

With you, I am well pleased

Mark 1: 4-11 The Baptism of Christ

In 1975, Michael Griffiths, then general director of the Overseas Missionary Fellowship wrote a pithy and prophetic book with a telling title: *'Cinderella with Amnesia'*. He commented,

'Christians collectively seem to be suffering from a strange amnesia. A high proportion of people who 'go to church' have forgotten what it is all for. Week by week they attend services in a special building and go through their particular, time-honoured routine, but give little thought to the purpose of what they are doing.'

He argues that it's all too easy for us to forget why we're here, to mislay our purpose, to lose sight of why we do what we do. But perhaps the problem goes deeper, he suggests, to our forgetting who we are in Christ.

We know this, because we follow Jesus, and Satan tried very hard to undermine *his* identity. At his baptism, Jesus' identity is affirmed by the Father: *'this is my Son'*. As Jesus begins his ministry by being baptised by John in the Jordan, the heavens split open, and the Father speaks.

Think for a moment - what would *you* say to the one who is embarking on the greatest and most significant mission in the history of planet earth? Perhaps you'd assure them that you'd be with them all the way, or comfort them with a reminder that, although great pain was ahead, glory was in the future too. Instead the Father speaks but one sentence: *'You are my Son, whom I love; with you, I am well pleased.'*

Jesus hears his Sonship celebrated. He is told that he is loved, and that the Father's pleasure is upon him. Like Jesus, before we do anything for God, we need to do it from the place of knowing who we are in God. He is already pleased with us; failure to grasp this causes all sorts of difficulties which we'll hear about in a minute.

It's in Luke's gospel that we get the detail of what happened to Jesus directly after his baptism. Mark manages to cover Jesus' time in the wilderness in just two verses which hardly does it justice. But in Luke we learn that immediately, in the wilderness, the devil tries to undermine Jesus' identity: *'If you are the Son of God ...'* he whispers into his ear.

The satanic battles came in three waves, and the first centred on Jesus' body. After forty days without food, he was literally starving. And so the question comes: *'If you are the Son of God...'* and then the invitation: prove yourself. Do a magic trick with bread, for your own survival. The devil's question amounted to this: *'Who on earth do you think you are?'*

The second temptation was about power. In return for an act of satanic worship, Jesus would know total earthly authority and be exalted, without having to go to the cross. And then the final attack came, complete with a misquoted portion of Scripture, as Satan suggested Jesus should throw himself off the high pinnacle of the temple.

Through a determined attack, Satan tried to undermine Jesus' identity. And he will do the same with us if we don't pay sufficient attention to who we are in Christ. Our identity matters. As we gather together for worship – online at the moment but in person when we're not battling a pandemic – as we share together in small groups, as we pray, as we reflect on the truths of Scripture, we affirm that Christ is Lord, and that we belong to him. We remember who he is, who we are, and whose we are.

How is it then that many of us, somewhere along the way, take on a very different belief system that says: *'I am what I achieve and how well I achieve it'*? We forget that we are loved by our Heavenly Father unconditionally, and instead place upon ourselves all sorts of expectations that do not come from God.

During the summer lockdown, I was introduced to the work of Brené Brown, the American professor, lecturer, author, and podcast host. I've been enjoying her book *'The Gifts of Imperfection'* as it has much to say about the dangers of perfectionism, something I know I've struggled with over the years. But, rather than thinking that some of us are perfectionists and others of us are not, it's helpful, I think, to see perfectionism as existing along a continuum. We all, if we're honest, have some perfectionistic tendencies. For some, these only emerge when feeling particularly vulnerable; for others, perfectionism can be compulsive, chronic and debilitating, similar to addiction.

But let's be clear what perfectionism is and isn't. It isn't the same as striving to be or do your best. That's a healthy behaviour pattern for all of us, whatever our age or stage in life. Perfectionism is the belief that *if* we live a perfect life, look perfect, and act perfect, then we can avoid negative feelings such as

blame, judgement and shame. Perfectionism is, at its core, about trying to earn approval and acceptance. It's what Satan whispered in Jesus' ear in the desert following his baptism, and it's completely contrary to what we know about our relationship with God – how *he* sees us.

Rather than leading to success, research shows that perfectionism actually hampers success. In fact, it's often the path to depression, anxiety and addiction. It's also what stops us living 'life to the full' – the *fullness of life* that we're promised in the Holy Spirit – because we pass opportunities by, or don't follow a dream because of a fear of failing, making mistakes and disappointing others. We don't want to do anything that others might judge as 'imperfect'. But God gives to each of us *gifts* – gifts of the Holy Spirit – that are ours to use, for the benefit of others. What a shame it is when these go unopened, or unused.

To overcome perfectionism, we need to remind ourselves of who we are in Christ. You don't have to open your Bible far to get an idea of how God regards his creation. In Genesis, with every part of creation, we read that '*God saw that it was good*'. But with the creation of mankind, we read that God's regard for what he created goes up a notch – creation of humankind is described as '*very good*.' In Psalm 139, we're told that we're '*fearfully and wonderfully made*'. In Jeremiah 29, we're told that God has a plan for each and every one of us: '*For I know the plans I have for you*', declares the Lord, '*plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*'

In the New Testament, Jesus tells us in Matthew 10 that '*even the very hairs on our head are all numbered.*' In Ephesians 2, Paul tells us that we are God's '*workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*' And, in 1 Corinthians 12, we are reminded that, together, we are Christ's *body*, and each of us is a part of it. But whatever we're called to be, we're called first to be apostles, followers of Christ. Each of us in our own unique way, sometimes getting it right, but often getting it wrong, in good keeping with the twelve who first journeyed with Christ, and countless millions since.

So, rather than fretting about promises we can't keep this New Year, promises that may perpetuate a desire to be more perfect than we're ever called to be, maybe this year our resolutions should be about cutting ourselves some slack, particularly when living through a pandemic, and applying some self-compassion. Self-compassion that means being warm and understanding

towards ourselves when things aren't going the way we want them to, and recognising that suffering, whatever that looks like for us, is something that happens to us all.

God asks nothing more of us than to be in relationship with him. To keep talking to him – to keep showing up – even when it's really hard. For we're reminded time and time again in Scripture that our heavenly Father loves us, and is right there beside us. And we're reminded in our passage from Mark's gospel today that he loves us without us having to do a single thing to earn that love. Hear those words again that he spoke to Jesus, and maybe experiment with placing your own name in the sentence he speaks, as you accept the truth of what you mean to him:

*'You are my Son (you are my daughter), whom I love;
with you, I am well pleased.'*

This New Year, let that be enough, for each and every one of us. Let's not forget who we are, and whose we are. In Christ.

Amen.