

“Who is it that can tell me who I am?”

In Act 1 of the eponymous play by William Shakespeare, King Lear poses this agonising question, giving voice to that profound search for identity which is universally human. Lear is in crisis, terrified by his obvious decline into madness – or what we, today, would call, dementia – and disturbed by the exploitative treatment of his daughters. In contrast to the equally agonised outpouring of Hamlet ---- ***“What a piece of work is a man! ----- And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?”*** --- Lear’s question is intensely personal. ***“Who is it that can tell me who I am?”*** --- yet the one question is closely bound up with the other ---- each essential in nature.

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Today is the 30th anniversary of my Ordination as a Minister of Word and Sacrament --- that day being a crucial landmark on my own journey of self-discovery --- my own efforts to understand who I am. The journey began long before the 27th of September 1990 --- its starting point lost in my childhood --- and the journey continues today --- as it will so long as I breathe. In that, I am no different to anyone else.

As today has drawn nearer – a day which happily coincides with our granddaughter’s first birthday --- I have inevitably reflected upon my experiences 30 - 40 years ago. I recall the sense of achievement in gaining a law degree and starting my apprenticeship as a solicitor; the joy of falling in love and marrying, while at the same time becoming a partner in the law firm where I trained. I still feel the bruises of the internal battles I had; knowing that despite the apparent success of my career it was not who I was. I will never forget the grace which Dorothy showed in encouraging me to forget the prospects of a life in the law and to follow my heart --- even though we had no idea where that would lead. Then followed the overwhelming sense of relief as I took the plunge, applied for and was accepted as a candidate in training and embarked upon three glorious years studying divinity and learning the basics of parish ministry. All came to a high point as, having been called to Edinburgh Wardie, I entered the packed Church on the evening of 27th September 1990, in the company of the Presbytery, very nearly losing it as I heard the extraordinary sound of almost 500 people singing the 100th Psalm. How can it be that 30 years have passed? How much closer am I to

discovering who I am? Well I am closer, for sure --- but as the old spiritual says, ***“Nobody knows who I am until judgement morning!”*** Until that day, for all of us --- ***who I am*** remains just outside of the field of vision --- shrouded in the mists and mysteries of God. What I can say is that my life has been fuller, deeper and so much richer because of God’s grace in leading and calling me to ministry and that grace which so many people have gifted to me in the years since then.

Shakespeare’s Hamlet exclaimed ***“What a piece of work is a man! ----- And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?”***. Biology responds to that by pointing to those physical and chemical characteristics which are common to all human beings. But we all know that human life is more than just biology. Nonetheless, the quest to discover the quintessence -- the essence of humanity in its purest and most concentrated form – that quest continues to elude us. Many would say that the reason is that there is no such thing as human essence. Our human existence is so bound up with culture and context --- and culture and context are so globally diverse --- that we are unavoidably and essentially diverse as a species. As Professor Rowan Williams puts it ***“What we share as humans is not a “human essence” outside of history [i.e. outside of our life and work] but a common involvement in the limits and relativities of history.” Williams goes on to declare that “The only humanity we have is that bound up in difference, in the encounter of physical and linguistic strangers.”***

30 years ago, I wonder how much sense that would have made to me. I certainly held then that liberal assumption that the human race can acknowledge a shared context and a shared goal --- all of that implying a just and equitable sharing of power, resources and opportunity. Today, however, I can see that whether it be in the realm of race, creed, economics, education or health --- the crisis which faces us starkly now --- is a crisis rooted in the distribution of power. And central to the greed for power ---- is the claimed right to tell other people who they are. White power has for centuries tried to tell black people who they are – to force our selected identity upon them. Wealthy power has always felt entitlement to characterise those without wealth --- and in each characterisation to demean them, intentionally or not.. There will never be justice or peace while that remains so.

The New Testament model of the Church, so much influenced by the Apostle Paul, is one which seeks rightly and radically to insist that the answer to the question “**Who am I?**” lies in sweeping away the dominant models of authority and identification; replacing these models with an understanding of equality under God and of a distinctive communal life to which, in obedience to Jesus Christ, adult people consciously commit themselves. The trouble is that even within the New Testament we see clear evidence that the reality falls far short of the ideal. And as the centuries have passed the distinctiveness of Christian community and life has become less and less. As soon as it became natural and not radical to be a Christian --- so the Church became increasingly naturalised to the ways of the world. The realisation that this is true quite understandably leads to a longing for some utopian past --- but it is a past which has never existed – and so is a pointless exercise. Instead, we must look not to the New Testament Church but to God in Christ upon whom it is founded. In the masterful poetic prose of Philippians Chapter 2 we see the essence of God described as God emptying himself and taking the form of a slave – a servant of the world. ***Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. Therefore, God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name,***

From this God in Christ we learn that our life and work as individuals and as the Church must be – always and essentially --- a gift for the deepening and strengthening of the faith of others and a life of openness to receive that same gift from others – including and perhaps most of all – those who are strangers. Implicit in all of that is the truth that what I am – and what the Church is --- can never be a parading of status – or of maturity as a thing in itself. It will never be without each other that we move towards God’s kingdom and it will never be in claiming the right to decide who other people are. Jesus gave the powerful people of the world a hard time for that very reason. “***Who is it that can tell me who I am?***” Until all is revealed on the judgement morning --- only God in Christ can lead us on the pathway to the true answer. **In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen**