

August 27, 2017

Whitsuntide XII

St Matthew 16: 13 - 20

A number of years ago I was visiting the old Harbours Nursing Home in Douglas, and a very elderly person in a wheel chair beckoned me over, and asked, "Do you know who I am?" For a moment I thought it was someone I should be expected to know, and I asked 'remind me your name again, please.'" The resident gave an icy smile and sadly said, "I don't remember by name."

To lose our sense of self-identity is a horrifying nightmare for many of us. Perhaps it is the most frightening of all nightmares, because the only true way we lose our sense of identity is if we lose our memory.

Conversely, there are many ways by which we identify ourselves. Our name is the obvious one. Here there is just one Arthur, but we have a number of men named Steve, which means we have to define which one we mean. We also do it through our relationship with our family and other people. We do it through our family's place of origin, our work, hobbies and interest, religious affiliation, and more.

When we turn to the Gospels we see there are a number of different ways in which people identified Jesus. In both Matthew and Luke we find the family tree that recounts Jesus lineage back to David, to Moses, and eventually to Adam and Eve. As a youngster, Jesus was identified as the son of Joseph and Mary, and as the carpenter's son, and a bit later, through his relationship with his brothers and sisters. To some of the home town folks, Jesus was the weird one compared to his siblings. He is called the Son of David, the Son of Man, the Son of God, and as you just heard in today's passage, the Messiah.

There are more than just different names and titles. They create different images in the minds of those who say and hear the words.

The important thing for us to remember, is that we each have a somewhat, or perhaps very radically different, image of Jesus.

For example, growing up in white bread and crème of mushroom soup Minnesota in the 1950s, the only image we had of Jesus was a young blue-eyed man with a carefully trimmed beard and white robes who looked like he just stepped off the boat from Stockholm. And he was surrounded by Norwegian looking disciples who came from Oslo - all except for the swarthy looking guy we instantly knew was Judas Iscariot. So, imagine the shock and confusion when Mr Gibbs showed us a picture of

an African Jesus and told us, that was his image of our Lord because Jesus looked like him and his family.

The diversity of our mental images of Jesus and the holy family were very predominant in our celebration of the Christmas crèche show for several years.

It is more than a mental picture in our mind. All of us have our own description of Jesus such as teacher, healer, Saviour, Judge, philosopher, story teller. But in turn, they create our own mental image as a way of connecting ourselves with Jesus. Teacher? For me, Mrs. Van Zant, my favourite teacher or Dr Stuart Henry, and NEVER Mrs Wilson the scourge and terror of the sixth grade. And so it goes with each different word, and each image that is different for each one of us here this morning. When is telling a parable, it is different. It is different again throughout Holy Week to Easter morning.

Make no mistake about it, all of this is important. The images and words that you choose to use for your connection with Jesus have real impact on your life. They influence your relationship with Him, and they also influence our relationships with other people.

This is the sometimes challenging spiritual work we simply must do, or we flounder in our relationship with Jesus. At its absolute worst, it means we never really move beyond what we learned in our earliest years in Sunday School. That is fine for children, but I don't think it is adequate for adults.

At the same time we live in a culture and society where there is a resurgence in animosity, division, hatred, and even violence. That means we have to be able to carefully define what every important or significant word and phrase in our spirituality means.

For example, sometimes we hear an advertisement for a business that states, "We are a Christian business." But what does that mean? How do they define a Christian business? The words might create different images in our minds and very different meanings. Is it closed on Sunday? A concern about caring for employees and clients? Honesty and fairness? Or is it advertisement?

A couple of weeks ago, smothered by the news of violence and hatred, was an interesting article in the papers that Christians blame individuals for their own poverty. It wasn't until the third paragraph that the author stated that this was a belief of many evangelical Christians, and then a paragraph or two later, it was explained that this was the result of a survey done at several mega-churches which emphasize the gospel of wealth.

Well, isn't that interesting?' as the church lady on the old Saturday Night Live programme would ask. One small segment or group within the Church Universal holds that view, but the article left many with the belief that this was what all, or at least a majority of all Christians believe.

This happens repeatedly, constantly. We hear of an emphasis creation care and yet at the same time that the church should not get involved in environmental issues. The church is pro life and it is pro-choice. We need to be concerned about the well-being of others; our only task is to make sure everyone becomes a believer. Good Christians must be a member of this political party; no, good Christians must be members of that party.

I believe the truly important questions are first, do we have or don't have the same interpretation of the words, and second, "Are they speaking for me?" Are their words and images my words and images? Or, are they speaking for themselves?

We can not stop there.

When there are words and images with which you can not agree, do you have the courage to speak up? We don't need more shouting and anger. A quiet, "I hear what you are saying, and I do not agree with you," is sometimes sufficient. At other times, it requires more.

The worst thing you and I can do is stand by and say nothing when we hear and see things that are in opposition to our beliefs in Jesus, our profession of faith, and violate the promises and vows we make. Saying nothing is often misunderstood that you agree with ideas you can not accept or support.

Remember, young Saul did not throw rocks when Stephen was martyred. He stood by, keeping watch over the cloaks of others, saying and doing nothing. Yet it was clearly understood that he supported those who committed murder.

There is little difference between Saul and ourselves when we do not respond to that which we believe is wrong or unacceptable.