

## **Who do you think you are? (Luke 3.15-17,21-22)**

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> January 2022 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings:       **Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22**

### **Introduction: a new year**

If I haven't already said this, Happy New Year! I don't know how you are feeling about this coming year. Covid is still with us, and we have no idea what challenges may yet come our way. But we can take comfort from words in the reading we heard from Isaiah: "Do not fear, for I am with you"<sup>1</sup>. I hope something from this morning's sermon will bring you encouragement, whatever you are feeling.

### **Describing yourself**

I'd like you to imagine a scenario where you have to introduce yourself to a group of people. Maybe you've decided to join a club, or take a course, and you're at the first meeting. The facilitator or group leader says "Why don't we go around the circle and introduce ourselves?" What would you say, if you had to describe yourself in 2 or 3 sentences?

I guess the answer would depend partly on the context. We would choose what we say partly on its relevance to the subject that we were all there to learn about, or the reason

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 43:5 NRSV

that the group existed. But suppose you're invited to say 2 other things about yourself, not directly relevant. What would you say? Take a moment to think about this.

(...) Now tell the person next to you what you would say, and then listen to what they would say.

Now I'm going to ask you another question: is there something that is really important about who you are that you have *not* included in the information you have just shared? Take a moment to think about something really important about yourself and then share it with the person next to you.

### **How we feel about ourselves**

How did you feel about sharing this information? Maybe you felt proud about something you shared – perhaps you talked about being a parent or grandparent, or perhaps you shared about the job you do, or a role you play in our church or in the community. But it might be that you felt a little diffident or shy about sharing information about yourself. Did you feel a little vulnerable, perhaps wondering what the other person would think about you?

I would hope St Michael's Church is a place where people do feel comfortable being themselves, and feel that they are accepted by others. But that's not our experience everywhere. And of course how confident we are feeling may depend on what's going on in our lives right now. If you're going through a hard time you may not want to share information about yourself with another person. You may be experiencing a sense of failure, or guilt, or just being

overwhelmed by all the pressures on you. I hope there will be something in this sermon to meet your need.

## **Identity**

There's a lot that is said these days about identity. There's "identity politics", for a start. This is about people seeking to further their rights by identifying with a defined group, for example as women, as people of colour, as gay or transgender or another defined set of characteristics.

When we apply for jobs, or take courses, we're often asked to identify which category we belong to, for the purpose of monitoring whether different groups are fairly represented.

Companies are open to criticism if they don't have enough women or people from ethnic minority backgrounds in senior positions.

Identity is also really important for children and teenagers as they grow up. They learn that people have expectations of them, based on their gender or social background, expectations which may be limiting or difficult to live up to. They feel that to be accepted they have to look, or behave, in a particular way that may not come naturally to them.

Now, clearly there is a place for conforming your behaviour and appearance to what is considered socially acceptable. But the harm comes in more subtle ways, and we are very aware now of the damage that social media can do to children's self-esteem, as they spend hours doctoring photos so as to present themselves as good-looking to their peers, or worry about how many "likes" or "friends" they have on Instagram.

We do depend on the approval of others for our self-esteem, and this makes us very vulnerable. Of course, many of us in this church today have reached the later years of our lives, and have achieved things that we are proud of. We've also gone through mid-life crises, brought children up, had some hard times and struggles, but have learned to accept ourselves as we are, with all our faults and failures. But I suspect all of us still look for the approval of others to make us feel good about ourselves. And a word of criticism can still shake our self-esteem.

## **Two case studies**

What has all this got to do with our Bible readings today? Our main reading has a lot to say about identity. It is about the Baptism of Jesus, as told by Luke. We first see John the Baptist in action, calling people to repentance and describing himself as the one who was called to prepare the way for the Messiah. And then we see Jesus, an unknown carpenter from Nazareth in the north, coming to John, being baptised and then having two supernatural experiences – first, the anointing with the Holy Spirit, coming down upon him in the form of a dove, and second, the voice of God the Father. The meaning is clear – he is God's own Son, dearly loved, and he has been equipped by the Spirit for a mission to save the world.

There are some important principles here to help us think about who we are.

Let's start with John. We heard about his miraculous birth in one of the readings before Christmas. John's parents were told that he would be a prophet of God, bringing people to

reconciliation with each other and with God, and that he would prepare the way for the Messiah. They were also told that he would be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb. And so John grew up with a clear sense that God had chosen him for a purpose. He was faithful to that mission, preparing himself by living in the wilderness, living simply and then boldly challenging people to face what was wrong in their lives and make a new start with God through baptism.

We heard that people were asking themselves who this wild man in the wilderness was – could he be the Messiah?

John was quick to put people straight on this: he was not the main attraction, his role was to point people to the one who would come after him. There was not a trace of self-importance in John, as we can see when he said:

“one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.”<sup>2</sup>

Do you have that combination of self-confidence and self-effacement? Do you know that you are called by God to make a difference to the lives of others? And are you humble about the status you have, the attention you get from others?

John knew himself to be special because he was chosen by God, not because of the success of his preaching, which brought thousands of people to the Jordan to be baptised. It's very tempting to judge our worth by our successes. But that's a false criterion. It's much more important to

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 3:16 NIV

concentrate on being faithful to what God calls us to do, whether that's doing something small or unseen, or taking an up-front role. The results are secondary.

And then there's Jesus. Before he came to be baptised by John he was an obscure village carpenter. Maybe he was respected for the quality of the tables and chairs he made, or the repairs he did to people's houses or donkey-carts. But no one outside Nazareth had heard of Jesus.

But, like John, Jesus knew inside that he had a higher destiny. We have an inkling of how Jesus understood himself in the story about him as a twelve-year-old boy in the Temple in Jerusalem in Luke chapter 2. But we can't begin to imagine what it was like for Jesus to be both fully human and fully divine.

I'm sure, like me, you must have wondered why on earth Jesus saw the need to be baptised. One answer is that this was part of Jesus identifying with his fellow human beings. They were baptised as a sign of starting a new relationship with God, one in which they chose to turn away from a life based on satisfying selfish desires, in order to live a life dedicated to serving God. Jesus too used this moment as the start of his new life as a teacher, as a healer and as God's Messiah. In so doing, he was validating John's calling and work. It was also a sort of passing the baton. In a relay race the athlete who is about to take the baton runs alongside the one who currently holds it for a short while, until the baton is passed. John would soon be arrested for criticising the ruler Herod, and after some time in prison, would be executed. Jesus would take up the baton.

Jesus' baptism is a significant moment. In order to fulfil the mission that God is calling him to, Jesus needs the power of the Holy Spirit. Luke tells us that after his baptism, the Spirit led him into the wilderness<sup>3</sup> to be tempted by Satan. And after that, we read that "Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit".<sup>4</sup> When Jesus goes back to Nazareth and visits the synagogue, he applies the words of the prophet Isaiah to himself:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor."<sup>5</sup>

You and I are not Jesus, but if we are to fulfil the mission that God has given us as his disciples, we also need the power of the Holy Spirit. If we try to be good Christians in our own strength, we will fail, and then we will get discouraged and give up trying. There are too many Christians who start off with enthusiasm, being good witnesses to Christ and doing good things. But a few years later they have settled back into mediocrity, content with a half-hearted version of the Christian life, hardly praying and having little impact on the world. We can't achieve anything meaningful for God without his Holy Spirit. So pray each day to be re-filled!

At the heart of being a Christian is having a personal relationship with God. That is the most important part of our identity – more important than being a man or a woman, a

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 4:1

<sup>4</sup> Luke 4:14 NIV

<sup>5</sup> Luke 4:18 NIV

parent, an engineer, or an amateur musician. Is this at the heart of who you think you are?

As Jesus comes out of the water, he hears God the Father saying, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”<sup>6</sup> Please note that this is before Jesus has taught anyone or healed anyone. We do not need to do mighty works for God before he is pleased with us. God our Father just wants an open, loving relationship with each of us as his children. He just yearns for us to open our hearts to him, to receive his love and to love him in return.

At Jesus’ baptism we see Jesus the Son of God submitting to his Father’s will and receiving the assurance of his love. God’s love for Jesus is the same love that he feels for all his people. In Isaiah 43 God addresses Israel at a time when they are broken and humiliated after years in exile because of their sins. Yet his love for them has not ceased:

But now thus says the LORD,  
he who created you, O Jacob,  
he who formed you, O Israel:  
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.<sup>7</sup>

In the same way, by the Holy Spirit we can know God’s fatherly love for ourselves. Paul writes in Romans chapter 8:

For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry,

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<sup>6</sup> Luke 3:22 NIV

<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 43:1 NRSV

‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.<sup>8</sup>

## **Come, Holy Spirit**

Do you know that God the Father loves you? Perhaps you know it in your head, but do you know it in your heart? Is his love real to you?

If you would like to be more sure of his love for you, take a few moments to meditate on these words, and let them sink in. They are words of God the Father himself.

“You are my beloved son/daughter. I am pleased with you”.

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name,

you are mine...

you are precious in my sight,

and honoured, and I love you...” (*Isaiah 43:1,4*)

Prayer (to be said slowly):

Father God, thank you for making me in your image and for your glory. I know that I often fail you and don’t deserve your love. Thank you for loving me anyway. Thank you for sending Jesus to be my Saviour, taking my sins on himself on the Cross so that I could be forgiven. I want to know your love in a deeper, more personal way.

Holy Spirit, I open myself to you now. Fill me afresh, I pray. Cleanse me, renew me, restore me, heal me, empower me and fill me with love for you.

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<sup>8</sup> Romans 8:15-16 NRSV

Thank you for answering my prayer. Thank you for filling me with your presence and your love. Help me to stay close to you today, tomorrow and every day. May my life bring you honour and pleasure. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.