

Sermon – Sunday 17th December 2017 – 9.30 am

When I became a teacher in my early 30s, I remember the joy of being asked what I did, because being able to say, “I’m a teacher” really seemed to connect with people. That was something they could understand. Everyone, after all, has had contact with teachers. We all have a sense of what it might mean to be a teacher. It felt, to me, like a part of my identity was somehow understood.

I should say that prior to teaching I was a Civil Servant. There are, of course, some people who have an understanding of the Civil Service, but many are somewhat confused. Given that I joined the Civil Service at a time when there were tremendous cuts being implemented, across the country there was the sense of being a “faceless bureaucrat” or a drain on the tax payer. More charitably some people simply didn’t find the term Civil Servant helpful in making sense of what I actually did – which is hardly surprising given that within the Civil Service people work on anything and everything. And for me part of the challenge was that I was a generalist – so could end up feeling like I had no expertise at all.

I’m not even going to begin with what it feels like to say that you’re a Vicar.

Today’s gospel reading encourages us to ask questions about our identity. John is being asked by the priests and Levites from Jerusalem who he is. Is he the Messiah? Or Elijah? Or the prophet? To all of these he answers no. And all he will acknowledge is that he is fulfilling the scripture from Isaiah – that he is the voice of one crying out in the wilderness “make straight the way of the Lord.”

What astonishes me is how clear John is about his identity. He knows who he is and he knows his purpose. Wow. I wonder whether you could say the same.

The thing is, of course, that there are so many different aspects to each of our identities. And they can change somewhat over time. Changing jobs is an obvious example, but there are others. What it means to be a parent changes over time – as children grow up and leave home. What it means to be someone’s child changes, too – as your parents get older. Many of us might recognise a time in life when both the younger generation and the older generation were somewhat dependent on us – a situation that can alter our sense of our own identity. As does our own health; our relationships; and so much else.

For each one of us we can probably identify times in our lives when we have felt more and less confident about our identity. It may be that some things about who we are have never changed – perhaps you are in contact with people who have known you for decades who can still be confident about what you will think, how you will respond or what you might do in various situations because of those things about you that have never changed. Sometimes, I think, it can be easier to see that kind of thing in other people than to feel it in ourselves. Only we are aware of everything that goes on inside us as we make decisions. What can seem obvious to others may actually feel like it’s come at the end of a challenging process in the course of which we really have doubted ourselves.

But there is another aspect of the focus on identity that today’s reading suggests that I find especially important. John identifies himself as the voice of one crying out in the wilderness “make straight the way of the Lord.” John’s identity is entirely caught up with others, and in particular with Jesus. Quite simply his identity would make no sense without Jesus.

I wonder how often during a service of Holy Communion you take notice of the phrases that speak of us as the Body of Christ? There is an introduction to the Peace which says, “We are the Body of Christ. In the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body. Let us then pursue all that makes for peace and builds up our common life.” Or there is the breaking of the bread – “We break this bread to share in the body of Christ. Though we are many, we are one body, because we all share in one bread.”

Do you notice this insistence that each one of us is part of a bigger whole? That our own individual identity – crucial though it is – is caught up in a larger sense of our identity as part of the Body of Christ. One reason why I am fond of the large priest’s wafers – some are so large that they can be divided into 24 pieces – is that as we receive Holy Communion we have a physical reminder that the part we have received only makes sense when it is joined with the others. Walking away from receiving Holy Communion we can really have that sense of a shared purpose alongside others – that who we are is intimately connected with who we are.

I will always remember my first evening at theological college. During the opening service of the year the college Principal suggested to each one of us that we may be looking around the church, wondering how on earth it could be that the people alongside us could possibly be training to be priests. And the good news was that they were looking at us thinking exactly the same thing.

That observation has proved to be a powerful one for me. First of course it is a reminder that we might find God working in the most unexpected places. It can be so easy to think we know what it looks like to be a follower of Christ, but I often find that I am proved wrong – just as John the Baptist would not necessarily have been the person people would have chosen to associate with 2000 years ago, and Jesus himself was definitely not what people expected from the Messiah, so today we might spot the face of Christ in the most unlikely souls if only we dare notice.

What I found particularly powerful about the Principal’s observation, though, was that it transformed my understanding of what is important. It was so refreshing to realise that my judgement on whether others would make suitable priests simply wasn’t relevant. I, like them, was there to learn, to discover, to grow – to be that part of the body of Christ that was uniquely mine in that place; to give space and encouragement for others to play their part, too; and to allow myself to be encouraged and supported by them.

Being part of the Body of Christ is transformational – daring to see ourselves as part of something bigger than ourselves doesn’t reduce us but rather enables us to see beyond our own horizons. John the Baptist was not diminished by being the one who prepared the way. In our shared discipleship we, too, are capable of more than we might imagine.

Amen