

# Who do you think you are?

## **Reading, as part of the 'Celtic Daily Prayer' office by the Northumbria Community**

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting for forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.' Jesus answered, 'It is written: "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."' Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the highest point of the temple. 'If you are the Son of God,' he said, 'throw yourself down. For it is written: "He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone."' Jesus answered him, 'It is also written: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. 'All this I will give you,' he said, 'if you will bow down and worship me.' Jesus said to him, 'Away from me, Satan! For it is written: "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

*Matthew 4:1-11, NIVUK*

## **Talk**

*Who do you think you are?*

Like me, I guess if someone marched up to you and greeted you with this question, you would probably be rather taken aback. You might think they were being rather rude. Maybe even trying to provoke you, or start a quarrel. Which in part explains the appeal of the TV series of that name that ran a little while back on BBC. Who do you think you are? It's an arresting title isn't it?

If you're not familiar with the series, it had a simple theme: Take a well known celebrity and film them as they trace their family history. There were quite a few shocks, surprises and twists as people discovered that they had descended from barons, or barrow boys, had Royal connections or were related to a noted criminal. Perhaps one of the most dramatic moments on the series was when Alan Cummings discovered that his maternal grandfather had accidentally killed himself playing a game of Russian Roulette!

But the question that frames the series - 'Who do you think you are?' - is an important one. And it goes right to the root of understanding of ourselves, of our relationships with one another, with God and with creation.

The same question was posed to me over 30 years ago when I studied sociology, and I can still remember the sense of discomfort it evoked. In fact the question wasn't posed in quite that way, but it was just as disconcerting. As we all shuffled into the lecture hall for our first lecture in social psychology, the lecturer asked us how we would describe ourselves to someone who had never met us. She asked us to take a sheet of paper and write down just FIVE words that we would use to describe who we were. Five words! It's incredibly hard. How would YOU describe yourself in FIVE words? Here were mine:

- Male
- 19
- Christian
- Happy
- Bright

I guess I could also have put modest, but that would have been six words wouldn't it?

I wasn't married or engaged at that time, so that didn't find its way into my list. We were all students, so there was no job to put down. But I guess for most of us, something that described us in relation to others - husband, daughter, father, uncle, sister, godparent, grandparent, carer - would be likely to figure. And something that described us in relation to work: secretary, plumber, housewife, doctor, retired teacher, manager, pensioner, job-seeker, volunteer.

I have thought about that list often since. Not particularly MY list, but the idea of any list. And I recall how shocked I was as we looked at how strongly work features in the way we view ourselves, and in the way others view us. Ask someone what they do, what job they have, and it tells you all you need to know. It tells you what education and qualifications they have, what they earn, who they are likely to have as friends, where they are likely to holiday, what sort of house and district they will live in, even what newspaper they read. It's a short hand way of putting a value on someone. It is very easy to define ourselves and others in terms of what we do.

But there are other answers to the question. All too often, we define ourselves in terms of what others say about us. Who do you think you are? I am what others say I am. So I am funny... or not. Interesting... or boring. Intelligent... or dull. Attractive... or ugly. How often do we hear these days the tragic story of someone, a teen quite often, destroyed by the cruel things others have said about them? The idea that people think badly of me can be crushing. Mary Lyon wrote: 9/10 of our suffering comes from people not thinking as highly of us as we think they ought.

*Who do you think you are? I am what I have.*

I have a home, belongings, an education, family and friends, intellect, health. The problem comes when we lose these things.

When we have our good job, we feel as if we are someone. But what about when we lose our job, through ill health, or retirement? When people speak well of us, we feel good. But what about when they don't? When we have our home, our family, our friends, our self esteem is fine. But what if we lose them? What if we discover that we have built our lives on shifting sand?

What we learn in the Bible, and in the life of Jesus, is that all of these are a lie. When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, the devil said, do something, show you are useful and turn these stones into bread ('you are what you do').

Throw yourself off the temple and people will speak well of you and your miraculous powers. Amaze people ('you are what others say about you').

Worship me and I will give you power, riches and influence ('you are what you have').

But Jesus knew something that was far more powerful. And it comes immediately before the temptations. At Jesus' baptism, he heard, not the voice of the devil, but the voice of God say to him, 'You are My beloved.' And that is the voice we need to hear.

In hearing that voice we are no longer fooled by the temptation to believe that we are what we do, or what others say about us, or what we have. For we know that we are the beloved children of God.

The Bible encourages us not to be fooled in how we define ourselves, or others. We are all beloved of God, not because of who we are and not because of what we do. Nor are we beloved of God because we are good. God loves us, not because we are good, but because He is good. He doesn't pigeonhole us. See how Jesus dealt with people. He treated every one as unique. He reached down to the level of who they really were.

So at the most fundamental level, we don't need FIVE words to describe who we are. Because the most important thing about us is not whether we are male or female, young or old, baron or barrow boy. Nor are we best described by what we do, what others say about us, or what we have. The word that best describes us as the children of God is:

BELOVED

*Based on Sermon by Henri Nouwen - 'You are the Beloved'*