

October 4th - our identity is in Christ. The Reverend Ruth Hulse

Who are you and What do you do?

These are generally the first questions people ask someone they meet? And once they, or we, know the answer, all sorts of assumptions spring to mind don't they. We think we know something about the other person based on their answers.

Thinking about that question another way. That's the question that so many people are seeking the answer to - who am I? What is my purpose, what is my worth, what is my identity?

And from yet another perspective, it's the question the Parish Reps have been asking over the last few months as they create the parish profiles: who are we at All Saints or one of the other churches? What is the purpose and identity and worth of this church? I have to say I think that all of the Reps have met that question head on and the profiles that have come out are pretty good at answering that question. It's the question that a new Team Rector will want to ask us, and will want us to answer - who are you?

And it's this fundamental human search for identity that Paul is talking about in the passage from Philippians. To conclude, he says, the only way to truly find yourself is to be found in Christ.

That could be the end of the sermon: the only way to truly find yourself is to be found in Christ, but I think there's a little bit more to say.

We all know what Paul does here. He lists his credentials to show that they add up.

After the service we're going to hold the APCM and part of that is to look at the accounts. What's the first thing you do when you receive the accounts and look at them? Or if you check your own balance at the bank? You look to see what's come in and what's gone out, and do they add up? The assets and the liabilities, what you gained, and what has cost you.

Imagine Paul writes his spreadsheet of 'accounts'. On the income side are his credentials, his assets:

"Circumcised on the eighth day" - exactly as prescribed by Jewish law.

"Of the tribe of Benjamin" - his parents were Jews. Paul is an Israelite by birth and could trace his genealogy - he is good enough.

"a Hebrew of Hebrews" As Jewish as you could get.

But it didn't stop with what he was born into.

Paul also goes on to list:

“in regard to the law, a Pharisee” He interpreted the Scriptures conservatively and studying them diligently.

“As for zeal,” Paul says, “persecuting the church”. Not only was he zealous for the law and the traditions but he took action against those who did not stick to them.

And finally, “As to righteousness under the law, blameless’ He kept the rules.

If anyone could look at that list, that spreadsheet, and feel good about himself it would have been Paul. He was the model Jew. His identity was in the rules and in his genealogy and his asset column was full.

“But, Paul says “whatever gains I had, I now regard as loss because of Christ. because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”

Or, to put it this way: Paul came to the point where he looked at his spreadsheet, looked at everything he had accumulated by inheritance and by his efforts and came to the conclusion that these things actually meant nothing compared to knowing Christ, in fact these things had the potential to keep him from knowing Christ, could cost him. He then copied the entire assets list, into the liabilities column. He called it ‘loss,’ and under assets he wrote, ‘Jesus Christ.

All of the credentials Paul had staked his life upon were empty and worthless compared to Christ. He regards them as Rubbish. The KJV uses dung. They are only worth throwing onto the rubbish pile compared to knowing Christ.

How many people in the world today try to grasp at identity and worth through the things they do, the things people see that they do, the rules they are seen to follow. How many of US do that? And how often does it lead to discontentment because we fail or because we don’t think others perceive our worth, or because something like a pandemic throws everything up in the air and means we cannot ‘do’ what we have always done.

Now, Paul wants to “gain Christ and be found in him not having a righteousness that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.”

What does it mean to gain Christ; what does it mean to be found in him? It means to be able to put what is Christ’s in your assets column, rather than all the other things we try and cram in there - our good deeds, our hard work, our churchgoing, our salary or job title, our clothes, our knowledge.... instead of all that, we put Christ, and all the things we know Christ is - love, grace, peace, transformation, forgiveness and above all, LIFE.

Paul says everything is meaningless without Christ, at the end of the day it will only lead to discontentment and a feeling of worthlessness, because at the end of the day, all these other things will let us down at some point. But if we gain all that Christ is, and we are found in him - our identity found in following Christ, that is placing our hope and our worth and our identity in something eternal and never failing. Our balance sheet will never be in the negative.

Sounds like Paul has it all sorted, doesn't it. Not like the rest of us, not like so many people searching for identity and worth and a full list of credentials.

But Paul then says - you know I'm not there yet, I'm still striving for it, but I'm keeping on keeping on because Christ has made me his own - in other words, I know what my identity is, it's in what Christ did for me. I forget what has gone before, and I keep pressing on! And in the next verses after these, he says "let those of us who call ourselves mature Christians not forget this, but keep on together, let us hold fast together."

This is not only about individual identity, but an identity that binds us together with other brothers and sisters of the Church. An identity of community and faith.

When those candidates invited to interview for the role of Team Rector, visit us - what will they see is our identity, at the heart of all we do? I pray that they will see that it is in Christ, through the way we worship, through the way we are in community, through the way we keep on pressing on, even in adversity, and through the way we pour ourselves out for others the way Christ poured himself out for us.

Let's keep checking our spreadsheet of gains and the things that could cost us, the things we *consider* our credentials, and where they sit against our faith and identity in Christ - let's check at least as much as we check our financial balance sheet. And if the balance tips and we start trusting in our own righteousness, or more in what we do, than in what Christ has done for us, let's address that as we press on towards the goal. And let's do this together so that when candidates ask us - what is your identity, who are you, what's at the heart of all you do, we can honestly say, we know who we are, we are found in Christ and Christ in us.

Amen