

Sermon – 16th September 2018 – 10:30am Eucharist

Mark 8:27-end

**May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.**

This weekend and last many places have been hosting Heritage Open Days – just as we are here at St Mary's - an opportunity for people to steep themselves in the historical importance of this ancient, holy church; an opportunity to appreciate the past. And I know the organisers have been extremely pleased with the response.

And this interest in the past is emphasised by the number of people wanting to trace their genealogy. Since I've been in Parish ministry, I've been amazed by the large number of churchyard enquiries we receive from people seeking out graves and records to help them to compile a picture of their family tree. And then, there was the recent TV series, 'Who do you think you are?' where various celebrities were seeking the truth about *their* ancestors.

There seems to be some deep-seated desire to understand our own personal heritage, perhaps in a desire to know more about ourselves; to identify who we really are. Our past certainly does shape us but how do we come to know who we *really* are?

I used to be pretty sure I knew myself. Like me, some of you may have undertaken tests to identify your personality type – whether you are an extravert or an introvert; whether you like structure or prefer to 'wing' it; whether you are a detailed person or prefer to take a broader perspective. It can help you to understand yourself and to identify your strengths and weaknesses. But, for me, this pigeon-holes people and I don't believe people should be categorised like that.

The question, 'Who am I?' is one of the most important questions we can ask but the answer does not lie in psychometric tests, but rather is linked to our relationship with God. We are, after all, made in the image and likeness of our Creator, so who are we, really? I take the word 'image' not to mean to *look* like God (whatever that might be), but to *be* like Him – to have the capacity to love and to be loved.

In today's Gospel reading, it is Jesus who is asking his disciples, "Who do people say that *I* am?" It is a question of Identity. Who is Jesus Christ? Who is this figure who stands at the heart of our faith?

Images of Jesus are wide-ranging – he was gentle but also fiercely passionate; he was a wise teacher but also a revolutionary; he healed the sick making the blind to see, and the lame to walk; he was a friend of the poor and the outcast, but also of the rich and powerful. But he wasn't merely another human being. Jesus was *not* Elijah, he was *not* John the Baptist, he was *not* just another prophet. Jesus was **both** human and divine. Jesus was *God's* Only Son, God's image in human form, who lived amongst us to reveal God's love for *all* people.

And it is Peter who confidently identifies Jesus as the Messiah (the Hebrew word), (in Greek, the Christ), meaning "the Anointed One", the One promised by the Hebrew Bible prophets to free, save and deliver God's people with the promises of hope and everlasting life. Yet, Peter does *not* appreciate the *true significance* of who Jesus is. There is more to being the Messiah than who Jesus was during his life.

Jesus must suffer, die and rise again for his true identity as the Son of God to be revealed. And, as his disciples, we are called to do likewise – to take up *our* cross and to follow him by modelling our lives on and pointing to Christ in all we think or do or say. By doing so, we will come to know who *we* truly are. But this is not always easy. The busyness of life and our own shortcomings and insecurities get in the way.

One of the most challenging, yet powerful, comments ever made to me came from a colleague at Vicar School last year. He said: “When we meet in Heaven, I *will* know you” (*Pause*)..... It made me sit back and take a good hard look at myself. I might not have this physical form nor *look* as I do now (perhaps not such a bad thing!!) but he *will* know me! (*Pause*).....

I started to re-examine myself. Who am I really deep down inside my soul? How do people see me? But, more importantly, how does God see me? Because, let’s face it, God knows the very secrets of our hearts. We can try to cover up our weaknesses and faults to those around us or even to ourselves, but God truly knows us.

Sometimes I ask myself, do people see the image of God in me? Everything Jesus did, made a difference to people’s lives. Everything Jesus did pointed to God. But, do *I* truly follow the example of Christ every day of my life? How can *I* become more Christ-like? How can *I*, like Jesus, make a difference? How can *I* help more people to experience God in their lives? Do I *truly* play my part in building up the Kingdom of God here and now?

If we are to know who *we* really are, we need to focus on who God wants us to be. And the answer lies in developing our relationship with God; by spending time with Him through the intimacy and silence of prayer. And, as we sink into His presence, as we listen to Him deep within ourselves, something shifts. As we draw closer to Him, and pray that He will give us the courage to follow the way of Christ whatever obstacles we encounter along the way, we find our true selves.

If you want to know who you really are, long to encounter God, long to make a difference, long to be who God calls you to be, long to follow the example of Christ.

In the words of the writer and theologian, Henri Nouwen:

- Did I offer peace today?
- Did I bring a smile to someone’s face?
- Did I say words of healing?
- Did I let go of my anger and resentment?
- Did I forgive?
- Did I love?

Amen.