

At the foot of the cross ...

... We lay down who we think we are.

A reflection given on the Second Sunday of Trinity, 21st June 2020, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker in the Online Service

Matthew 10:24-39

The film-maker Woody Allen has been back in the public eye recently with the publication of his autobiography. Now, whatever you think of Woody Allen as a person during his career, his very long career, he's made some pretty impressive films. And one of my favourites from many years ago is a film called Zelig. It's a mock documentary about a man who was supposedly known as the 'human chameleon'. Zelig wants to fit in so much that he is able to transform his physical appearance to resemble the people around him, whether he's surrounded by Orthodox Jews with their beards and black hats, or by the Ku Klux Klan with their hoods and robes. He physically changes to become indistinguishable from them. And the psychiatrists can't help him because he just turns into another figure in a white coat, reflecting their own mannerisms and attitudes back to them. It's a daft story, but it does contain a truth. Many psychologists will tell us that our identity is not something that is fixed and given; we're made up of different 'selves', according not just to our background and experience, but also depending upon whom we're with. As Jesus says in the gospel message, "The disciple is like the teacher and the slave is like the master." So it seems where you went to school and who you work for, shapes who you are. But which aspect we choose to present to the world can shift according to the occasion. And of course, our religion is part of this mix that makes up who we think we are, and it can be an important part of our group identity.

But what happens when some part of our identity becomes fixed and absolute? What happens when my Britishness or my sexuality, my race or even my Christianity, becomes the most important thing about me? What happens if it matters so much to me that I feel threatened when someone else doesn't share my sense of its importance? Sadly, the result is often conflict: when some aspect of our self identity becomes hardened and non-negotiable, we may feel it has to be defended when someone else's identity bumps up against it. I think that may be what's happening at the moment with all the controversy about these statues to former slave traders and

people like Cecil Rhodes in Oxford. The statues are symbols of identity. And the question is not whether the statues matter in themselves, it's more about whether one group of people's sense of identity can flourish without another group of people feeling threatened. If expressing who I am, including expressing my history and my past, if that makes other people feel invisible or second-class, then perhaps I need to be a bit more open to seeing myself as others see me and less bothered about defending the symbols of my tribe.

In our reading this morning, Jesus seems to be saying that if we are secure in Christ, we don't need to defend our identity. "Have no fear of them," he says. He says it more than once. 'Don't feel threatened when people attack you as a follower of Christ. God will be faithful', and "You are of more value than many sparrows." And he warns his disciples that their faith will attract opposition from other people who will suspect their loyalty to the group. Even their own families will reject them, feeling that their own identity is under attack. And in that sense, the gospel will cause division and conflict. Not because following Christ is yet another cause or movement which has to compete with others and be bolstered and defended from attack, but because the gospel removes the need to defend ourselves at all.

Following Jesus, remember, involves following him to the cross, "Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me", he says, and just to rub it in, he goes on, "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." – These are challenging words.

But they're also full of hope. If we're clear that we belong to Jesus, then we're strong enough to be undefended. We don't need to assert ourselves at someone else's expense. Neither do we need to protect God or our idea of God: He's perfectly capable of looking after himself and He's not looking for that kind of loyalty from you and me. In one sense, Zelig is a parable of our own humanity: his lack of his own identity doesn't really make him a freak; instead, it makes him open to other identities and to appreciating them from the inside. Perhaps we can find that greater humanity ourselves, not by patrolling the boundaries of our many-layered identities, but by surrendering them to Christ.

At the foot of the cross, we lay down who we think we are, in order simply to receive his love, whoever we really are. And in the end, that love is all we need to recognise one another as his children.

Reading Texts

Matthew 10:24-39

²⁴ "A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; ²⁵ it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more will they malign those of his household! ²⁶ "So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. ²⁷ What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. ²⁸ Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. ²⁹ Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. ³⁰ And even the hairs of your head are all counted. ³¹ So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. ³² "Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; ³³ but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven. ³⁴ "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵ For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; ³⁶ and one's foes will be members of one's own household. ³⁷ Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; ³⁸ and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹ Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.