

Homily – Sunday 12th January 2020 – 6 pm

It seems to me that this evening's readings are all about identity. In the Old Testament lesson we hear part of the story of Joshua. He was a major figure in the events of the Exodus, charged by Moses with selecting and commanding a militia group for their first battle after exiting Egypt, in which they were victorious. Later he accompanied Moses up Mount Sinai and was identified as one of the twelve spies sent by Moses to explore and report on the land of Canaan. According to the first chapter of the book of Joshua, God appointed Joshua to succeed Moses as leader of the Israelites, blessing him with invincibility during his lifetime. This evening's lesson comes from the first part of the book of Joshua which covers the period when he led the conquest of Canaan. And we hear that striking story of the Jordan river parting to let Joshua and his people through. All of us hearing this story are reminded of the parting of the Red Sea for Moses. This story is, above all, demonstrating Joshua's identity as Moses' successor.

The second lesson is the opening of Hebrews and is all about the identity of Jesus. In the Greek, the first 4 verses are one single sentence of flowing prose, containing a deep Christology. The author offers seven clear insights into who Jesus is: heir of all things; involved in the creation of the world; reflection of God's glory; exact imprint of God's being; sustainer of all things; purifier of sins; superior to angels. The subsequent verses are an extended chain of scriptural references used to highlight the superiority of the son compared to the angels. If you want to meditate on the identity of Jesus, this opening section of Hebrews is an extraordinary statement, each phrase of which could form the basis of prayer and reflection.

Identity is important. It's all about who we are. Who we were made to be. It's about our uniqueness. What makes us similar to and different from others.

The church's celebration of the Baptism of Christ at this point in the church year can feel rather incongruous. Last week we were still at the manger with the arrival of the magi, yet today we find ourselves thirty years down the road. Jesus is a grown man, choosing to be baptised by John in the Jordan. (It becomes even more confusing in a couple of weeks' time when we celebrate the presentation of the infant Christ at the temple.)

But baptism represents a recognition that each one of us is a child of God. It is all about our identity. And for each of us, the beginning of a New Year may well be a helpful time to remind ourselves of our own identity. Of who we are and who we are called to be.

I wonder what you would say if asked to define yourself? I wonder, too, what others would say? Of course we are complicated, multifaceted people. Our identity encompasses our relationship to others as well as personal characteristics, and also shapes what we do. Aspects of our identity also change over time as we take up or set down different roles.

And what this evening's readings also remind us is the extent to which our identity is caught up in our relationship with God. Since God created each one of us and knows us better than we know ourselves, we live out our true calling by taking time to nurture that relationship. The more time we spend with God, the better we come to know ourselves. To know ourselves as children of God, whose deepest, innermost identity is recognised, cherished and loved by God. Amen.