

Who am I? When I was in my final year of training to be a Priest we were required to give a 20 minute presentation to our peers and lead a discussion on ‘who we were’ – our sense of identity as we prepared to take our vows in the following months. I found it a very challenging project, as did most of my peers. What defines who we are is not an easy question – it is made of so many things which have influenced us through our lives – positively and negatively. The experiences in the family we grew up in, the friends we have had, our experiences of learning and education; experiences of church and faith; extra curricula things we have done; or hobbies and interests we have developed.

Then there are our experiences as we move into adulthood, the jobs we might have, relationships we have developed – all these experiences shape who we are which is constantly growing and changing. The answer to the question who I am is different today, to what it would have been 12 years ago, or 20 years ago – though of course some elements would be the same.

In the passage we hear from second Corinthians, Paul wants his readers to understand what has shaped who he has

become; he begins with an experience he has had of God 14 years ago. Paul is quite passive in the way he communicates these experiences, almost trying too hard not to boast, but at the same time wanting to convey not only the power of the experience he has had, but the influence this has had on the life he now lives.

How do we share such experiences? What do we even do with such knowledge?

On Friday evening I attended and participated in the ordination of 8 new Priests who I have been mentoring for the past year. Because of Covid restrictions it has been harder to get to know them this year as we have not met in person much, and I realise so much sharing takes place as we share a cup of coffee, or have a break in a session. But an ordination service, because of the vows those being ordained need to answer, gives a clear vision of the experiences people have had – experiences and encounters with God which have led them to be challenged to change vocations and say that God has called them to this place and this time. The promises that these Candidates make before God expresses a commitment not

only to God but to the way they choose to live moving forward.

We have a similar experience at our Baptism. Our baptism is a promise, a covenant between God and us, that we will be Christians. It is also the community of faith expressing its commitment to being a community in which we are able to be Christian within.

This weekend in the liturgical calendar in its readings and prayers often encourages us all to evaluate again, like Paul, what our encounters with God are calling us too now – and how we might answer the question of who we are.

Are there experiences we have had with God in the past, or in the present which are inviting us to consider afresh the way that we live out our faith. This may be in terms of the vocation we follow – of which there are thousands! Or it may be in terms of the rule of life we have adopted for our faith – that is the shape we give to our Christian life in terms of prayer, bible study, worship, living and charity.

The question of God's call on our life is not a one off event as our readings today remind us, rather like the question of who we are, it is something we need to return to regularly so

that we see what the next turn, what the next experience might be. It may not be life changing, it may be quite simple, it may even affirm that we are on a path already and need to continue.

Our Gospel reading from Mark 6 contains two stories really; both of which are about how we respond to the question of who we are and who we follow. The first 6 verses describe how the community in which Jesus grew up coped and responded to his new authority. Some translations even translate the comments as crudely as ‘Who does this boy think he is!’

The identity of Jesus is a consistent issue in Mark. In the gospel, we hear the opinions of rulers, religious authorities, crowds, disciples, and family members. For the author of Mark, the important question keeps coming around to "who do you -- the reader -- say that Jesus is?" And if we do honour Jesus as the son of God, who does that make us?

In the second part of today’s Gospel we hear about how those who have accepted this identity in Christ are to be received. It explores what those who are sent out might expect.

Emerson Powery¹ suggests that maybe one of the reasons the instructions are different in the different Gospel might simply have reflected the various missionary strategies in early Christianity. For example, only in Mark did Jesus' command the disciples to take a staff and wear sandals.

While all of the Gospels indicate that the disciples will need to rely on the hospitality of others, in Mark they seem to be more prepared. Mark's focus seems to be on development of households of faith, and so preparations are slightly different. Mark also seems to focus on the idea that they will experience rejection – as Jesus does – and they need to be prepared for that.

The other thing to notice in Mark, is the focus on repentance and the use of oil – which doesn't appear in other Gospels. It may be that Mark is reflecting a practice which is starting to develop in the early Church – but these themes of rejection and repentance are key in Mark's gospel.

So where does this leave us?

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-14-2/commentary-on-mark-61-13-5>

Our readings remind us that we all are invited to find our identity in God; and that the question of who Jesus makes us is at the centre of our being and our identity. Our society often does not talk positively of identity that is related to faith which can means we shy away from confidently claiming what it is to be Christian. If nothing else the voice we give to our faith is a counterpoint to a singular view of faith in Christ.

But it is more than that!

Feeling confident to claim our faith publicly means we also claim who we are honestly. Our readings today invite us to consider who God is calling us to be now, not 10 years ago, or not in 5 years' time. How does God see us now – and can we see ourselves that way too?

That is the invitation to each of us today, and each time we come before God in prayer. Who am I because of this pray and this faith? Who am I in God - And where will that lead me today? Amen.