

Who he is and who we are.

You might say that chapter 9 of Luke's Gospel, from which we read, is somewhat preoccupied with the question of who on earth Jesus is. 'Who is Jesus?' seems to be the subtext of this chapter. So, back in verse 7 we find wicked King Herod puzzled and perplexed by what he had heard of Jesus and asking, 'who is this about whom I hear such things?' And then just a few verses later we find Jesus turning to his disciples and asking them, 'who do the crowds say that I am?' Jesus knows that he is making quite a stir and people are talking about him and he wants to know what they are saying, who they think he is. And there then follows this weird, strange story of what we call the transfiguration, when Jesus took his three closest disciples with him up a mountain. And we're told that as he is praying up there his face is changed and his clothes dazzle and there appear to him these ancient figures from history, Moses and Elijah. And a cloud comes down and from the cloud there's a voice and – surprise, surprise – what does this voice say, what does it speak of? Well, it tells us who Jesus is: 'This is my Son, my chosen, listen to him.' So there's the answer. There's the answer to the question that is being kicked around in chapter 9 of Luke's Gospel and indeed that has been kicked around ever since, throughout history, who is (or who was) Jesus of Nazareth? And the answer? God's son, God's chosen - whatever that means.

Well, this morning I want to probe this question further. I want to take some cues from this passage to mine this question about Jesus' identity a bit deeper because it may just be that in following those cues we actually discover something about ourselves and who we are. And the first place I want to go in this story is to these two figures who appear with Jesus, Moses and Elijah. Suddenly, we are told, they are there with Jesus, these characters from ancient history, and they are talking to Jesus and we'll look at what they are talking about in a minute – but why are they there? What is their significance? Well, whatever meaning or significance these two figures have the important thing is that they are part of a story. They are part of a story that goes back centuries and that includes them and a host of other characters, and that's a story that Jesus knew well. It's Israel's story and Jesus was brought up on it. It was fed to him with his mother's milk. And the point is that Jesus cannot be understood

apart from that story. Somehow the question of his identity is bound up with it. In fact this passage is saturated with that biblical story. So, for example, there is more than just a passing reference to Moses here. When we are told here that a cloud came down and overshadowed the scene on the mountain we are meant to recall the story of Moses going up a mountain, to receive God's Law, and when he was up there a cloud descended and we are told that his face shone. In other words, whatever is happening to Jesus here on this mountain can only be understood by referring back to this earlier chapter in Israel's story that had similarities. And it's interesting that we are told that in verse 31 that Jesus spoke to Moses and Elijah about 'his departure', and that word would actually be better translated 'exodus'. Jesus was talking here about his 'exodus' and what does that mean? Well, we recall Israel's exodus from slavery in Egypt under Moses, their liberation from Pharaoh, and we realise that Jesus is also going to accomplish a liberation from slavery and a Pharaoh of a different kind.

So, you see, to understand Jesus' identity, who he is, what he has come to do, it's not enough just to say that he is God's Son, the chosen one. That doesn't tell us enough. Jesus can only be understood as part of a long story, Israel's story, in which he is rooted and which shapes and forms him. And for centuries that story shaped and formed us too. For centuries in so-called 'Christian nations' people understood themselves, understood their lives in terms of that biblical story. It was taught, it was celebrated and it made us who we are. So, for example, this week the season known as Lent begins. And in Lent we recall the story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness. But we realise too that Jesus' time in the wilderness had echoes of Israel's time in the wilderness with Moses. So in celebrating Lent people were in touch with a multi-layered story, which told them who they were and that gave a depth and a richness to life. And this was true of the whole year. Christmas and Lent and Easter and Pentecost and Advent and the narrative they unfolded gave shape to the year. These festivals and seasons gave life a rhythm, a pulse and a meaning. And it's very interesting that there have been discussions recently about fixing the date of Easter so that it's like Christmas, with the same date each year. Well, be careful! The reason the date of Easter changes is that it is linked to the Jewish, biblical story of the Passover, of Israel's release from slavery under Moses. And the date of Passover is related to the phases of the moon and so it changes each year – and so, therefore does Easter's. And the move to fix the date of Easter is therefore a move to disconnect it from the biblical narrative, to

uncouple it from Israel's story and to make it just a celebration of Spring. And that is a good example of how increasingly we are becoming divorced from the story that has shaped us for centuries. And that's all very well, but it leaves us with an identity crisis! The stories, the narratives that told us who we are and how we fit into the universe are being lost and forgotten. And when that happens then the only story that we can tell ourselves is that we are products of chance in a blind, indifferent universe, the product of evolution and natural selection - and is that story enough to fund our sense of who we are, and to bestow upon us dignity and worth? And this morning we had the joy of baptising a little child and what we were doing in that baptism was connecting little Elisa with that deeper story, the biblical story, the Christian story. We were inserting her into that narrative out of which our identity emerges. In baptising little Elisa we were saying in effect that this is this story which will in-form her and mould and shape her life.

So that's the first cue to Jesus' identity in this account of the transfiguration. The presence of Moses and Elijah remind us of a long story out of which Jesus emerges and which explains who he is. But then there is also what happens to Jesus here on this mountain: he's transfigured, his face and clothes shine like the sun. And we see here another clue to his identity - Jesus has a relationship with this one he calls his Father. There is this presence in his life, the one to whom he relates. And the effect of that presence and of that relationship is that Jesus is changed, transfigured, aglow with the divine. So Jesus' life, as well as being rooted and anchored in ancient stories and traditions, is also anchored in heaven. And there are times and places when the barrier between heaven and earth becomes very thin, very porous, as heaven seeps into the world. I wonder if you have ever known such moments. Typically, in Luke's Gospel, unlike the other Gospels, it is while Jesus is praying that his happens: 'While he was praying the appearance of his face changed...', for Luke has a special interest in Jesus' prayer life as we've seen before. And again, as with the biblical story, it is this that gives Jesus his identity. It is this that forms and shapes who he is: those moments in the waste places, and on the mountains and hillsides and in the depths of the night when Jesus sought communion with his Father - and the boundaries of heaven and earth blurred and the divine seeped into the human and his heart burned, and maybe his face shone just a little. And again, what happens in a culture where that whole dimension is gone, lost, forgotten, when we no longer pause to

commune with this one who seeks us out? What happens when prayer no longer mingles earth with heaven? What happens to our humanity when we no longer offer it to be blessed by the divine? What would become of a world where there is no longer heard even the murmur of a prayer? And I wonder if perhaps this Lent, in the coming weeks, you might consider making more space for prayer in your life – maybe using the daily devotions on our website, or joining us here in the prayer corner for a few moments before our service begins.

In a few moments we will be gathering round the table to celebrate the Lord's Supper. In the light of our thoughts this morning we might well say that partaking of this sacrament is central to our identity, central to making us who we are. Firstly, in the build-up to the sharing of the bread and wine, we join in what is called the Great Prayer, a Prayer of Thanksgiving, and this is traditionally a prayer which summarises the story of what God has done in creation and redemption. And there will be mention of Moses and Elijah, reminding us that we are a people shaped and fashioned by these great narratives of our faith. But then, secondly, we eat the bread and the drink the wine and in so doing we commune with God, and the barrier between heaven and earth and the saints and the heavenly host becomes gossamer thin and porous, and we bask in communion with the God in whom we live and move and have our being. Here, in this act, in these two ways, our identities are constituted and we become who we are. And, who knows? We might even leave, like Moses, with our faces shining – at least just a little. Amen.

Living God,
come we pray and transfigure your world.
Come to us and let our world and our lives
shine with your presence.
We remember those in Taiwan caught up
in the recent earthquake, and we pray
for the bereaved and the injured and
and rescuers still trying to save life...
O God we remember all those caught up
in natural disasters, praying too for people
and animals in Zimbabwe experiencing
severe drought and its effect on crops...
And again on this Sunday as we collect money
for the Mulanje Mission Hospital in Malawi
we pray for it and its work,
for medical director Ruth Shakespeare
and all the staff.
O God make it a place where your glory dwells...
And bless your church worldwide.
As Peter yearned to build shelters
to house your presence, may your church
be a place of meeting between heaven and earth,

a place where humanity shines with the love
and grace of God...

As always we remember today those
who cannot gather here at your table because
of age or infirmity or weakness.

Draw near to them and may they know
through our love and care that they still belong here.

And remember too those recently bereaved.

Comfort and strengthen them we pray.

And hear us as in a moment of silence we

bring our own lives before you

bringing to this table things that are on our hearts.

Hear all these prayers, we ask,

in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.