

A Question of Identity

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 15 February 2015, by David Gill. Readings for the Transfiguration of Jesus were 2 Kings 2:1-12, 2 Corinthians 4:3-6 and St Mark 9:2-9

“Who are you?” It’s a question we face many times every day.

You need cash so you push your plastic into an ATM. What happens next? The machine wants proof that you are you, so: PIN number please.

You land at Mascot from overseas and join one of those endless queues at Immigration. You dig out your passport, study the old photo, and hope the machine, or the human on duty, will be convinced it is really you.

You’re driving home from Christmas Eve at St Stephen’s and are stopped for a random breath test. What is the first thing the police officer wants? After a crack about “Good communion wine tonight?” it is “Driver’s licence please”. Identity matters.

In a few weeks we will troop to our voting places to do our democratic duty once again. But before we get our hands on ballot papers, it will be “name and address?” Another identity check.

Things were simpler in biblical times. They had no plastic, no passports, no driving licences and no electoral rolls. So how did they identify each other? Just a name plus a place (Jesus of Nazareth), a job (Peter the fisherman) or family connections (the person’s parentage).

Usually that was enough. But not always. Sometimes the question “Who are you?” could not be answered so simply. Sometimes the person’s identity was more than usually important. Special measures were needed.

One device they used was the story that would cast light on who and what a person was. The Bible has many such stories, some of them to our ears quite exotic. Two thousand years later they cannot be explained and we shouldn’t try. They can only be re-told and allowed to speak for themselves.

This morning’s readings invite us to jump back into that very different world of identification through story-telling. Are you ready to jump? OK, join me in a burst of spiritual gymnastics.

First, the strange tale from the second book of Kings. Elijah, greatest of all the prophets, is nearing the end of his life. His companion, Elisha, is about to

succeed him. The narrative, rich in trimmings, focuses on God receiving Elijah into heaven and putting the stamp of divine approval on the succession. It illuminates the identities of both Elijah and Elisha, affirming that the authority of both derives from God.

Next we heard from St Paul, writing to the Corinthians. Christ, he tells them, is the one in whose light we glimpse divine glory. Not a story, but certainly a focus on identity.

Finally, St Mark's gospel, expanding on the same point. Not just Mark: all three story-telling gospels tell of what has become known as the Transfiguration (= the change, transformation, metamorphosis) of Jesus. It is a weird tale to our ears, loaded with innuendo and symbolism that meant a lot to people back then but today mostly passes us by. Let's unpack it.

Who is involved? Jesus plus Peter, James and John, the three disciples closest to him. Where? A high mountain, and mountain tops were seen as places of divine revelation. What happens? Jesus' clothes become dazzling to an extent that is quite unearthly. Two great authority figures of the Hebrew people, Moses (the law) and Elijah (the prophets), appear talking with him.

Then the climax. A cloud (associated with God's presence) overshadows them. A voice from the cloud echoes what had been heard at Jesus baptism: "This is my son, the beloved; listen to him!"

It's the identity question again. In this man, ancient hopes and yearnings are being met. Ancient promises are being fulfilled. Heaven is touching earth. Eternity is entering time. Listen to him!

Where were the three disciples while all this was happening? At panic stations, that's where. Peter was raving on about preserving the moment by putting up some shelters, but basically, according to Mark, they were terrified. In Matthew's version, they had fallen face down upon the ground. Can't blame them. We would have been overwhelmed too.

But their fear is not the end of the story, at least as Matthew tells it. In his account, Jesus approaches them, touches them, encourages them to rise and says forget your fear. It's a moment of grace. The Transfiguration is primarily about the identity of Jesus of Nazareth, but it's also saying something about the identity, by association, of his followers.

You can almost hear him reassuring them. “Don’t be afraid. Don’t be overawed by all this. Don’t be put off by your confusion, your smallness, your inability to understand. You are my friends. You matter. You are valued and loved. We’re in this together”.

The message was aimed at three panic-stricken followers. But I suspect he would want to say something equally reassuring to his followers today.

We’re often confused. But that’s OK. We often feel insignificant. But we’re not insignificant at all. We often think we’re too small to have any useful role in the vast purposes of God. But I like that line from the Dalai Lama: “If you think you are too small to make a difference, try spending a night in a room with a mosquito”.

Big or small, everyone matters. Young or old, every follower of Christ is involved. Whether you’ve been a Christian for 80 years or eight minutes, you have a role to play. But how? Where?

Remember where the drama on the mountain top took them. They had grasped Jesus’ identity – as St Paul wrote, the one in whom we glimpse God’s glory. But the mountain top experience ended. Peter never did get to build the three shelters he wanted, to extend the moment. The spiritual high was cut short. The deep questions about eternal things never did get answered, or even asked.

What happened? Jesus led his three friends down the mountain, back to the everyday, towards the sick, the poor, the vulnerable and into collision with the authorities of the day. [If you’ve ever wondered why we preachers sometimes feel bound to touch on issues that happen also to be on someone’s political agenda, that’s why]. Jesus led his friends towards controversy, conflict, rejection, ultimately a cross. He leads us the same way.

That’s where moments of spiritual insight, if they’re authentic, will always take us. Martin Luther once commented that a theologian is born not by thinking, reading and speculating but “by living, dying and being damned”. That’s true for us all, not only theologians. We grow in faith and faithfulness not by thinking deep thoughts, sitting patiently on mountain-tops or waiting hopefully for moments of enlightenment. We grow by plunging into life’s dramas, dilemmas and damnations.

You have glimpsed who he is, the Transfiguration story is saying to us. So listen to him. Then watch where he goes. And go with him. Yes, following him is a

risky business, as Luther implied, but then whoever heard of risk-free Christianity? There is no such thing.

This year marks the 70th anniversary the martyrdom of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, pastor and theologian, executed on 4 April 1945 for his opposition to Adolf Hitler. In a prescient comment some years earlier, in a book whose English title became *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer had written “When Jesus calls a man, he bids him come and die”.

The dying takes different forms, for different people, in different places, at different moments in their lives. But that is Christ’s way.

In three days it will be Ash Wednesday, and the beginning of another Lenten journey towards another Holy Week. The transfigured man will become the crucified man. We won’t forget the dazzling moment of truth on the mountain top. But we won’t let it blind us, either, to what lies before him.

Before us too. When we recognise his identity, and find in his our own.

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