

## St George's Anglican Church Malvern

**Fourth Sunday in Epiphany** 31 January 2009

Jeremiah 1.4-10 Psalm 71.1-6 1 Corinthians 13.1-13 Luke 4.21-30

How do you know who you are? More importantly: what do you base your identity on? At first, others give us our identity. At the deepest level, way before and beyond understanding, parents and carers give us our identity by gazing at us – looking into our eyes and calling us into personhood. As we grow we hear stories from our families about who we are. We are told about our place in the world. We hear things like ‘We came to Melbourne from ....’ or ‘your grandfather was a leading .....’ Or we are told what we are like in our parent’s eyes, ‘Oh, you are clever with your hands’ or ‘Oh dear, you’ll never be any good at that.’

Did you read Ross Fitzgerald’s article in yesterday’s *Weekend Australian* newspaper?<sup>1</sup> He was born after a brother had died. His understandably grieving mother would point to the night sky and say, ‘Do you see the brightest star in all the skies? That’s your brother Rodney.’ The little boy came to feel he was ‘garbage’ and knew he could never measure up against the brightest star. I am sure his mother had no idea of the impact of her words which helped her loss but robbed a living little boy of his worth in her eyes. When we are young and therefore vulnerable we are being given an identity for better and for worse.

Gradually we ourselves shape who we are by the choices we make – choices about what we do with our energies and talents, and who we love and who we ignore; what we reject and what we value and embrace. We are given our identities to begin with, and we spend the rest of our lives working out who we really are and who we desire to become!

Often the ways people think of themselves are based on rivalry or comparison. Think about that. We say to ourselves, ‘I am not as good as...’ or ‘I don’t have as much as...’ or we do the same thing as say, ‘I’m as good as the next person’. We can’t help ourselves, we all do it. The world around us does it to excess - we base our sense of worth on how we compare to others. These days worth seems to revolve around glamour and celebrity. I was disturbed recently when the highly skilled woman doctor who separated the twins in pioneering surgery was presented in the *Women’s Weekly* ‘all glammed up’ for a photo in a slinky dress and strappy sandals. She looked like any other model for hire on Brownlow night. She is a very skilled doctor – so, what was wrong with us seeing her at work. Is professional skill and extraordinary achievement not enough to make a woman impressive and admirable?

Comparison and competition at the expense of others fuels the economy, sits in parliament and the classroom, and lunches daily in the boardrooms of the world. It hangs around in unkind conversations between friends and it lurks in the shadows of fear and pride in every human heart in some measure – more original sin marring our identity as each uniquely, equally made in God’s image and likeness.

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<sup>1</sup> Ross Fitzgerald, “Reflections through a sober eye”, *The Weekend Australian*, January 30-31, 2010 Inquirer, p 5.

Jeremiah had himself labelled as a person who ‘did not know how to speak.’ But God knew better, being God you understand, and knowing Jeremiah as only God knew. Jesus, knowing himself through and through in his knowing of God, said boldly that what God promised in the scriptures was fulfilled in him.

But the hometown crowd, knowing who he was according to their terms, said ‘isn’t this the carpenter’s son?’ And they would have thrown him to his death but for Jesus’ wonderfully secure self knowledge. Secure in himself and his identity, Jesus was able to pass through the midst of the murderous mob and simply leave.

Paul understood. Now we see dimly, as in a mirror which reflects not illuminates, he said. Then, we will see face to face. See what?

Then we will see the God who created us and who has been gazing upon us with love from before we were born. How can we see God? Only, Paul says through love – real love, not ‘in love’, love’s necessary but false dawn, not in sentiment which is love’s substitute, not needy, grabby pseudo love, but the love of any who look and know who they are, without rivalry, without the need to compare. That is the look the best mothers offer their babies. The best mother offer looking and loving which allows the child, later the adult, to ask not ‘does God love me more or less than others?’ but simply to say, ‘God loves me (and everyone else) and with that I am content.’

*Now*, we see ourselves and others through eyes that compare and compete and constrain our capacity to love, no matter how good and loving they are. Now we see dimly, partially.

*Then, then.....* we shall see ourselves and others through eyes wide open to God, and we will be compelled by love to love in return without competition and comparison.

When will this be? Only in the future? No. It can begin now; it does being now, and it can grow in times yet to be. The psalmist looked back over a lifetime and could say to God, ‘on you I have leaned since birth my birth.’ Jesus could be so present to God and to himself in the moment, that even hostile people backed down as they began to glimpse who he was. How else do we explain the strength of character that caused a murderous crowd to disperse, its envious hatred to fall away. The crowd began seeing Jesus according to their categories – the carpenter’s son. I believe they left glimpsing God’s son – but not yet willing to open their eyes to behold him.

This I do know, the time to shift our gaze from comparison and competition towards love is now; the way to shift our gaze towards love’s source begins with looking towards the One human life lived freely focussed on God. The place to do these life giving things is within the community the Holy Spirit calls into life beyond the partial existence we live in the present.

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