

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight o lord. My strength, and my redeemer. Amen.

So today in our Gospel reading we hear Jesus asking the disciples a very significant question: who do people say that I am?

He's not asking "who am I?", because he knows, but instead he's asking who other people think he is. And today I'd like to ask whether there's a difference between who we really are and who people think that we are, and whether this actually matters.⁷

Before we unpack the disciples answer, we might reflect for a moment on the nature of our own identity, and what defines it. Who am I?

I can try to answer this from a biological point of view and provide a description of my physical person, but that actually doesn't answer the question because I am so much more than my physical body. My identity includes, and is built on, my thoughts and dreams, my spiritual life, my emotions, the way I relate to others. And many people spend the whole of their lives trying to answer that question, who am I, often unsuccessfully, and sometimes making themselves deeply unhappy, because the person that they are isn't the person that they actually want to be.

And some run away from an unsatisfactory answer and spend time "trying to find themselves", and of course people change. I am not the same person now that I was at 16, and a good thing too, nor the same person that I was at 40; I have evolved and I have changed in both my body and in my spirit.

During the enforced isolation of lockdown, many people have found themselves forced to confront this question, of who they really are, for the very first time, and some have not liked what they found and tried to change it. And others have noticed that the person who emerged from this self-examination was in some way different from the person that their friends and family believed them to be.

Many found that the enforced isolation from external stimuli, of family and friends, forced them to re-evaluate the priorities of their lives; what was really important; what habits did they not realise they had and less forced to confront them in their daily situation. And, most significantly, which part of themselves did they dislike, and how could they change themselves when re-emerging into the world like a butterfly from its chrysalis.

Some people found their identities, and how they saw themselves, have been defined by their jobs. Clergy you're very familiar with this, since it is a curious phenomenon which most clergy will have observed, that if people are used to seeing you with a dog collar, they frequently fail to recognise you without it. I've noticed this myself even in parishes where I'd work for years and among people I knew well. The first thing that people notice is the collar not the person: the uniform and not the individual.

This can be a little unnerving, though undeniably handy when coming out of the pub or on holiday, but it emphasises how our identity can be subsumed into our jobs and an individual can be defined by it, thus a chance encounter with a stranger might result in the question "who was that?" and the answer "that was the vicar", not that was Joe Bloggs.

In March many people longed for a return to normality, to being the person that they always had been, to living in the world in exactly the same way that they always had. But now everyone, I think, recognizes that this is never going to happen. Life, as we know it, will never be the same again,

although as yet we don't know what the new normal, to use a very overworked phrase, will actually look like. And for many of us this provides an opportunity to change ourselves and our habits, the person that we are, and the way that we live in this world for the better; for occasionally good really does come out of evil.

We sometimes hear of famous and conceited people asking at social gatherings: "Do you know who I am?" when they feel they're not being paid sufficient attention, and thus demonstrating a great lack of self-confidence. But where does that confidence come from? In this day and age, so many people lack the confidence that comes through stability and the possession of a proper spiritual life, because one's identity is defined by God.

Very often people will go through life trying to fit a mould that's been created for them by parental expectations; by peer pressures; or even by churches. So this is the perfect time to reinvent, or rediscover, oneself, just as the church is trying to do. Seeking oneself is a healthy thing when it's done for the right reasons, which is to discover how one may best use one's gifts in the service of God and community.

God gives us the power to choose in every moment what will shape our lives and we can choose to accept that universal unconditional grace-filled love and become a stable God-filled person, or we can reject that love out of fear or ignorance or unwillingness to commit.

If we accept the fact that we were created by a loving God, who continues to love us despite all the ways that we offend him and our fellow human beings, then we are well on the way to becoming fulfilled and comfortable human beings. And it's highly likely that our new identities, as people who have found themselves, will be recognisable by others, that each of us will be seen as the person that we really are.

So here in our Gospel reading we have Jesus asking his disciples whether they recognise who he is and Peter makes a famous response "You are the Christ, the son of the living God". He is in no doubt about Jesus' identity, because it has already been proved by a great series of healing miracles and teachings.

So why then does Jesus need to check that the disciples are on message, that they understand who he is? And the reason, I think, is that he's checking their level of commitment, and he had good reason to do so, because as we know they were all going to desert him as he suffered and died for them on the cross at the end of his life; leaving him because of their human fears, their insufficient faith, and their lack of understanding.

Here, he's making sure that they realise what commitment he is seeking from them, especially in view of his coming death; that he isn't the prophet Elijah, that he isn't John the Baptist returned from the dead, and Peter says "You are the Christ", and by acknowledging this bound himself to follow Jesus through this world and into the next.

And Peter is the symbol of all who follow Jesus, including us. He responded to the call, but was beset by doubts and fears and made endless mistakes, but eventually achieved the identity God had chosen for him, as the rock - the foundation of the church. But he only succeeded eventually, as we all succeed, by the grace of God, for that is the answer to the question "who am I?": it doesn't matter who people think that I am; I am what God made me and if I realise that, it is enough. Amen.