

'A Question of Identity'

A sermon for Lent 1 by Mark Pilgrim

Who said 'There is no existential crisis and no resentment towards any one. My identity is founded in who I am in Christ'?

This same person went on to say 'I know that I find who I am in Jesus Christ, not in genetics, and my identity in him never changes'.

These words were spoken almost three years ago, in April 2016, by Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, as the news broke to the world that the man he had thought for almost 60 years to be his father was not his father. Unlike the alcoholic whisky trader husband that Welby and his mother had assumed his father to be, Welby's actual father, a paternity revealed, was Sir Anthony Montague Browne, who served Churchill from 1952 in Downing Street and then during his retirement until the great man's death in 1965. Justin Welby was actually the result of a very brief, alcohol encouraged fling between his mother and Anthony Montague Browne, both of whom worked for Churchill, very soon before her wedding.

Three years ago Justin Welby's proclamation rang out loud and clear – and still rings out today: 'My identity is founded in who I am in Christ'. Faced with an uncomfortable and potentially distressing challenge to his integrity and self-worth (at least, as 'the world' sees it), the Archbishop's response was clear: 'Who I am depends on God – not on human opinion or judgment'. He said "To find that one's father is other than imagined is fairly frequent. To be the child of families with great difficulties in relationships, with substance abuse or other matters, is far too normal.

"Although there are elements of sadness, and even tragedy in my father's case, this is a story of redemption and hope from a place of tumultuous difficulty and near despair in several lives.

"(This story) is a testimony to the grace and power of Christ to liberate and redeem us - grace and power which is offered to every human being."

What happened to Justin Welby's identity, we may ask, when these facts were established and published? Was it stolen? Did it shift profoundly when he discovered the man he had met a few times at reunions of Churchill's staff he attended with his mother when he was young turned out to be his father – and no one could doubt that they looked very like each other? Well, no. Justin Welby makes very clear that the tap root of his existence is not his relationship with either of the men who claimed to be his father but with God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and the heavenly father for us all.

Now, I share all this about our current Archbishop of Canterbury because of the similarity of ground it covers with today's Gospel reading. In the accounts of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness, Jesus' own identity is tested and challenged in extreme ways. 'So', says the devil 'you are the Son of God, are you? Prove it by turning this stone into bread and by being rescued by angels when performing a suicidal dive. Come over to my side and I will make you ruler – as despotic as you like – of all the world.' As we know, though, Jesus rejects this invitation to assume a new identity. He trusts and stands firm in his identity as the Son of God. Being the Son of God is all he is and wants to be. He will not be separated from his relationship to and his identity in God.

Temptations to be something other than related to and bound in God come in all sorts of ways. In the accounts of Jesus in the wilderness they centre on bread, power and security. Our attention is drawn towards earthly pleasures. There are a myriad of other temptations towards which we can be invited and distracted: one trio might be youth, beauty and wealth. Another might be confidence, romance and fame.

The important thing about temptation I want to suggest this morning is not that it tempts us TOWARDS something, namely sin but that it tempts us AWAY from something, namely our relationship with God and the identity we receive in and through that relationship.

Consider for a moment the attempts to question and undermine our identities – ‘who we are’ - every day.

On bill boards, in magazines, on the back of buses and across the internet are adverts suggesting that our lives are missing something. ‘Who we are’ is not quite as rich or as laden with possessions as we could be. To become ‘more complete’, we just need to buy this brand of car, go on holiday to this desirable location, sign up to this internet delivery, music or screen service. But the temptations towards sin and away from God don’t just come from the mammon of advertising.

Invitations to leave one identity behind as imperfect and take on another come from all kinds of groups: political parties which say ‘vote for or, even better, join us and be part of bringing heaven to earth’ ... a Jeremy orientated heaven in the case of Labour and a Theresa orientated heaven in the case of the Conservatives (though how long each will be in charge of setting the tone of the invitation from their political parties over the next few months will be interesting to see!). And sports clubs – pre-eminently football clubs – invite us to take on a tribal identity where ‘we’ are best and ‘they’, the opposition... particularly your derby team, the near neighbours, are always second class...isn’t that so, Rovers and City fans in the congregation?!

And, lest we ignore the elephant in the room, the same process can be identified within the Christian community. How many of us have looked down our noses at the way some Christians worship in a way which is different...and we fall prey to the temptation to believe...inferior to ours? For how many of us is our identity in Christ linked too closely with the kind of church music we enjoy, with the kind of service we like to attend, with the formality or the informality with which the service is conducted?

Each and every one of us is under attack from tempting messages seeking to draw us away from the God who created and redeemed us towards some poor substitute. In response we should remind ourselves that God loves us more than anything: God loves all of us enough to send his only Son into the world, to take on our life, to suffer the same temptations as us, to be rejected as we often feel rejected and to die as we will die, all so that we may know God is with us and for us forever. Moreover, God raised Jesus from the dead to demonstrate that God’s love is more powerful than all the hate in the world and that the life God offers is more powerful even than death.

And remember, this life is given to each of us at Baptism. In Baptism the minister makes the sign of the cross on a person’s forehead and, in effect, says ‘You are God’s beloved child.’ So, I invite you to join with me now in making the sign of the cross on your own forehead and affirm your identity in Christ by saying these words: ‘I am God’s beloved child’.

Having done so, I invite us to focus this Lent, as Justin Welby did three years ago, primarily on our identity in Christ. Think about temptation as something that first takes us away from God and only second takes us towards sin.

With this emphasis on our relationship with God as revealed in Christ rather than on our relationship with things we shouldn’t do in mind, I invite you, on this first Sunday in Lent, to spend the next few weeks in joyful celebration and contemplation of the fact that our identities are indeed to be found, as the Archbishop of Canterbury reminds us, most fully and most truly in Christ. Amen.