

MATTHEW 3:13-17
AFFIRMATION

Where do you go for affirmation? Who reminds you that you are loved? Who reminds you of your good qualities and achievements? Who affirms you as a person, helping you to recognise your worth and value? Who asks you “What did you do today to make yourself proud?” We need that sense of affirmation. There is a lot of talk about mental health today and one of the key markers in mental health is how we see ourselves, our self-esteem! I had a phonecall recently with a friend about a project we are both working on; in our previous conversation, I wasn’t sure he was happy with something that I had done and when he wanted to speak with me again I admit that I was apprehensive about taking the call because I imagined that he wanted to pick over the bones of that previous conversation. When we spoke, the first thing he said was, “I just wonder how you are? I’m concerned for you and how you are!” What a difference that made to my spirit; someone was taking time to be concerned for me and by doing that he was affirming me and my value in his eyes. I left the conversation in much better spirit than I went into it. Has that happened to you?

We all know what it feels like to be criticised, or to be blamed, or to be reminded of our faults and mistakes, the ways in which we’ve fallen short. Some of us have had people around us who have delighted in making us feel small, making us feel worthless, having us think that we have no value at all in their opinion. The balloon of our self-esteem has been well and truly punctured and we have left the conversation deflated and feeling useless! Where do we go to for affirmation, to be reminded of our worth, our value? Is there anywhere?

We really are not very good at affirmation. As a society, we will applaud someone’s achievements one minute, but in the next we’ll say that they need to be brought back down a peg or two, just so that they don’t get too big for their boots. The person we applaud is almost instantly reminded of their faults, failings, or weaknesses, just in case they get big-headed. Let me ask you another question: What are you good at? You’re not allowed to say “nothing” because I don’t believe that! What are you good at? What’s your best quality? We are brought up not to think like that; sometimes we are so battered that we don’t see anything that we’re good at; we have no best qualities! Now, I’m exaggerating a little, but not by much! We laugh at it as being good Scottish Presbyterians; there is something in our culture that makes us afraid to affirm ourselves; history tells us that when our grandfathers and grandmothers came to church they were reminded in no uncertain terms of their faults, with little talk of grace. You certainly were not allowed to leave church feeling good about yourself; if you did, the preacher would have failed! What are you good at? What’s your best quality?

Affirmation is at the centre of the story of Jesus’ baptism. It is there in two senses: Jesus affirms His sense of calling from God and takes up the mission to which God is calling Him, affirming His willingness to be all that God wants Him to be. Secondly, the Father affirms Jesus; this is who He is; this is His value in the Father’s eyes. Both of these senses of affirmation are important to Jesus in what He was to be and what He was to do for us; both senses of affirmation are important for us as we look to be followers of Jesus.

Jesus comes to John to be baptised. It is strange in some ways because John’s baptism is all about repentance and forgiveness, turning away from sin and being forgiven. John sees that Jesus has no need for this baptism and in fact, this is the wrong way round; John should be baptised by Jesus! But Jesus insists. “*Let it...*” (*Matthew 3:15*) What does that mean? This is the first sense of affirmation in this story; Jesus affirms His God-given mission. When He is baptised, Jesus is standing alongside all those others who were baptised for repentance, identifying with them, saying that what they did was important and needed to be recognised as such. Here is Jesus embracing His God-given mission to be the Saviour for these people and for us. God has called Him to be a servant and someone who will suffer and later die on the cross; this is His calling to bring the salvation of God into the world, so that we are forgiven

and saved. That mission to save begins here, with His baptism and Jesus affirms that calling and embraces it.

For us baptism is an affirmation about the road we will travel in our life. If we were infants when we were baptised, that affirmation was made for us by our parents and they affirmed on our behalf that direction of travel. The Church of Scotland doesn't make as much of the confirmation process as perhaps we should and some consider there should be a time when as adults we can confirm that direction of travel for ourselves; there is something psychological about an act of affirmation that sets the next steps in place. There are times when we affirm again our dedication to Jesus; could today be one of these times, affirming again the direction of travel we take, that we want to follow Jesus, that we are determined to be His disciples, that we are committed to be the kind of people Jesus wants us to be? Is that our affirmation? Jesus affirmed His way to be Saviour!

The second sense of affirmation comes to Jesus in His baptism and it comes in two ways. First or all, "*At that...*" (*Matthew 3:16*) God fills Jesus with the Spirit to equip Him for His task; the Spirit is God in us, so the Spirit coming onto Jesus like this is confirmation of Jesus in His God-given mission; God not only calls Jesus, He equips Him for the task. The giving of the Spirit is God affirming Jesus as the Messiah, the One sent to save world. The second way affirmation comes is in what Jesus hears: "*And a...*" (*Matthew 3:17*) God affirms that Jesus is His Son – this is who Jesus is, no doubt, identity affirmed. God affirms that He loves His Son – again no doubt, the Father's love declared for Jesus to hear and others too maybe! God affirms that He is pleased with His Son, even well-pleased with Him, before He has even done anything; Jesus has done nothing to earn Father's affirmation. He is deeply and assuredly affirmed.

The psychology of this is interesting. The very next episode in Jesus' life is in the desert; the Spirit leads Him there and He is in the desert for 40 days. As part of that experience He is tested and tempted by the devil to leave aside the ways of God to travel a different road, to become a celebrity magician and a wonder-worker rather than God's messiah on the road to the cross. As part of that process of testing and tempting, twice the devil says to Jesus are: "*if you...*" (*Matthew 4:3*) He is trying to sow seeds of doubt, challenging His identity, trying to undermine this earlier affirmation to distract Him. Jesus remembers His baptism, and says to Himself "this is who I am; this is what God has said; this is the way I go!"

Frank Lake is a psychologist who looked at this story of Jesus' baptism and saw God's grace at work. From this story he created what he called the "cycle of grace" as way of describing a healthy understanding of who we are. It has four stages: the starting point is so important and the starting point is "acceptance" – "*this is...*" (*Matthew 3:17*); the second stage is "sustaining strength" – God gives His Spirit to equip Jesus; the third stage is "significance" – Jesus sets out on His life's work, His ministry to save the world; and the fourth stage is "achievement" – He did what God called Him to do.

This cycle of grace is a healthy way to see ourselves and to see the Church: it all starts with a sense of affirmation and acceptance – we are God's children, whom He loves and that is affirmed in our baptism and is affirmed in the Bible over and over again; we are God's people whom He loves and He loves us just as we are, before we have done anything. This is one of the values of baptising infants: it reminds us that God loves us first, and that He loves us as we are. From that affirmation, that acceptance, comes our significance and achievement. Of course, we can live the cycle the other way round in which case we depend on our achievements for our significance and acceptance, but that can be hugely damaging; this way of being creates a deep anxiety and we are driven to achieve because our acceptance depends on what we achieve. I meet young people who live in fear of disappointing a parent when they fail an exam, for example; the expectation placed on them by their parent is one of success and they will be loved and accepted when they succeed and only when and if they

succeed. Do we think God is like that? Are we living our lives with that fear in our hearts – God will only love me when I'm winning?

We've done an exercise before with two words "I am..." and I've asked you to finish the sentence. We've discovered that there are so many ways in which we can describe ourselves: school we went to, the sport we play or watch, our features, our character and qualities and so on. But then there are two ways in which we finish the sentence from the Bible: first, we are people made in God's image to love and be loved; this is true of every human being, and we are worthy of dignity and respect simply by virtue of being human, being made in God's image. Secondly, we are God's children; as Christians we believe this is true of us, the ultimate accolade to be called the children of God, adopted members of His family alongside the one natural son, and sharing His glory. *"How great..." (1 John 3:1) "This is who we are!"*

Affirmation! We affirm again this morning that our aim in life and faith is to follow Jesus. Jesus affirmed His mission to save the world. Be affirmed – we are children of God, children whom He loves, whom He accepts as we are, and He gives us His Spirit and we set on the road to follow Jesus. *"This is..." (Matthew 3:17)* Jesus is affirmed and accepted; this is the grace of God at work. We are affirmed; God is our Father, we are His children; His love is lavished on us; He cannot love us anymore than He already does; you cannot get better than perfection. This is who we are. Walk with spring in your step; leave with head held high – all because God is full of grace.