

## PRIMARY IDENTITY AS DISCIPLES OF CHRIST

Nic Denny-Dimitriou - 9th May 2004

Leviticus 19: 1-2 and 9-18 [A holy God – practicalities of holy living]

Revelation 21: 1-6 [The new heaven and new earth]

John 13: 31-35 [A new commandment]

To begin with, it is important to acknowledge Mother's Day – our celebration of mothers and grandmothers, for without them, where would any of us be? J

(At 9am service, children specially honouring mothers, grannies...)

Of course, we all acknowledge their wondrous roles and contributions *every* day. Only on this day our acknowledgement is more special than usual, and in honour of that, I want to share with you some of the things my mother taught me...

### **Lessons from my Mother:**

My mother taught me TO APPRECIATE A JOB WELL DONE.

"If you're going to kill each other, do it outside. I just finished cleaning."

My mother taught me TO PRAY.

"You better pray that mess will come out of the carpet."

My mother taught me about TIME TRAVEL.

"If you don't straighten up, I'm going to knock you into the middle of next week!"

My mother taught me LOGIC.

"Because I said so, that's why."

My mother taught me FORESIGHT.

"Make sure you wear clean underwear, in case you're in an accident."

My mother taught me about the science of OSMOSIS.

"Shut your mouth and eat your supper."

My mother taught me about ANTICIPATION.

"Just wait until your father gets home."

My mother taught me GENETICS.

"You're just like your father."

My mother taught me about my ROOTS.

"Shut that door behind you. Do you think you were born in a barn?"

My mother taught me WISDOM.

"When you get to be my age, you'll understand."

And my favourite: my mother taught me about JUSTICE.

"One day you'll have kids, and I hope they turn out just like you".

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I begin the sermon this morning, talking about **Identity**.

It is a rich and potentially complex subject with many facets to it.

Aspects include

- Tribal / Racial / Ethnic / National
- Commercialised Western or Rural African
- ... so important that much has recently been said on these in our recent elections (from different points of view)
- From my surname – often asked if I am Greek; well, yes – half.
- Nuanced – from Alexandria, Egypt (NOT Cyprus / the islands / Turkey / mainland!).
- But I am part-Irish too.
- And I consider myself S. African – nuanced too:
  - WUESSA – White, urban English speaking South African.
- Music, dress, car, job – all parts of our identity, or linked to it, or expressions of
- Frequent social question people ask: “Where do you come from?”
- It is jokingly said that in the W. Cape people ask you where you live, because the defining point of identity is where you are situated in relation to the mountain and the sea! ;

In Gauteng they ask you what work you do – that is the defining point – which also defines the car you drive; and in KZN they ask you where you went to school!

- Roles – mother / teacher / businesswoman / domestic worker / priest
- Identities as male and female – understandings of that shift all the time, and have done so through the ages, also depending on culture and other factors of society – how does a man or woman define themselves, act in society etc.

It is a defining thing – who am I, where do I fit into things, how do I relate to others, how do I define myself?

**For the Christian, identity is also crucial.**

Primary Identity: Belong to God; a disciple / follower of Jesus Christ; a member of the Family of God. Baptism, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, is defining. The extent to which I know and understand that will determine my understanding of myself as a Christian.

At the superficial level there are as many nuances of identity as there may be in tribal / role identities. For instance, there is denomination to consider, and facets such as emphasis in theology, styles of worship, culture, etc. But at a more profound level, the defining point is that I belong to God. It is like an archway over all the other identity characteristics we have discussed.

Live within a culture, and a specific time-period, so these things will be differently expressed.

Add to that the mix of age, background / upbringing / personality – all these things will vary.

With regard to today's Bible readings, we will respond according to the way we understand our identity.

**Leviticus:**

This is a reading of part of the Law, being given and expanded upon to the Jewish people whose identity was based upon knowing they were formed as a nation to reveal the salvation of God, and were to keep specific laws of God.

Today, we still acknowledge the basis of that Law, although in the light of Jesus Christ, are no longer bound by all its specific requirements... especially the dietary and other culturally defined aspects of it. Yet, the basic commandments and moral laws remain in force!

From today's reading, we have the following highlighted...

- Holy God
- To be obeyed
- Practical laws –
  - Make provision for the poor and hungry, the resident aliens
  - Not deny wages to the daily-paid labourer (no credit cards – his family would go hungry that night)
  - Strict impartial justice, no ill treatment of labourers or disabled
  - Concern for those on the edges of society, as opposed to those in the centre of things
  - No nursing of hatreds – Wow, how many wars have been caused by humanity ignoring that!

- At the root of all these: Honouring other people (including the “alien”).
- Love others ... (refer to reading for the wording – so close to Jesus’ later words!)

Takes us straight to the Gospels and the teaching of Jesus...

### **Gospel of John:**

- Holy God
- To be obeyed
- Practical laws / commandments:
  - Love others as I have loved you
  - Love is defining – chief aspect of identity here!
  - Understanding that I am loved by God, and responding to that love
  - Allowing that love of God to affect how I relate to others.

No matter the sophistication or technological development of society, these core values remain the same, from the time of Leviticus (over 3,000 years ago) to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Practical, yet not simplistic – our highly complicated world ensures that none of us is able to cope perfectly with all the demands of daily life. Under personal stress, all of us react in unpleasant ways – “snap”, yell, selfish, withdraw – many other possible reactions. So too in families, larger groups / nations etc.

But Jesus comes to bring transformation of humanity and sinfulness, in part by calling us to a higher identity than any other we have. Over-arching, a claim above all the other human-related identities, important as they may be.

Famous statement in Scripture: In Christ, there is neither Greek nor Jew, slave nor free, male nor female...

Often ignored, not lived up to. (Elaborate on Paul’s sense – not literal in that we are suddenly without ethnicity / social roles / gender etc., but in the light of our belonging to Christ, these differences which we use to define and separate ourselves from other ‘classes’ of people, become irrelevant / insignificant.)

The defining reality: I am in Christ.

Jesus’ transformation is many-faceted:

- Within us
- In perspectives
- In identity

If I understand that my primary identity as being in Christ, many of the other things that Christian identity calls for will flow more naturally – including how I relate to and treat other people, how I love them (remembering how practical the law was in its application).

For the set of laws and commandments is not just an arbitrary way of living, nor a cold set of laws given by a mindless bureaucrat with a poor sense of humanity. They are consistent with the nature of God, and the person belonging to God is called to live consistently with that too.

As I grow in understanding my primary identity in Christ, these things will also grow within me.

Just as I may need to learn what my other human roles imply or involve, and just as I grow into those roles, so too do I grow into my identity as a disciple of Jesus Christ, and learn to live as one.

As a Father to my children – changing and learning all the time (– elaborate on the analogy).

So too in my experience as a Disciple. I need teaching, encouragement, inspiration, guidance, help in correcting mistakes, reassurance from time to time.

Let me conclude with a few questions, and a final perspective:

- Have I considered what my primary identities are?
- What is my identity in God? How strong is it? How well formed is it?
- What is my relationship to God?
- Do I understand these words of command from Scripture as being from a loving, living God, as opposed to a killjoy bureaucrat?
- The extent to which I identify myself as a Disciple of Jesus Christ will largely determine the extent to which I am able to hear these things and not just live up to them as an outside source of rules, but as something coming from the heart of who I am.

### **For a final perspective: The Revelation to John**

Our reading today from the Revelation to John gives us the perspective of the new Heaven and the new Earth one day to be created, when we shall see and know God and be fully and completely transformed. Our identities as humans now, which are all consuming, will seemingly be of no consequence any more, and our identity as fully-transformed citizens of the Kingdom of God will be paramount. It will be a time of no more tears (including that which causes tears), no more death or pain – or any of the other negative things of human experience.

That is also a reality to which each of us is called, is headed.

And that perspective ought also to form a part of our identity as children of God.

Now – we are called by Jesus to love others, as Jesus himself has loved us.

Amen.