

*Identity's key*

Who is Jesus Christ? Who is this compelling preacher and teacher, this wonder-worker and miracle-maker who was executed in the most despised manner imaginable as a rebel, a heretic and a political subversive? That is the question that lies behind the first few chapters of Matthew's Gospel: who is Jesus? And the writer attempts to answer that question for a church community most likely made up of Jewish people who had become Christians and who needed to weave together their Jewish faith with the extraordinary life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. So Matthew's Gospel begins to explore who Jesus is by the device of a genealogy, a sort of family tree, tracing Jesus' identity back to the father of the Jewish race, Abraham. And subsequent stories in the early chapters of this Gospel continue to disclose aspects of who Jesus is, until we come at last to our passage this morning describing Jesus' baptism by the radical preacher John in the Judean desert. Who is Jesus Christ? And the answer given here is sounded from the sky and by a heavenly voice which proclaims, 'This is my Son, the Beloved with whom I am well pleased.' So Jesus identity – who he is – is disclosed to the world and indeed to him. And Jesus needed to know that, he needed to know who he was as he set out on the dangerous ministry and mission that was to follow.

Who is Jesus Christ? And indeed, who are you? And who am I? This is the profound question of identity – what we call an 'existential' question that plumbs the mysterious depths of what it means to be human. It may seem to be an abstract and esoteric question which can be safely left to philosophers and those with too much time on their hands. There are, however, occasions when the question of identity presses in upon us and becomes urgent and one such occasion has been brought home to me by a book I read over Christmas and which moved me deeply and which I bring this morning to this passage about Jesus' baptism. The book is by a Scottish journalist, Sally Magnusson, it is called 'Where Memories Go' and it chronicles the slow descent of her beloved mother into the hell and anguish of dementia. Sally Magnusson's mother, Mamie, was herself an acclaimed journalist – a highly articulate, witty woman and a pioneer in the previously male world of journalism. By her daughter's account Mamie Magnusson was a joyful, free-spirited woman with a joyous take on life and a sense of humour to match. And the book chronicles the

twelve years in which she was invaded by this terrible condition, gradually robbing her of her memory and with it her personality and identity. The twin assaults of Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia which were Mamie Magnusson's diagnoses were like an acid that gradually corroded and dissolved this once vibrant person, as her family struggled to care for her and to come to terms with losing the mother they knew and loved.

It's a beautiful and powerful book and I recommend it to anyone who has in one way or another encountered dementia or Alzheimer's disease – something which of course is becoming ever more common as we live longer and suffer conditions which once we would have never lived to see. But here is one place where the question of identity looms large. Where my memory has gone, where have I gone? When memory is hijacked this way is the person that is 'me' not taken hostage? After all, so much of who I am is bound up with memory. The only way I can account for myself is by referencing the narrative of my past - but when that goes where do I go? And other people can only identify me when there is some continuity between the person they encounter now and the person they have known previously. But what happens when the person you once knew and loved has been stripped of so much of what they once were? What has happened to their identity? Are they in any sense the same person at all? And from here we are led to a host of other questions about how the mind relates to the brain. Is the brain just some fantastically clever and complex computer that generates an illusion of self that slowly fades as the brain corrodes? The great seventeenth century French philosopher René Descartes, right here in this city of Amsterdam, coined his famous phrase '*cogito ergo sum*, 'I think therefore I am'. But what happens when I can no longer think, when my mind has been scrambled – do I cease to be?

Well, these are deep, profound questions to which there are no easy answers, or at least many partial answers. But I am taken this morning to this account of Jesus' baptism in River Jordan as a starting point for considering this question of identity as Jesus is declared by this voice from heaven to be God's Son, the Beloved. And the first thing that this tells us is that our identity is hidden with God, known to God and given to us by God. And therefore nothing – not even the cruel ravages of dementia – can ultimately violate who I am. In his wonderful passage about love in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians Paul wrestles with the question of identity, 'who am I?', and he pictures himself looking into a mirror. But the mirror is dark and obscured and so he

cannot see himself, he cannot see who he is. But then he goes on to speak of how one day he will know – *even as he is known*.

‘For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.’

Here is Paul’s reassurance that while he may be a mystery to himself he is nonetheless known - known by God, named and identified by God and one day the mystery of who he is will unfold and be revealed. Likewise here in the Jordan river Jesus’ identity is declared by the one who knows through and through who he is. And Jesus can therefore face his ministry with all its trials and rigours knowing that whatever happens to him, and whatever stress and pressure he is put under, however assailed and assaulted he is, however disfigured and dehumanised he is, his identity is held safe and secure, prized and treasured by God.

That leads us to a second point. One of the moving aspects of Sally Magnusson’s account is her and her sisters’ determination to care for her mother and to keep her in her home surroundings and out of institutional care whatever the cost – and the cost was great. Behind this decision lay the conviction that our identity is something that is given to us not just by God but also by others, through our relationships, and hence the social dimension of care, the need to affirm the person as part of a community that reinforces their particular identity and the specifics of their personality. Sadly, all too often that does not happen in institutional care. And likewise that is why Magnusson is critical of the overuse of drugs and medication in the treatment of dementia. Drugs treat us inwardly, physically, in isolation, but identity is constructed and maintained socially, in community. So part of my identity is as a pastor to you, to you people, and that identity was given to me when you called me as your minister and is reinforced when you allow me to relate to you that way. And here we see and hear something profound in Jesus’ baptism. We’re told that as he came up from the water the Spirit came down like a dove and a voice spoke. Here Jesus is being affirmed by the voice of his Father who declares him to be his Beloved Son, and that is confirmed by the Spirit who alights upon him. And here we catch a glimpse of a great mystery about God that will later be expressed in the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Now at the River Jordan, just as throughout all eternity, Jesus’ identity is established by his relationship with his Father and with the Spirit as they unite

and combine to establish who he is. Identity, then, is something given to us by others. Return to Descartes sitting here in Amsterdam - alone with his thoughts, reaching inwards to find himself. That is no way to construct identity. Contrast that solitary, thinking being to the triune community of love in which Jesus was caught up in his baptism. Contrast that isolated figure of Descartes with the family community that held Mamie Magnusson through those years, uniting and combining to establish who she was right to the end, a beloved mother and so much more - even in the face of huge loss and tribulation.

I want to close by quoting from a poem – or rather the lyrics of a song – that came to mind as I read Sally Magnusson’s book and as I pondered the horror of dementia in the context of Jesus’ baptism. It’s from a song by Leonard Cohen, so sadly departed just weeks ago. It’s a song called ‘If it be your will’ and it evokes Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane struggling with God’s will as he faces arrest and execution. The verse goes:

If it be your will that I speak no more  
 And my voice be still as it was before;  
 If it be your will I will abide until  
 I am spoken for. If it be your will.

Here are echoes of Jesus moments before his betrayal and arrest, knowing that soon he would be silenced, his voice no longer heard, no longer able to express himself. That is the experience too of dementia, when we are silenced, our identity stifled and smothered. But the verse goes on, ‘I will abide until I am spoken for’. Jesus here allows his voice, his identity, his very life to be taken from him – but it in the knowledge that it will be given back, it will returned to him, by the one who will speak for him. And he could be confident of that because at his baptism that voice had spoken for him – ‘This is my Son, the Beloved...’ – and he trusted that voice to speak for him again. Mamie Magnusson lost her voice. She could speak no more, at least as she had before. But she never lost her identity, for that was held and kept safe by God, and in the silence it was her family who spoke for her. They gave back to her who she was.

Who am I? Who are you? Who knows when forces may assail us and we are constrained to ask those deep questions about identity. We live in a world where we can be too easily dehumanised and violated, our identities too easily distorted and disfigured and destroyed, whether by disease or by other people or by the circumstances of our lives. Who are we? The key to our

identity as human beings lies in the God who loves us and speaks for us – and in our learning to love and to speak for one another. Amen.

O holy and loving God,  
revealed to us in Jesus of Nazareth,  
we worship you this day and bless your holy name.  
In him you have torn open the heavens and come down,  
In him you have immersed yourself in the waters  
of destruction and fear,  
in him you have stood alongside us in our sin, and suffering its effects – in  
order to save us.  
And despite our faithlessness and our failures  
you love us and declare us to be the beloved  
in whom you take delight.  
O God, have mercy upon us we pray and forgive us for our sins.

Forgive us that we do not live as the beloved of God.  
Forgive us that there is much in us in which you take no delight.  
Have mercy we pray, in Jesus' name....

Loving God,  
Send your Holy Spirit upon us afresh,  
that Spirit that anointed Jesus at his baptism,  
that Spirit that assures us that despite our failure  
and shortcomings we are named and loved,  
forgiven and reconciled to you.  
And by that Spirit empower us we pray to live new lives  
as the people of God.  
We pray in Jesus' name and in his words  
We join together, saying...