

We are continuing our exploration of what faith looks like and within that context how we are called to be the person God created us to be.

This week Jon, Katherine, Jane and myself spent four days on retreat in the wilds of the Yorkshire dales studying the personality theory of the Enneagram. The course title was 'God shaped people'; very apt for this term's theme.

Many of you will have heard of the psychometric test named after its inventors Myers Briggs; it evaluates your personality and identifies what you do in certain circumstances. The Enneagram digs deeper to look at your underlying motives of why you do, what you do. It's more about your character formation and the way you live out your life. A life which has been wonderfully created and shaped by God. The Enneagram provides both good news and bad news. It reveals your strengths but also your weaknesses. Used appropriately it enables you to build upon your self awareness and identify the ways and means by which you can seek transformation to become more fully the person God called you to be by leading you into a deeper Chris-like formation. I like to think that's a fancy way of saying it helps you to learn to live loved by God.

The Enneagram identifies and places individuals in one of nine different spaces - numbered, would you believe 1-9 and because each number is identified with specific characteristics the fun part was deciding what your number was and much more fun, the number for others. Katharine for example is a number 1, I am a number 9 whilst both Jon and Jane were number 6'.

Obviously there's much more complexity to the theory than just nine spaces but each space is characterized by a different way in which the individuals in that space understand the truth about God and the formation, manifestation and application of their faith will consequently be different.

As a 9, my statement of truth would be that God loves us all conditionally. He is the giver of true peace and wants to share that peace with us whereas Katherine's statement of truth as a 1 would be that only God is perfect and His grace covers all creation. Jane and Jon.....well let's look at them in the light of today's story of Simeon.

In one sense this narrative is the end of the Christmas story with Jesus being presented to God in the Temple at six weeks of age in compliance with Jewish Religious law. Interestingly, the law did not require the child to be in the temple but Mary and Joseph choose to take him and because the dedication could only be done in the Temple situated in Jerusalem, that would have meant traveling from Bethlehem.

That is just one more example of how faithful Mary and Joseph had been. They had named him Jesus as instructed by the Angel. Joseph had stood by Mary when convention dictated she should be cast out of society for becoming pregnant outside of marriage. Both had accepted what the Angel told them as the truth and by doing so they are an example to us today proclaiming true faith is evidenced by obedience. In Enneagram terms Joseph had shown great loyalty to Mary, both have readily submitted to a form of authority, they are prepared to make sacrifices for the one they love and above all else they show a good degree of responsibility in these early weeks. All these characteristics suggest they are a number 6. Actually just like Jane and Jon. I must remember next Christmas not to get the names mixed up. Mary and Joseph's statement of truth would be that God can be trusted in all circumstances and as a consequence their actions simply mirror their faith belief.

But faithfulness is not solely attributed to Mary and Joseph in this story; these qualities are seen in abundance in the words and actions of Simeon. Simeon is described as righteous and devout. And significantly that the Holy Spirit was upon him. I sense therefore that it is the Spirit of God who is

directing this scene, because He has previously revealed to Simeon that his death would not come until he had seen the Messiah. We don't know much about Simeon because this is the only occasion he is mentioned but he displays many characteristics of a number 5. The truth statement for a 5 would be that God is super abundant and generous. He is all wise and gives wisdom to anyone who asks. 5's are totally trustworthy, reliable and perceptive. They hold a detached point of view, not being swayed by fear or personal desire. I think that sounds pretty much like Simeon.

Here is a man who has accepted that the Holy Spirit has gifted him wisdom and discernment to know the Lord's Messiah when he saw him. We do not know how or why he was attracted to the Temple that day or to what extent he had shared what he knew - but a number 5 is known for their persistence. He had probably been going there time after time anticipating seeing the Messiah and still going back when he hadn't.

But on this day, immediately on arrival – bingo the moment he has in many ways, lived for, arrives. Simeon takes Jesus in his arms and immediately praises God. It's almost as if he is singing the words we will in our final hymn "thank you O my Father for giving us your son and leaving your Spirit till the work on earth is done".

Simeon was promised that he would see the Messiah before he died and he now proclaims that he can die in peace because he has seen salvation with his own eyes. Simeon's prophecy itself is a statement of mature faith. To see Jesus is to see God's salvation.

Simeon was talking about the salvation of the people of Israel, but when he holds the baby Jesus in his arms his words reveal something which says something so much more – Jesus will be a light for revelation to the Gentiles. Yes, Jesus is the light by which you and I can seek salvation; he is the light. Indeed he is the way, the truth and the life.

But Simeon's prophecy is not all light and joy; there is also the foreboding warning to Mary that she will feel a mother's pain as some thirty years later she watches her son suffer total rejection. Simeon tells her a sword will pierce through her soul, mirroring many say, the spear thrust through Jesus's side when he is on the cross.

Simeon's remark to Mary may be an aside, but it is an important one as it tells us that identifying with Jesus may have a painful, personal consequences and this is never so true today as the persecuted Christians in Nigeria, Iraq, India and other such countries have to endure.

Of course, I have speculated about the numbers the Enneagram might have revealed had Mary, Joseph and Simeon attended a course similar to ours last week. But like us, each of them had to choose whether to believe or not believe and trust in God. Their motivations for doing so might be different to ours when we make choices in our own faith journey, but each choice we make shapes positively or negatively our relationship with God.

The Enneagram is of course, just one of many tools which can help us find the best way to believe and trust in God. We learnt to understand a little more about what makes God shaped people tick in this respect.