



Sermon preached by The Revd David Tatem on Sunday 23 August 2020

Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

Following on from the introduction to our theme we can hopefully agree that the question of how we recognise people is not as simple as it might sometimes appear; it can be very complex indeed relying on a whole variety of different indicators and it can also be open to error or to deliberate misdirection. I'm sure we've all made the mistake of rushing up to a complete stranger in the street and giving them a big hug mistaking them for a close friend....well, perhaps we haven't all made that particular mistake but I bet we all know someone who has! Identical twins can present quite a challenge for others to be able to tell them apart and it may take quite a while before very subtle differences are recognised that allow them to be correctly identified...which introduces a word that I have deliberately avoided using until now, 'Identity'. There is an important relationship between being able to recognise or identify someone and recognising their identity, a relationship but also a significant difference. We increasingly live in a world where we are being warned to be on our guard against 'identity theft'; warned against people who by one trick or another may be able to get hold of enough personal data about us to be able to fool banking systems or other people online into thinking that they are us and go on to steal from us or misrepresent us or cause whatever chaos they might wish. Some have had their Facebook accounts or blogs cloned and false information placed there deliberately to discredit them or trick or trap other people.

There is nothing new in that, only perhaps in the ways in which it is now done. It is one of the first crimes recorded in the Bible. You might know the story in the book of Genesis, in chapter 27, of Jacob effectively stealing his brother Esau's identity in order to trick their father Isaac into thinking that he is Esau and gaining the blessing reserved for the firstborn. He does it by wearing Esau's clothes so that he smells like Esau and covering his hands with goat skin so that he seems to be hairy like Esau when Isaac touches him. He almost doesn't get away with it because Isaac is confused by hearing Jacob's voice but he accepts Jacob's reassurance that, no it's Ok, he is actually Esau and he gets the blessing. It's all part of a long and complex saga in which favouritism, sibling rivalry, family feuds and deception play a large part and it places identity theft right at the root of so much of the troubling dynamic of human society down through the ages. Later on we find the question of who is a false prophet and who is a true prophet regularly playing a part in the life and faith of the people.

So it is no surprise that it also plays a part in the gospels and especially around the question of who Jesus is, and it begins to suggest to us that identity is something rather more than, for example, just the fingerprint that identifies otherwise identical twins so that we can tell them apart. Actually the debate over who is a false or true prophet helps us to focus this a little more clearly. Who really does speak with God's voice, with God's authority and therefore speaks the truth and who does not? Who has tried to steal another's identity? Who is genuine? Who can you trust to give you real hope? And who has perhaps laid a trap?

Jesus knows full well that all of these questions are in people's minds and the urgency to find an answer is amplified by their needs and their hopes. It is no idle theological parlour game to while away the hours of some lockdown. They are looking for reassurance that God may be speaking

and acting through Jesus, that he is not just another pretender so they wonder whether he might be Elijah returned and what role he may have, and wrapped up with this are the titles that signify roles. Whether Son of Man is a title or simply a term of self-reference is open to debate but Jesus uses it to refer to himself and he asks Peter 'who do you say that I am?' Peter gives the response that takes the meaning of identity to another level.

When Peter responds that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, Jesus' response to Peter, suggests to us that far more has happened than that Peter has simply chosen the right name from a list or even been able to read the correct indicators, decode some hidden or subtle message. It's also not that Peter may have had a religious experience and heard God saying 'this is my Son'. The gospels tell us that this happened at Jesus' baptism so it's not even that Peter has simply dug it out of his memory. The way Peter responds suggests that it has come from some deep well within himself and that Peter himself has begun to change he is becoming someone who instinctively recognises the essential nature of Jesus' identity. Whatever else we may want to say about the title, 'Son of God' or Messiah and there is much that can be said and debated, it speaks of Jesus complete identification with the nature and character of God. Elsewhere Jesus tells his disciples that to have seen him is to have seen the Father. Jesus loves and feels and acts as God does, there is a deep integrity that in a sense is Jesus' identity. This is something that Peter has begun to grasp and Jesus picks this up and takes it further than just talking about Peter as one individual but suggests that such an experience as Peter has will become the bedrock on which the future community of fellow believers will be built. Identity becomes far more than being a form of identification. As it is for Jesus, so it is to be for his followers, it is to do with our essential nature, the values we hold, the instinctive way in which we set priorities and act. This tells us too, that identity can never fully be stolen, it can only appear to be so.

Jesus' words as Matthew records them there bring us, of course, to one of the great areas of debate and disagreement within the church. One interpretation of Jesus' words that Peter is to be the rock on which he will build his church has led to a whole ecclesial structure of authority with the Bishop of Rome being Peter's successor. Some would disagree.

I'm not going to enter that debate, only to say that, whatever position may be held, the change that happens when we know not only who he is but know him is what matters and makes the difference. That that is what it is all about. There is a world of difference between recognising someone and knowing them, between changing what we know about someone and experiencing ourselves changing because of our relationship with them.

Just as the people of Jesus' time looked for hope and many found it in their experience of him as the embodiment of God's identity so it can be for us too in our day and that is especially valuable in an environment where trusting so many of the identities often paraded before us is so challenging. We will continue to ask questions of those who present themselves to us in many spheres of life; questions of their true identity and the depth of their integrity and of how far we can trust them and whether what they offer will meet our needs and the needs of the world or instead serve their own plans and desires. We wonder; we hesitate; we hope; we may take tentative steps of trust or turn away. It is our human condition to struggle with those questions and it can surely help to immerse ourselves once more in the experience of exploring afresh who Jesus is, what his life means for our lives and the life of the world when our needs are deep and hope is fragile, to be prepared once again to place ourselves in the shoes of those who met him for the first time and wondered and took the risk to follow and came to know him.

Brian Wren has beautifully and poetically encapsulated that experience in his hymn 'I have no bucket and the well is deep' and instead of introducing it as our next hymn, I am going read it, with musical accompaniment, as a meditation.

(Hymn 340 R&S) I have no bucket, and the well is deep.
My thirst is endless, and my throat is dry.
I ask you, stranger, silent at my side,
can words refresh my longings if you speak?
I have no bucket, and the well is deep.

Can love unbar the strongrooms of the mind
and scour the tombs and warrens underground
for toys and treasures lost, or never found,
for all I cannot name, yet ache to find?
I have no bucket, and the well is deep.

Who are you, strange yet friendly at my side,
and can you see and judge, yet understand
my hidden self, and heal with wounded hands?
Are you the path, the gateway and the guide,
the keys, the living water, and the light?

Come break the rock, and bid the rivers flow
from deep unending wells of joy and worth,
for tears, for drinking, drowning and new birth,
and I shall find and give myself, and know
the keys, the living water, and the light.