

Sermon, Lent 1, **Being In Christ**

Silvia Purdie

Cashmere Presbyterian Church, Sunday 14 February 2016

Romans 10:8-13

Luke 4:1-13

I've been trying to find my way around this past month, meeting people, working out what's where and whos who. Last Sunday I went to a local Anglican church, and a lay woman did an excellent sermon and I was eager to meet her. So after the service I bowled up to her and asked her "So who are you then?" She was rather taken aback, told me her name, but seemed more anxious to leave than tell her life story to some strange woman. Fair enough. I let her escape. You folks, however, are not to be let off so lightly, for we have 6 weeks through till Easter in which I will be asking you the same question – Who are you? Who are you as people – yes, I genuinely do want to know! And who are you as 'a' people, as this church here on the hill.

This is our theme for Lent – Who we are in Christ.

And it is the 'IN' Christ that I will explore from different angles, in sermons and in our Lenten studies. I hope that you find something for you in this time of Lent.

Lent is traditionally a time for a focus on repentance, and we relinquish things in order to get to know ourselves more, to see ourselves, including our failings, more honestly. Practices such as fasting – going without food – or some other form of 'self-denial' make us more aware of all the things that prop us up or obscure our identity. You might like to try some form of fasting over this next month, something that confronts your own habits, not to punish yourself or make you miserable, but to notice what you rely on to make you feel good.

The focus of our Lenten series is the question 'Who are you?'. And seeing as I'm standing up here on my first Sunday I guess as good a place to start is 'Who am I?'. What can I tell you about me? You already know the external things, the 'Rev' before my name which is a very brief outcome of many many years of study and ministry and exploring my calling and countless church meetings and reports and Inductions and prayers ... many, many prayers. You know that I am a wife and mother, a daughter, daughter-in-law, sister, aunt, friend ... and I guess if you want to know what kind of wife & mother & daughter-in-law I am you'll have to ask them!

'Who I am' is often named by **where** I am, and where I come from ... which is complicated for me. No easy answer, no one mountain or river which is mine. Most recently, I come from the Kahuterawa River, which flowed past our home in Linton, near Palmerston North. Before that, the hills of Dunedin. Before that, the valley of Wainuiomata, where these two young men were born. Before that, newly married, Chris & I lived by the lake and hot water springs of Taupo, by the mighty Waikato River. Before that, Lower Hutt, Wellington, the harbor, the hills of the Capital. There I did university, worked for the Methodist Church in youth ministry nationally. Before that, my childhood, that's even more complicated ... seeing as I seem to be going backwards through time, just to confuse you, I came from Tonga, Ruatoria, Kaikohe and finally, I was born in Suva, Fiji. I could continue going back, to tell you who my parents were and why they were in Fiji, who their parents were, why their ancestors came here from Denmark, mostly England. I do need to claim an important connection to this place, for my great great grandparents, Thomas and Elizabeth Ayers arrived here in 1858 with their 4 children, and walked over these hills to settle in Rangiora, where they built many of the early houses. In fact, all 4 of my mother's grandparents were born here in North Canterbury; all 8 of her great-grandparents came here from England, between 1858 and 1871.

We define ourselves in relation to a sense of place, and a sense of connection to other people gone before us, and our roles with the people who go with us. We also define ourselves by our skills and talents – what we can do, what we get paid to do, what we do when there's nothing else we have to do. We define ourselves by what brings us joy or a sense of accomplishment, by what we can give, by what we have and who we love ... and we'll talk more about those things as we go along.

But, what is left of who we are when we can no longer 'do' anything, when we can barely communicate even? I had the honour of officiating at the funeral of Jess McAlister last Friday. She kept full charge of her faculties for 101 years, which is pretty amazing. But the journey towards death often strips us of all our competence, all our doing ... until there's nothing left but just **being**, and then that too is gone.

Lent begins with Ash Wednesday, which is a harsh reminder that we are finite mortal beings, and that in due course our bodies too will be returned to dust and ash.

And many people are content that that's life, make the most of it. If who you are is constructed only by what you can do, then good luck to you.

But my theme through Lent is that God invites us into a life so much greater than what we can be on our own, so much so that it cannot be confined to our bodily life, so much more significant than the details of our days. The

invitation of the gospel is to step into the life of Christ. It is a journey into a new home. It is a fundamentally different way of defining who we are. It is not difficult or complex. It is not an exclusive club. There are no barriers other than the ones we ourselves erect. Paul calls this 'salvation', and he throws it wide open:

Romans 10:8-13

If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ... For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. ¹³ For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

It doesn't matter, writes Paul, whether you've said the right words or believed a complex set of doctrines. He makes it so simple ... just say out loud 'Jesus is Lord' – let him be the boss. Just trust in your heart that Jesus is alive. That's it. That is the way in. And when you're in, you're in ... you are **in** Christ. You share in the risen life of Christ, you can receive the Holy Spirit, you can know a whole new way of being and belonging.

I had better talk about the Gospel reading before I run out of time. Our reading today is the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, and no doubt you've heard dozens of sermons on this story. What stands out for me today from this scripture is the word '**if**'. Sometimes it is the smallest words that open up the Bible in fresh ways.

If. Who says 'if' in this story? The devil. Three times he says it. The temptations hinge on these 'ifs' ...

The devil said to him, *"If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread."* ...

"If you worship me, it will all be yours." ...

"If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down"

If you are the Son of God. That's the ultimate 'To be or not to be'!

'Am I really?' Jesus asks himself ... Who am I?

And, the devil being the devil, it's all twisted, and it takes Jesus some time – 40 days in the wilderness – to sort out the truth from the lies. For the devil's twist on what it means to be the Son of God is to claim the supernatural power that should be part of the deal ... the power to fly – who hasn't dreamed of flying!?! the power to change stone into bread, to get our own needs met ... which is pretty tempting when you're starving, but we all have things we are quite sure we need and we are tempted to use whatever and whoever we can to get what we want ...

For Jesus, the answer to the 'if' questions was **'yes but'**. Yes, he knew through and through, yes he was the Son of God ... but not as the devil would define it.

That's the middle question, the 2nd temptation, about 'worship me'.

What we worship is that to which we give the power to define us. Jesus refused to be defined by anything other than what he knew to be most true, not for all the power and riches in the universe. Nothing was worth more to Jesus than his own sense of who he was in God.

That's what we mean when we name him the Son of God, that this one person, this Jesus of Nazareth 2000 years ago, his man was truly at one with God. He alone was undistracted from his true identity, sourced before time itself, lived out by being fully present in every moment of his earthly life.

This Jesus, crucified and risen, calls us to follow him. Paul describes this as entering into the life of Jesus, being 'in Christ'. It's easy to join Christ, Paul writes, simply trust in your heart that he is alive, simply say with your lips, 'Jesus is Lord'.

For me, I was blessed with a Christian home. I grew up believing in God. And along the way there have been many points in which I chose afresh for myself, to believe in new ways that Christ is alive, to say in new ways that Jesus is Lord. My story is one of God continually shaping me, continually naming me and remaking me ... so that my primary identity is the foundational knowing that I am loved, no matter what I do or have, that I am known, that there is a purpose for my life beyond my jobs and roles and effort and lists and skills.

The fascinating thing, I have found, is that the people who are most sure of their identity in Christ are the least pretentious, the least frenetic, the most present in a simple way to the people and tasks before them. So, I start today as your Minister trying to just be me, just Silvia, trying not to care that much about whether or not you like me, or even what you want me to get done this year – though that sounds really bad starting a new job! I am most interested in being who I am, in Christ, and sharing in who you are, in Christ, as individuals and as church. We will be who we are and the Spirit will show up and open us up to more of who Jesus is. That's what we're here for.

Our starting point is gratitude, and our end point will be gratitude. So my song for this morning is 'For all that you've done I will thank you'.