

Passion/Palm Sunday 2019

A few years ago if you'd been asked how do you identify? You probably would have wondered what sort of question it was! But today the matter of identity is an increasingly important one. Like all such issues the question of identity has helped us understand that we can indeed misidentify folk. It has been a reminder to us of minorities within our community. But, for some, identity politics, is a religion. And I can't help but think that for many 'identity fundamentalists,' division is the goal; and division is the mark of religion at its worst. The life and ministry of Jesus is concerned with breaking down barriers based on identity and ultimately creating a new community. A community of the baptised which St Pauls tells us knows neither slave nor free, Jew nor Greek, male nor female because our identity is 'in Christ.' This is our identity; but those of us who take this identity seriously know that it is easier said than done. Today is all about split identity; those who have welcomed Christ as our King today will be buying for his blood in a few short days. What of us?

At this week's Lenten study I confessed to my split identity! The three characters in the parable of the Prodigal Son had taken up lodgings in my mind and I am finding them hard to evict. As many of you know I have in recent weeks become rather consumed, transfixed by this parable and part of this obsession has included a growing dislike of the elder son. Yes, it is true his younger brother was a larrikin, he took advantage of his father and wasted his inheritance on booze and gambling; he broke the rules. But there is something endearing about him, I like the bit when he 'wakes up to himself' and heads home. It strikes me as all rather iconically Australian; (why is Ned Kelly so popular?) we secretly love the larrikin.

But what struck me particularly *this* week was the comment made by the elder brother, when he challenges the old man. 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you...' We spent some time on the elder brother's response in our study group; the rudeness, the mistruths, the moralizing. But what occurred to me was that whilst he *identified* as a slave, it was what Paul claimed Jesus had *actually become*: 'taking the form of a slave.' In reality the old man, the father had become the slave and I found myself disliking the elder son even more. He is the tall poppy of the worse possible kind and I found myself wanting to cut him down to size...all wrong of course, all very Australian; I should know better.

Today Jesus arrives in Jerusalem and is welcomed as a king, we have welcomed him too in the same way, Palms waving...All glory, laud and honour!! Why were the crowds there... because we are told, they had seen deeds of power. This is all about mistaken identity they, and us are quickly brought down to earth; deeds of power are not enough. Today the Lucan Passion narrative places on the lips of Jesus words which should cause us to stop and think. Jesus gathers with his disciples at table. He utters those

immortal words that we too will hear very soon. This is my body, this is my blood, given for you, poured for you. But even now, after all this time the disciples fail to understand: *A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest.* What can we hear, whose voice? It is the voice and the attitude of the elder brother.

But Jesus says to them, *'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves..... I am among you as one who serves.*

Those of us quick to criticize the younger brother, the larrikin, the boozier, the chancer, suddenly find that we called to be like him, you must become like the *youngest*; the one who wakes up to himself and returns to his father, who acknowledges the father's love. Indeed there is in the parable a sense that the younger son becomes one with his Father who profoundly shares in his son's suffering. The elder son is estranged; what he doesn't do is to engage in any way with the suffering of the father, he refuses to enter into the suffering of the father *and* therefore the father's joy.

The suffering servant of Isaiah understands the rejection he suffers as a rejection of God and believes that God shares that rejection with him. There is no complaint because they are undergoing it together, the servant is one with God. Paul likewise gives us the hymn of Philippians 2. This depicts Jesus as the image of the self-emptying God. But this is no servant, no slave simply *sent* by God, this is the son who flows from the heart of God, as we say in the creed, God from God, light from light. The servant is one with God.

When we interpret Jesus' passion through the lens that understands it as divine self-giving, thoughts of "paying for sin" fade, along with any idea that God could have anything to do with violence. This is reinforced in the garden. Jesus demands, 'No more of this!' when the slave of the high Priest is attacked. God has nothing to do with vengeance.

When we allow Isaiah and Paul and Jesus' own words to interpret his passion, we get the picture of Jesus as the expression of God's unfailing love, a love rejected but never overcome. So as we enter again into Holy Week let's do so through the lens of Luke, Paul and Isaiah. Let's look again at Jesus and to see him through their eyes. And as we do so we understand more fully how he is truly the revelation of God's way of being.

Let us during this Holy Week draw together as a community whose identity is found 'in Christ', the revelation of God's great love. This calls us to enter into the suffering of the Father like the younger son; offer our humble service to the world through him, and in doing so we *will* enter into the Father's joy. Amen.