

# Who do you think you are?, ...

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*A sermon given on the Third Sunday of Trinity, 25th June 2023 – by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster*

*Matthew 10:24-39*

Who do you think you are? It may be not such an easy question as you think. I remember there was a Woody Allen film years ago called *Zelig*, about a man with a rare medical condition, making him like a human chameleon. He wanted to fit in so badly and had such an empty sense of his own self that he could change his physical appearance to blend in with the people around him. So in the company of Orthodox Jews, he sprouts a bushy beard and a black coat and hat. And when he stumbles accidentally into a meeting of the Ku Klux Klan, he suddenly grows a white pointy hood and a gown. And it's impossible for the psychiatrists to help him because he just becomes another figure in a white coat, reflecting back to the doctors their own gestures and technical language. *Zelig* is an extreme example, but many psychologists would argue that none of us has a true 'self'. We all construct different 'selves' according to who we're with and how we want to present ourselves, because we all want to 'fit in'. And this process begins very early as we learn to build our identity by copying the people around us. It's what, in layman's terms is called peer group pressure. So who do you think you are? Take a look at the people around you, the people you choose to mix with, the people you look up to and admire, the people you copy and want to impress - and you'll probably get a pretty good idea of who you are.

And today's Gospel reading to some extent affirms that. Jesus says, *"It is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher and the slave like the master."* And Jesus says, *"Whoever acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven."*

So if we choose to identify with Jesus, he will acknowledge us, he will recognise us as one of his own. So the Christian faith has always encouraged folk to imitate Jesus. And following him means trying to be like him, just as a slave tries to be like its master and a disciple tries to be like its teacher. Think of that great devotional work written by Thomas à Kempis in the 14th century and still in print today, called 'The Imitation of Christ'.

And that's what you and I are called to do. As we imitate Christ, so we discover our true identity. We become more like our master and become more like true children of God, because we are copying and learning from the Son of God. But the Gospel reading also alerts us to a potential problem. What happens, when in our desire to copy and fit in with one group of people, it becomes harder to fit in with a different group? What happens when trying to be like Jesus

invites ridicule or even persecution from a different group who expect us to fit in. Apart from Jesus, the group of people we are most likely to want to copy and fit in with are our family. But the gospel reading asks what happens when wanting to be like Jesus causes us to fall out with our family. It's a rather chilling passage where Jesus says, *"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, and one's foes will be members of one's own household."* A passage like this can wrongfoot us. We're so used to thinking that the church must be in favour of the family and applaud family values, and we're so brainwashed into thinking that marriage and the family must be more important than anything else, that a passage like this hits us like a bucket of cold water. *"Whoever loves the loves father or mother more than me"* says Jesus, *"is not worthy of me. And whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me."*

Of course, we have to tread carefully here: of course, marriage and the family are good and blessed by God - these are the relationships where we learn how to love, after all. But sometimes the good can be the enemy of the best and sometimes the things we love can tempt us into idolatry. Sometimes loving family can be a displacement activity, because loving God is just too difficult, so we love something easier instead. I think this is the sort of thing Jesus is talking about.

So who do you think you are? Jesus answers the question at the end of the gospel reading: *"Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."* So it seems in order to find our true identity in Christ, we first have to be emptied of all those false identities which compete for our attention and allegiance. If we are to allow God to give us our true identity, we have first to give up all attempts to establish an identity for ourselves. The 'real me' doesn't ultimately depend upon my family, my class, my education, my job or my achievements. Rather, it depends upon being able to lay those things down for long enough to understand that God loves me as I am, empty and helpless, with nothing else for me to cling to.

And there is, of course, room in Christ for other dimensions of identity. We're not just Christian: we can also belong to our family with our own set of ancestors; we can be proud of being from Beverly; from Yorkshire; of being a Tigers supporter, (I suppose); of having gone to a certain school or college or university; of being a member of a club; or being proud of your trade or professional skill. All of those things build up a picture of who we are. But there is a sense in which for them to find their proper place, we have first of all to let them go and then receive them back again. They are surrendered and nailed to the cross so that they don't become idols that we have to assert and defend against others.

Your identity is not your own. It is the identity of Christ himself shared with you and given to you. It is the identity of the cross with which we are marked at baptism, the identity of dying in order to live, surrendering in order to receive, of losing life in order to find it.

So who do you think you are? In the old television series of that name, when celebrities went in search of their ancestors, their identity turned out to depend less on who they thought they were and more on who they discovered their ancestors to have been before them.

And for Christians, our identity depends less on who we think we are and more on the one who puts a question to us about himself asking, "*Who do you say that I am?*" And it is as we face and respond to that question, the question of who we think Jesus truly is, that perhaps we find the key to learning who we really are.

# Reading Text

## Matthew 10:24-39

<sup>24</sup> *'A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; <sup>25</sup> 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 Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household! <sup>26</sup> 'So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. <sup>27</sup> What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. <sup>28</sup> 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. <sup>29</sup> Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father. <sup>30</sup> And even the hairs of your head are all counted. <sup>31</sup> So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. <sup>32</sup> 'Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; <sup>33</sup> but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven. <sup>34</sup> 'Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. <sup>35</sup> 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; <sup>36</sup> and one's foes will be members of one's own household. <sup>37</sup> 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; <sup>38</sup> and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. <sup>39</sup> Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.*