

What defines our identity? Who tells us who we are? Last week I went to visit my cousin in Muswell Hill, after we had had lunch, I went to the post office before catching the bus back. I was standing in the queue and someone asked me a question. I answered, after which a man in the queue said 'Ah you're Australian' and then in a loud voice started asking lots of personal questions and wanting to talk about Australia. This happens to me a lot. Now I am Australian, but I have also lived in London for 13 years, and I also don't know everyone who has lived in Australia. I love to talk about Australia – but generally not in public and not when I am trying to grab a few quiet moments in between appointments.

I am also intrigued that when my accent does come through people assume that of course I would love nothing better than to talk about Australia, and why on earth would I leave the lovely weather!

When others try to define who we are, or shoe horn us into a shape at times it can be uncomfortable.

In the past months, and if we are honest, really throughout all our history, there is a lot of assumptions we make about each other based on our culture, or the way we vote, or the job that we have, or who our friends are. Some of these assumptions will be based on experience and fact – but often they are not. And the experience of one person, doesn't make it a truism for another person.

For example – just because one part of Australia is hot, not all Australians love the heat. Or just because you had one bad teacher at school doesn't mean that all teachers are bad or lazy. The danger of labels is that we allow them to define our thinking and our behaviour – now they can also be useful – but when they became a way of dismissing a person or even an opinion without hearing their voice or story – we are in danger of injustice.

There are many reasons we might talk about identity today. It is the theme of many discussions since the EU referendum and there have been many arguments about how we see ourselves and each other in light of this. Some with reasoned arguments – and some which are rooted in causing hatred and fear in each other. As a community which fights for justice, the abuse of anyone's voice – even if we don't agree with it – is not justice. Bishop Pete in his pastoral letter to parishes this week put it this way '*From the perspective of being the Church in London, our role must be to build bridges with those who feel disenfranchised, to enable listening and understanding across the divides in our society and to seek to articulate and live the gospel hope in our multicultural context¹.*'

¹ Bishop Pete July Newsletter

But it is not just how our community works to understand itself in this new era – as a global community we struggle to live with what it means to be global – and have easy access to each other’s lives – while at the same time not understanding what our cultural differences can mean – and learning how we value our diversity and more than that – how we value ourselves, and our own communities in light of these broader relationships.

The challenge of course is that often our understanding is sourced from our fear. Our fear of an identity that is different to ours – or fear that others see us in ways we don’t want to be seen – can actually shape our identity.

This challenge is at the heart of the message of gospel reading today. Thomas was a strong man of faith – a faithful disciple of Jesus – yet throughout history he has been defined as ‘doubting Thomas’. Thomas is defined by one question he expressed at a time of fear – rather than by all the statements and confidence that he expressed in the rest of his life.

As we heard in John’s Gospel, when the disciples tell Thomas that they have seen their resurrected Lord, Thomas has some pretty strong reservations – but Thomas does not turn away from God rather he waits. Sadly this waiting means that Thomas is often referred to as the ‘doubter’ – because he demanded proof. And yet he wasn’t the only disciple in the Gospels to express disbelief or doubt at the reports of resurrection. Peter and John both had to see the empty tomb for themselves rather than rely on the word of some “hysterical” women.

The other issue is that it is not clear is that Thomas is doubting – rather he wants to see Jesus. He doesn’t run, he sticks around - in spite of his doubts, waiting to see if Jesus would return. What, I wonder, made him stay, after such an adamant refusal to believe his friends’ reports?

While it is clear that Thomas does not believe the word of his friends – he does not seem to doubt Jesus – or the power of God. He seems to be trying to understand – as we all do at different points the reality of the Easter story and its message. Thomas shows us that we may at times refuse to believe what our friends tell us of their experience of Christ – but that does not mean we do not have faith. Thomas shows us one of the greatest gifts of faith - To have the courage to wait!

Earlier in John’s gospel, Thomas is the only disciple with the courage to follow Jesus, no matter the cost. Not Peter the Rock. Not John the Beloved.

When Jesus hears that his dear friend Lazarus has died, the other disciples try to talk Jesus out of returning to Bethany to mourn. The disciples believed that returning to Bethany would bring execution. So while the other disciples procrastinate about not going, Thomas alone speaks up. Thomas alone stands in solidarity with Jesus. “Let us go with him,” Thomas says, “so that we may die with him.” These are not the

words of a doubter. These are not even the words of a believer. These are the words of a follower of Christ.

Thomas was a man who resolved to die with Jesus, if that's what following him meant, when none others would. And when Jesus finally appears to his disciples, Thomas is the only one who misses the resurrection reunion. The only one, in all the gospels, who accepted the reality of Jesus' death and offered to die with Jesus, is the only one who cannot see the resurrection.

In Thomas we see both the grief of a friend who wants to see his Risen Lord; and the example of a faithful disciple who questions new information and understanding – so that their faith might grow. And so it did. It is strongly believed that it was Thomas who introduced Christianity in India, and is believed to be martyred at St. Thomas Mount in Chennai, India and is buried on the site of San Thome Basilica. He is the Patron Saint of India and of Architects and Builders.

Thomas – will always be known as the doubter – it is too engrained in our history, but as you can see Thomas identity and impact on our history and culture is much more than this. As we question and redefine who we are in the weeks and years ahead – as individuals and as a nation, we would do well to look to Thomas who moves beyond one claim on his life to inspire many.

Whenever I think about identity – in the way that I know myself, and the way that I know others I am often drawn to the image of the stars. Or as Habakkuk put it *I will stand at my watch-post, and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me*².

Whenever I am searching with questions about who I am or where God is, I sit and watch the stars – and even in London, where it is hard a times to see any stars – I still look – I remember once having to make a difficult decision when I lived in central NSW at Dubbo and I drove out into the country, its flat and there no light pollution and when you look up there are millions and millions of stars – it reminds me of the vastness of God, and all the possibility that God creates – it reminds me that there is so much we can never know, and never define – but that God still holds us within in the vastness of the skies – and still loves us – and still calls us to know ourselves and God.

We can allow others to define us, or we, like Thomas can be confident of our faith, confident in ourselves and ask the questions that we need to take the steps of faith we are called to take. And whenever it feels hopeless, when we feel a little lost – maybe we can look to the heavens, our as Habakkuk – stand on the rampart waiting for the word of God, and as God to help us find the possibilities which are before us, or as the poet (who we will listen to during communion) put it:

² Habakkuk 2:1

Only night will ever know

Why the heavens never show

All the dreams there are to know

Paint the sky with stars

Night has brought to those who sleep

Only dreams they cannot keep

I have legends in the deep

Paint the sky with stars³

³ Enya – Lyrics – Paint the Sky with Stars