, inspired and equipped by the Spirit of God. Do you want to live a Christian life, inspired by Jesus, shaped by Jesus? Then learn to be a servant, to serve people around you, to serve the person next to you, or the person you meet in church gatherings, or the person you meet in street or in the other places you go. Jesus's mission is servant-shaped; His people should be servant-hearted people. Read Is 42:1-9 again when you get home – ask "how is this me?"

Who am I? Who are we? We are unique, each one wonderfully made in the image of God, with a unique personality, with unique gifts and skills. We are children of God, beloved and precious, heirs of His glory. With such great things said of us, we are learning to be servants, to serve God and to serve one another, inspired by Jesus and filled with His Spirit. We are who we are because Jesus is who Jesus is. He is the unique Son of God, loved by His Father; the Messiah who has come to do the mission of God in the world; the Saviour who stands alongside us in the crowd of sinners ready to repent. Our true identity is tied up with Jesus' true identity; we are who we are because He is who He is. His baptism is a big moment, launching Him into mission; He goes with these words resounding in His ears "*This is my Son whom I love*"; He goes filled with the Spirit, and He goes on the road that is already leading to the cross. This is the grace of God at work; we are who we are by that grace. Rejoice and learn to serve!