

## **Sermon: Identity in Christ**

Colossians 1:15-20 (NIV)

John 1:1-14 (MSG)

Preacher - Mike

Who am I? Why am I here? What am I here for? These type of identity questions are common to most of us, and not just when we're in church, but throughout the various stages of life. As young children, we tend to accept the world around us, but it's not long before we start wondering what our purpose is and how we fit in. When I was little, one of my favourite books was "Are you my mother?", in which a little bird was trying to find its identity in a busy and confusing world. And when our boys were growing up, we used to read them "Monkey Puzzle" which follows a monkey (surprisingly!) on a similar journey of self-discovery.

These questions of identity are important and it's not just children who have been captivated and puzzled by them. Some of the deepest thinkers that have ever lived have also spent much of their time

addressing them. Indeed, perhaps the most often quoted line from Socrates, probably the most famous of all the philosophers, is "know thyself!".

When I was studying, I found that some of the most enjoyable questions arose out of identity issues, particularly the thought experiments offered by thinkers such as Bernard Williams (husband of politician, Shirley). He asked questions such as "if we took someone's brain and placed it in the body of another, who would that person be?"

He then developed this idea by imagining cloning someone and downloading the memories and thoughts from the original into the clone – would that cloned person be the same person? And if not, why not?

And what about being beamed up by Scotty? In Star Trek, the technology involves copying the person, destroying the original and then recreating the copy in a different place – so was Captain Kirk the same person throughout, or lots of copies?!

The question of identity is a notoriously difficult one and perhaps it's more confusing than ever for today's generation. Not only do the philosophical questions of identity remain, but now there are biological and technological questions as well.

I'm sure, like me, many of you have struggled with getting used to the language of gender neutrality and perhaps sometimes feel that we are going too far in trying to remove all preconceived models of identity. It is certainly important that we use new insights to prevent people being trapped in a life that does not reflect how they self-identify, but I am concerned that we might be piling too much pressure on children by introducing so many options of identity at an early age, where many are quite happy just to find their own way into identifying as a superhero or a princess or a dinosaur.

And all of this becomes even more overwhelming when we factor in the ever-present role that technology now plays in our lives. Increasingly,

our identity is not just what we see in ourselves or what people discover when they meet us, but rather something that is heavily defined in cyberspace. Indeed, for many it can become difficult to see where one's virtual profile ends and one's organic identity begins. Social media adds a layer of complexity such that we increasingly seem to be feeding and nurturing an identity which often is impossible to sustain – very few people are really as happy as their Facebook or Instagram profiles seem to suggest.

So, who are we?! What is our identity? Is it something that we can pin down and speak meaningfully about in absolute terms? Well, to some extent, the answer is “no” – we will all change over the years, both in our views and in our physical appearance. And though we might fight it, there is little that we can do about it. But, as Christians, I believe that there is a constant, something that we can pin down and take comfort from in recognising it as an ever-present part of us...and that is our identity in Christ.

Now this might sound a little vague, but it is this shared identity in Christ that our readings talk about this morning. St Paul, in his letter to the Colossians, is addressing a group of new Christians who have created a confused understanding of their faith. They have probably been influenced by Greek and Gnostic teaching and have come to believe that God and humankind are distinctly separate, that God is pure Spirit and that we are just material beings - limited and sinful. And the only way that we can reach God is by undertaking certain rituals and mastering self-control. They have reduced human identity to being that of miserable subservience.

St Paul rejects such thinking out of hand and reveals that the true identity of both God and humanity can be found in Jesus. In Jesus, there is no separation between Heaven and Earth - as Paul observes:

*“He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”*

Identity in Christ is identity in the fullness of all things, it is identity in all that we can be, it is identity that allows us to flourish in the love of God.

And in our very familiar Gospel reading, St John echoes this point when he presents Jesus as being one with God and essentially intertwined with all of creation. Jesus removes all division between Heaven and Earth and makes it possible for us all to live as children of God.

The Message translation that we used this morning is particularly clear about how Jesus offers us this new identity through his revelation and sacrifice –

*“But whoever did want him, who believed he was who he claimed and would do what he said, He made to be their true selves, their child-of-God selves. These are the God-begotten, not blood-begotten, not flesh begotten, not sex-begotten.”*

Whoever believed in and followed Jesus he made to be “their true selves”.

Our true selves are found in the one who made us and He is found in Jesus. When we encounter Jesus, we encounter God and find our real identity. This isn't an identity that demands attention or so many Facebook "likes" or power or success, but instead, it is one that is at peace because it can be no more than it is. This is an identity content in its true nature and completed in its true form.

Who are we? We are simply, but amazingly, children of God, invited to follow in His ways through His Son and made complete when we do. There is no greater identity – despite what the world would have us believe, we can be no more than that.

*“I would rather be what God chose to make me than the most glorious creature that I could think of; for to have been thought about, born in God's thought, and then made by God, is the dearest, grandest and most precious thing in all thinking.”*

Let us pray...