

## Trinity 9

### 21.08.11 Chester Cathedral

#### Rom 12: 1-8; Mt 16: 13-20

I have my best thoughts in the bath, usually. That's where the events of the day get mulled over in my mind and I think of the perfect rejoinder to some remark or the exact point that would clinch an argument. I suspect most of us do this- it is normal human behaviour- going back over the past and thinking of what we might have said, or wished we'd said.

There was, however, one occasion when, most uncharacteristically, the perfect response came to me at the time. At a social gathering someone asked me 'what is your *raison d'être*?' – a fancy way, I took it, of asking me who I was, what I did. I suspect the irritation at what I regarded as pretension sparked my reply: 'I am learning to be an amateur.'

Well, I was of course using the word 'amateur' in its original meaning- one who loves, a lover- from the Latin word for love, 'amare'. The word has degenerated in modern usage from doing something for the sheer pleasure of it to not doing it well at all- amateurish is a pejorative term.

And yet, at the deepest level, the word 'amateur' is true for all of us on any sort of spiritual journey. We are learning to love, to be lovers- of God, of life. When we meet someone we naturally ask 'What do you do?' To which we might give a variety of replies- offering a title- such as reverend, canon, head teacher; or a role-

husband, wife, carer, lawyer, shopkeeper, volunteer, retired. We all have many ways in which we can describe ourselves- I am a woman priest, I have a degree in English Literature, I am a grandmother- and so on. But none of these really says who I am – what my deepest identity is. We build up a picture for ourselves based on these various aspects of our lives which we present in various ways; we build up a persona for everyday living. We all have masks which we present to the world- necessarily so, it is how we function. But none of them is the essence of who we really are.

So when Jesus asks the disciples 'who do you say that I am?' he is pushing for the deeper knowledge. It is easy to say what other people think- John the Baptist, Elijah and so on. But the disciples then- and we now- have to decide for ourselves who we believe Jesus is. Peter, as we all know is a fallible human being who keeps putting his foot in it-but he recognises who Jesus really is. And for that recognition- not because of any other qualifications- Jesus blesses Peter and founds the church through him.

Peter has many failings but he patently loves the Lord- and that is his salvation. He is on a journey of loving- learning to love- to be an amateur in its real meaning. It is a very painful journey in which he will get many things wrong but it is essentially about finding who he is in loving relationship with Jesus. The love he experiences is transformative. 'Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God,' Paul urges the Romans. If this transformation is to take place we must be prepared like Peter for some rough journeying. We normally establish our identities in our early maturity- who we are, where we come from,

our family, our work, our children and so on. Deeper than that, the conditioning which provides the framework for what we think and believe- much of which we imbibe from our early experiences. There is a natural tendency to settle down in this established identity- to keep it polished and presentable, burying the bits we don't like. We need a sense of identity- part of the explanation for our social unrest is precisely that people lack a good sense of who they are and the gap created is filled with cynical advertising- l'Oreal's 'because you're worth it'- which is a close relative of 'because you can'- a loss of restraining boundaries and respect for social cohesion that manifests itself across *all* sections of our society.

Our personal identities are a framework for stable living- but they are not the whole truth about us. Who are we really? If we really want to grow spiritually we have to be prepared for another journey- to find our deeper identity. It is a fascinating fact that many of our myths and our most enduring fairy tales are about that journey- Sleeping Beauty, the Ugly Duckling, to name but two. In psychological terms we let go our false self in order to find our true self. Spiritually, we discover we are not the centre of the universe, we are not in control- God is; when we put God first instead of ourselves we find our true identity, the person who God created in the beginning- formed in the womb, as Isaiah describes it. Our deepest identity is who we are in the mind and heart of God. The Zen masters describe it as 'the face you had before you were born.'

We find this face partly through critical self-assessment, as St Paul knows very well. 'do not think of your selves more highly than you ought to think...but with sober judgement.' We all have good and

bad in us, we all have strengths and weaknesses. Sometimes getting things wrong actually keeps us honest and grounded. We also have faults and failings which need transforming. Learning to be honest about ourselves is a big step on the road to self-knowledge, self-acceptance and crucially, reliance on God.

So the journey to our true identity is also a journey which can be painful as we learn to open ourselves totally to God's transforming love. This is not self-obsession: if we do not love ourselves – all of ourselves-we will find it hard to love anyone else in all their awkward reality.

As I said at the beginning, we all have a natural tendency to review the events of the day- going over in our minds what has happened to us. There is an Ignatian form of prayer which uses this natural tendency and is a very good way to keep close to Jesus and find our deepest self. In essence it involves spending just a few minutes in prayer thinking over the day that has past, allowing Jesus to show you where you have been close to him and where you have moved away, forgotten his presence and the love. Be thankful for the closeness and repent of the moving away- and allow that to be healed, before committing the day ahead into Christ's hands. Simple but profound and transformative.

'Be transformed, so that you may discern what is the will of God.' The closer we stay to God the more we will discover what it means to love- to be an amateur- a lover, and the wider the horizons of heaven will become. God is One, and we all find our deepest reality in God and it therefore follows that we are all related, all part of the great mysterious whole, and issues of who is in and who is out

no longer matter. Jesus gives Peter the powers of binding and unbinding- sadly Christian history and human anxiety have shown a much greater interest in binding than unbinding. If we will take seriously our calling to find our true identity in God, his economy of grace and love will predominate over any economy of merit and exclusion and we will know that our well-being is intimately linked with the well-being of all others.

Perhaps the next time someone asks you who you are you might answer, ' A child of God, learning to love and looking forward to the kingdom.'

© Christine Bull 2011