

The question of identity is one of enormous importance, a fact which the birth of our granddaughter has reinforced for me. Life is a journey of discovery and most of us never stop learning about ourselves from the moment we are born to the moment we die. Then, of course, there is the parallel experience of wrestling to understand the ever-changing world and the part which we each have in it. In this generation, such is the speed and the scope of communication and of travel that we are having to engage with a much larger compass than most of our predecessors. Their worlds were that little bit smaller and that little bit simpler by comparison.

National identity is a controversial and much debated topic. I will lay my cards on the table by saying that I think the whole idea of a national identity based upon arbitrary political boundaries is an outdated and ultimately harmful concept. One of the great challenges of the 21st century will be to shape new understandings which will be of help and not hindrance in saving our planet and establishing hope for a just and peaceful future. Politicians such as Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump do that cause great harm.

In reflecting upon the present-- and seeking to shape a better future--- it is essential that we understand and come to terms with our past. History must always be a major element in the education curriculum; which word, curriculum, is derived from the Latin verb "to run", the relative noun meaning "a racecourse"; facts which imply an important sense of urgency. It is famously said that history is always written by the victors, meaning that we should always treat established accounts with caution. The "*black lives matter*" movement, which will not go away [nor should it] is as much about truth telling in the teaching of history as it is about anything and anyone who heard Benjamin Zephaniah interviewed this week on The World at One could hardly fail to have been deeply moved by his passionate and mournful affirmation of that. There is a massive amount of work to be done to achieve honesty and integrity in our understanding and telling of history. Only with such work underpinning us, can we hope to discover truth about our identity, individual and collective.

Recent weeks and months have seen us led, by the lectionary, through the book of Genesis, in which we find Jewish faith history concerning origins and, thus, identity. In truth we find a

tapestry of different strands of Jewish faith history, something which continues as we move into the Book of Exodus. Genesis reflects first upon the origins of all things – the creation narratives --- before its focus narrows to the origins of God’s people, Israel. That narrative takes off in Chapter 12, with the call of Abram --- and flows onwards through Isaac – a small part player --- to Jacob, whom God renames, Israel, and who becomes Father not just to 12 sons but to a nation of 12 tribes. One son, of course, is Joseph, whose role is also critical as it is through Joseph’s experience and Joseph’s grace that Israel comes to be in Egypt, first as welcome guests but within a few generations, as feared rivals whom the Egyptians brutally cast into slavery.

The phrase, *coming out*, describes something which has long been part of human society; from the practice of Native American boys undergoing rituals by which they passed from childhood to manhood – through the enduring of the London “season” by the daughters of the well to do --- and on to its current reference to gay men and women publicly acknowledging their sexuality. In every context, “coming out” has a great deal to do with discovering true identity. As we move from Genesis to Exodus, we move from origins to “*coming out*” – to the emerging of Israel [and indeed humanity] as there begins, overtly, the maturing process of discovering their true identity. We see in Exodus the faith history of the shaping of a nation as God leads the children of Israel on a long and tortuous journey of discovery as to who and what they are. This process begins, with God’s call to Moses. It is surely no accident that, at the time, Moses is engaged in pastoral work, looking after his Father in Law’s flocks. Moses is also an outcast, a refugee and a hybrid individual, part Hebrew and part Egyptian. Through answering God’s call, Moses will discover what is his real identity – as a servant of God.

The account of the call of Moses is well-known but always rewards attention. We see the struggle Moses goes through to understand and to accept the role God has for him. This is not an identity that has ever previously occurred to Moses and it will always be a struggle to come to terms with the role; yet it is in that role that Moses finds life, fulfilment, purpose and achievement. What is true for Moses is true for us all. We must grasp that important truth from the outset of our own faith journey.

The Moses account in Exodus Chapter 3 is also of major importance because it gives us an eternal and vital truth about the identity of God. God will continue to be identified as the God of Abram, Isaac and Jacob. In time, Moses' own name will be added to the list. But God's true identity is much deeper and much more complex than that.

Moses said to God, 'If I come to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your ancestors has sent me to you", and they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them?' God said to Moses, 'I am who I am.' He said further, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "I am has sent me to you."

'I am who I am.' It is, of course, the most enigmatic of answers; doubtless puzzling and frustrating for Moses at the time and deeply so to countless others through the ensuing generations. But in that enigma, there is made clear an enduring and essential truth. It is the truth which challenged Adam and Eve, leading them to try to replace trust and faith with knowledge – it is the original sin. And that enigmatic truth about the identity of God still confounds us --- that God is God --- never to be fully known or understood --- and that we --- - sentient and intelligent beings though we are ---are **not** God. And carried – essentially --- within the enigma is the companion truth that God is who God is ---- and God is NOT to be shaped or defined or boxed or encompassed by any human theology or philosophy or indeed subjective and circumstantial preference. We cannot make ourselves God and we cannot make God in the image of ourselves.

Which means – of course ---- that in writing and interpreting our own faith history ---- which term ultimately encompasses all history --- we must not pretend to that which we do not know --- we must not exclude the inconvenient and the uncomfortable --- we must not abuse history for our own egotistical and selfish ends. If Britain is ever to deserve and to qualify for the epithet "Great" then taking up the cause of honest and humble history telling would be a wonderful – if painful place to start.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen