

Biblical Study

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Identity : Luke 15.1-7.

This week we are thinking about identity, work and health, themes central to the medicine of the person. The topic of identity raises the question, “Who am I?” It applies to my relationship to God, to myself and to everybody whom I meet. God created me in his image, but not only me. He also created, in his image, everybody whom I encounter.

“God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness’” (Genesis 1. 26).

To live by listening to God and in his love, that is the meaning of life.

To be created in the image of God is to have a history with God. It means accepting the responsibility of God’s gift of free will. To be human is to be faced by choice. There is a vocation to be undertaken, a path to be followed.

In the Old Testament, God’s greatest gift is the revelation of himself. This revelation is clearly seen in the story of Moses. Moses is about to discover his identity and his vocation. He received a call from God to rescue his people from slavery in Egypt. Moses felt completely unprepared for such a task. Moses was hiding because he is wanted in Egypt for the murder of a taskmaster whom he has killed and whose body he has buried in the sand.

By the burning bush, Moses received a special revelation from the God of his fathers. God was about to deliver his people from bondage. In this plan, Moses had an important part to play.

God enters into dialogue with Moses. Before he can undertake God’s work, Moses has to undergo repentance for his sin. The ground on which he is treading is holy ground. Like Isaiah after him (Isaiah 6.3-6), Moses has a profound sense of awe in the presence of the holiness of God. Moses claimed that he could not go and release his brethren in the name of an unknown God. In reply, God revealed himself as Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. According to von Rad, He made known an important aspect of his character by the epithet, “I will be that I will be” (Exodus 3.14, NRSV margin). He is graciously condescending to act on behalf of his enslaved people, and, at the same time, he is reserving to himself the leadership. He will always be the Lord and never the instrument of his people’s plans (von Rad. *Moses* p. 21).

The events that took place at Mount Sinai, in the communication between God and Moses, are fundamental to the whole pattern of Jewish and Christian thought. Behind the Ten Commandments, given by God to Moses, is enshrined the principle of ethical

monotheism; belief in one God whose power is universal and whose character is good. This insight, as the basis of the religion of a whole people, was new. Apart from a few individual exceptions, the ancient world saw no necessary connexion between religion and a style of behaviour. People worshipped many gods and goddesses who were greater than human beings in power but not in character. God led Moses to replace these polytheisms by belief in one God whose character is good and who demands the exclusive loyalty of the people who, by covenant, have become his own.

The dialogue between God and Moses put in place the conditions that made the Incarnation possible. Jesus could have come to no other country in the world, other than Israel, two thousand years ago, where he could have taken for granted belief in one God whose character is good.

The dialogue between God and Moses was a continuous conversation. At times, Moses felt almost overwhelmed by the task of leading and sustaining the Israelites for forty years in the desert. God constantly renewed the spirit of Moses and gave him fresh courage.

When Moses was completely disgusted, after the Israelites had begun to worship the golden calf, God reassured him that he had obtained his favour. "Moses said, 'Show me your glory, I pray.'" The Lord replied, "'I will make all my goodness pass before you'" (Exodus 33.18-19).

God spoke to Moses when he least expected to hear his voice. He opened before Moses a wonderful adventure, the effects of which are with us today.

Moses prepared for the coming of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, alone, is the person who bears the image of God in all its fullness. "He is the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1.15). Moses had asked to see the glory of God. We see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (II Corinthians 6.6).

It is in obedience to Jesus that we find true freedom and a real identity. "If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8.36). Jesus Christ is the genuine person. We are becoming persons. God calls us into a developing relationship with himself, as he did in the case of Moses, Moses who changed the course of history when he listened to God.

Jesus Christ is the Good Shepherd. (John 10.11). He calls us by name. He enters into dialogue with us. The voice and the name are symbols of the person. There is something incomparably special about the existence of each person. We are called first to be with Jesus and then to work for him. "He went up the mountain and called to him those whom he wanted, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message" (Mark 3.13-14). To each person, the Lord gives a task, appropriate for him.

Each person is of infinite value and worthy of respect. The community is weakened by the loss of one member. The Good Shepherd does not abandon the lost sheep. He goes out to look for it until he finds it (Luke 15.4). This is the message that we heard this morning, a fundamental text for concern for the person. Jesus takes great care to find the lost sheep. The sheep is a gregarious animal that does not like to be separated from the herd, but, on a mountain while nibbling grass, it easily finds itself in a place from which it cannot return. It would die of hunger unless someone rescues it. The shepherd does not allow this catastrophe to happen. He goes in search of the lost sheep until he finds it. "When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost'" (Luke 15.5-6).

The dependence of one person upon another is an expression of the life of God found in the inter dependence of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God lives in communion in the three Persons of the Trinity. The example of the Trinity means that persons are created to live in a relationship of love.

Jesus is the image of God in the world because he lives in loving communion with his Father. We reflect God's image in so far as we are growing in personal communion with him and with one another. The evening before his passion, Jesus prayed for his disciples; "Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one" (John 17.11).

Jesus belongs to this world; nevertheless, he has an air of something quite different. The prophets used to say, "Thus says the Lord". Jesus, by contrast says, "Truly, I say". The authority of God and the reality of his will are always evident. According to St. Matthew, at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, "the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, not as the scribes" (Matthew 7.28-29).

There was nothing automatic about the goodness of Jesus. It had to be worked out against powerful temptation to be untrue to his vocation. Immediately after his baptism, that marked his public acknowledgement as the Son of God, Jesus was driven into the wilderness where he was severely tempted by Satan (Mark 1.12-13). The devil chose his time. He appeared when the Lord was tired and hungry after a long period of fasting and prayer. The temptations were skilfully framed. Any one of them, if accepted, would have destroyed, in Jesus, his authority to reveal his Father in heaven. Jesus has been tested in every respect as we are, "yet without sin" (Hebrews 4.15).

Temptation was a regular feature in the experience of Jesus. After the feeding of the five thousand St. John tells how the crowd wanted to make Jesus a king (John 6.15). It appeared as though the disciples might have followed the crowd. The Lord, therefore, had to separate the disciples from the crowd. Mark says; "After saying farewell to them, he went upon the mountain to pray" (Mark 6.46). Without doubt, Jesus had to pray to avoid the temptation to become a king. Later, on one of the happiest days of

his life, when Peter acknowledged that he is the Messiah, Jesus had to rebuke Peter firmly for presenting him with the temptation to avoid rejection, suffering and death.

Jesus spent regular, and sometimes long, periods in prayer. St. Luke had a special interest in recording the prayers of Jesus. Jesus was praying at the time of his baptism (3.21), as the crowd began to press on him, Jesus withdrew to quiet places to pray (5.16), he spent the night in prayer before choosing the Twelve (6.12), he was praying at the time of Peter's Confession and at the Transfiguration (9.18), and on the cross (23.34, 46). Jesus took his vulnerability, as a human being, into the presence of God. As he faced the agony of his passion, Jesus felt the need of friends. He sought the support of three of his disciples.

Jesus knew in Gethsemane and on the cross the crisis of identity. He prayed, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet not what I want but what you want." (Mark 14.36).

Jesus shares our weakness and is always present to support us. He is there to listen to us and we can listen to him in meditation.

In *The Meaning of Persons*, Paul Tournier commented that it is the dialogue between God and us that makes us a person, a being, free and responsible (MP p. 165).

Our vocation is to respond to God by living according to his plan. At the moment of his conversion, St. Paul inquired of the risen Christ, "What am I to do, Lord?" (Acts 22.10). Later, St. Paul reminded the Christians in Ephesus that the risen Christ has given to each one of us a gift to use in his service. "The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry" (Ephesians 4.11-12).

St. Paul speaks of Christians being like the limbs of a single body. "The body does not consist of one member but of many" (I Corinthians 12.14).

Christ asks from us, our service. Mary found her vocation as the mother of Jesus. St. Luke found his vocation as a doctor.

Paul Tournier observed in the chapter on Vitality in *A Doctor's Casebook in the Light of the Bible* that in the biblical perspective faith, vitality and life are interrelated. Life means communion with God and death separation from him. The father says to the elder brother, in the parable of the Prodigal Son: "This brother of yours was dead and has come to life" (Luke 15.32; CB p. 148).

Dr. Tournier noticed that it often happens that the re-establishment of spiritual communion with God manifests itself in a recovery of physical vitality. Where there is mutual love and understanding, vitality and psychological health are advanced.

The identity of the Christian has sometimes to pass through difficult crises and the experience of failure. Dr. Tournier believed that there is an inner development of the person that only affliction seems capable of producing. This inner development of the patient, Dr. Tournier felt, also influenced him. He recalls the memory of patients facing sickness, bereavement, conflicts and failures and how doctor and patient have always found a common bond as they carried the burden together. "I remember too", he wrote, "how I have seen them (the patients) change through suffering, and how that has impressed me and changed me as well. It is true that the changes were not usually the ones that either they or I expected but I think that I can say that most of them gained by their experience as well as suffering from it" (CS p.15). Experience shows that when suffering comes it brings us nearer to Christ in his suffering (CB p. 242). God does not send or will suffering, but the biblical view is that suffering is a school of faith (CB p. 202).

The crucifixion of Jesus was followed by the resurrection. In the resurrection, Jesus retained his identity. Our identity and communion with Jesus and with one another will be fully realized in the resurrection. Mary Magdalene recognized the risen Lord when he pronounced her name. Initially, she had supposed that he was the gardener. "Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' . . . Mary went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'" (John 20.16,18).

It is in fellowship with Jesus that we have the assurance of resurrection to eternal life. In his book, *Learning to Grow Old*, Paul Tournier wrote of the resurrection, "I know that I shall retain my personal identity; and it is a fact here below, in personal fellowship, in the person-to-person relationship when it is true, that I find a foretaste of heaven" (LGO p. 237).

An adventure lived in the presence of Jesus Christ, who shares all the problems of our lives, and in the presence of my neighbour, that is the meaning of life. Such an adventure inspires us and upholds us in joy and in sorrow, in vitality and in weakness. "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 8.38-39).

Bibliography.

- The Biblical quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.
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