

### **Discovering our Identity**

“For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.”

Some of you may remember a story that was in the news a few years ago about the woman in Iceland who spent half the night trying to find herself - literally. Her tour bus had stopped in the volcanic Eldgja region of Iceland, and she went into a rest area to change her dress and freshen up. The tour guide miscounted the people on the bus, and a search was begun for “an Asian woman, about 160 cm, in dark clothing, speaking English well.” The woman joined about 50 people in the search party, until finally, at 3 a.m. she realised that she was the woman everyone was searching for! She did not recognise herself in the description.

That story probably amused most people who heard it, but I’m not convinced that the other members of the coach party who spent hour looking for her would find it funny. Hopefully they would have been able to laugh about it later, but I’m sure that wasn’t their immediate reaction when they discovered the truth.

At one level it is rather a ridiculous story. How could this woman not know who she was? How did she not recognise the description of herself? And yet it seems to me that this true story illustrates a far deeper spiritual reality. As Christians we can so easily fail to recognise who we really are. We can so easily forget, or perhaps not even properly grasp our identity in Christ. Maybe we don’t waste time looking for ourselves like the woman in Iceland, but we can waste time living as far less than God intended us to be, simply because we don’t appreciate who we are. That woman wasted several hours and it probably impacted the next day as she, along with the rest of her coach party would be too exhausted to enjoy whatever was planned in their programme. Some Christians waste years, decades even, weighed down by fear, by guilt, by worry, by uncertainty if they are doing enough to satisfy God, and more, all because they don’t know who they are in Christ.

In his opening greetings he addresses the letter, “To the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus.” I wonder if some of them failed to recognise themselves in that description, just as the woman in Iceland failed to recognise herself in the description. Paul quickly moves on to spell out what that actually means, with all its implications.

After the opening greetings he spontaneously bursts into praise of God for all that he has done and the blessings that he has lavished on us. “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.”

Do you know that to be true? Do you know that God chose you, in Christ, before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight? Maybe, again like the woman in Iceland, you don’t recognise that that applies to you. Maybe you don’t understand how you could be described as “holy and blameless”. Paul makes it clear that that is true not because of who we are in ourselves, but because we are joined with Christ, and he is “holy and

blameless". He continues, "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of his grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves."

Have you grasped the implications of that? God chose you and he chose me before the creation of the world. We can't fully get our mind round it, but God is outside of time, so he knew us fully even before he created us. King David understood something of that when he wrote in Psalm 139, "My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be."

I get the impression that some folk seem to think that the cross was an afterthought. Things went so badly wrong that God had to think up a plan so that we could be rescued. Amazing though that would be, the truth is more amazing still. God knew before he created the world that his creation would cause him pain and heartbreak because of our rebellion. He could have decided not to create us. He could have decided to bring upon us the condemnation that we deserved. However, he knew us and he loved us before we came to be, and so he built his plan of redemption into creation. The Apostle John picks up on the same theme in Revelation 13:8 where he speaks of the names in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain before the creation of the world.

Ernest Hemmingway tells the story of a Spanish father who decided to be reconciled with his son, who had run away to Madrid. The father put an advertisement in the *El Liberal* newspaper. "Paco – meet me at Hotel Montana noon Tuesday; all is forgiven, Papa." Paco is a common name in Spain. When the father went to the hotel he found 800 young men called Paco. So many fractured families, so many sons, all seeking reconciliation – and that was only one name.

Jeff Lucas writes: "God knows that we have a core need – to be parented, to be part of a family. He made us that way. So he sent his Son and adopted us into his family – meeting that need. He did not do this reluctantly, but out of his 'pleasure and will'."

He continues: "It's been said that without this truth, we as followers of Jesus are left in the courtroom, viewing God as a judge who has been appeased, rather than being settled in the family room, with God as our Father."

The image of the judge is biblical, and we will all be held to account, but if that is all we are seeing then we fail to grasp the heart of the gospel with the priority of grace. The symbol of the Christian faith is not the scales of justice, but the cross where Jesus died, taking our sin and shame. Taking the guilt for all our wrongdoing, dying our death that we might live his life.

That's why we celebrate communion. It's a means of grace. It's an outward sign of an inward reality. It's a powerful reminder that we are incapable of contributing anything towards justifying ourselves before God. There is nothing that we can do to win his approval. There is no point in even trying. Sometimes I see people, and I don't really know their heart, but it appears to me that they seem to have a sense of duty rather than a sense of gratitude.

There is no sign of joy in what they are doing. There is no spontaneous overflow of praise at the wonder of God's love.

I just sense that there are people here who struggle with the whole idea of God's undeserved love. God wants you to know that he loves you not because of what you have done, but because of who you are. You are his child in whom he delights. He knows your faults. He knows your weaknesses. He knows your self-centredness. That's why Jesus came to die. There would be no point in the cross, there would be no point in Communion if you could win God's approval for yourself.

Do you ever resent it when you see God blessing others in a way that you haven't experienced? They have a joy, a peace, a sense of God's love that you don't have, even though you feel that you are more deserving than they are. God would say to you this morning that it's not because he is unwilling, but because you won't receive. He holds his love out to you, but you won't accept it because you want to do it for yourself.

I wonder if that woman in Iceland felt some annoyance towards the woman who had gone missing. Did she question why someone could be so stupid as to wander off without telling anyone where she was going? Whatever thoughts went through her mind she failed to grasp the reality of the situation. Are you failing to grasp the reality of your situation this morning, or are you secure in the knowledge of who you are in God?

As we come forward to share in the sacrament, may we overflow with spontaneous praise and great joy as we celebrate the truth that we are God's children, brought into his family through the blood that was shed for us at Calvary. May we know that God loved us from before we born, from before the creation of the world, and it was that love that determined to go to the cross that we might be forgiven, that we might have the certain assurance of eternal life.