**9th February 2014**

**Luke 9.18-27**

Who are you?

You will have been asked that question on numerous occasions and I wonder how you have responded. Name, family, occupation, where you live – that is all the usual replies. I have been to conferences and meetings where you have had to introduce yourself and describe yourself as a type of fruit and why you chose that fruit. I have had to describe my most memorable holiday. The most challenging ‘who are you’ exercise I have done was when I was training for the ministry in Manchester. As part of my engagement with the community I volunteered to help with a charity working in the red light district and in the gay village in the centre of the city. The charity was trying to help people be safe and have access to help and advice. About a dozen new recruits gathered together at their HQ and we were asked to introduce ourselves, say who we were, what our sexual orientation was and roughly how many sexual partners we have had. I thought I might as well just tell them I’m a Christian and training to become a church minister. People physically moved their chairs away from me!

We can be a bit candid about who we are. But do we know who we are?

I spoke last week about my dissertation that I have to write by the end of summer and how I’m looking at changes in our culture and how that affects people’s perception and participation in the Christian faith.

The research I’m working with suggests that spiritualties that engage with the depths of personal experience are faring better than religions that demand conformity to higher truths. People have become more self-centred, more focused on their own subjective lives, valuing the authority of their own experiences rather than trusting external authorities and institutions. They don’t want to be told how to live their lives.

However we live in a highly regulated world. The academics I am studying speculate that the contemporary work life of auditing, monitoring, inspecting, performance related pay, target driven goals and public performance tables mean that many people are already living highly regulated lives as part of their everyday work and so they are not looking for the same approach in their private lives:

‘..*given the prevalence on the part of increasing numbers of people for finding the freedom, the opportunity to be and become themselves, it is likely that many will use their ‘free’ time to seek liberation from their standardized, in effect regimented, work lives. If they engage with seeking the spiritual life with others, they are therefore much more likely to be involved with freedom-loving spiritualties of life than with role enforcing life-as religion. Seeking to escape from externally imposed targets elsewhere in their lives, they will not want more of the same in the sphere of the sacred*.’[[1]](#endnote-1)

Of course many people live double lives – one in public, one in private. Many people indulge in escapism when in their private lives and thanks to the wonders of the internet and gaming – Xbox, PlayStation and the like – we can take on different personas in the virtual world. We can become different people. We can escape the restrictions of daily living and break free. I want to be break free …. So sang Freddie Mercury.

Are we free? Is that who we are? Do we have real life… or is our life squeezed out of us, regulated, monitored from performance management to the all seeing eye of the Closed circuit television camera.

These are some of the deep questions that we may be considering on the Christianity Explored Course. The second week asks this same question about identity. It asks the question in relation to Jesus – who is Jesus – but it can equally point the question back to us – who are we? The answer you give to who you think Jesus is will have consequences to who you think you are.

In our gospel reading Jesus is turning his face towards Jerusalem and starting out on his journey to the cross where he will take on and defeat the powers of evil, sin and death – in other words all that seeks to destroy human life and flourishing. He asks his disciples ‘who do the crowds say I am? They reply some think you’re John the Baptist, others think you’re Elijah or one of the prophets come back to life. People can’t help but compare folk with other folk, especially famous folk – celebrity culture gives you personalities that repulse or admire and wish to emulate. John the Baptist and Elijah were the celebrities of Jesus day.

‘Who do you say I am?’ Jesus asks Peter. Who then confesses ‘you are the Christ’.

Jesus them tells them not say anything and that this Christ will suffer and die. Then Jesus says anyone who follows him will have to die to themselves. If you want to save your life you must lose it. Whoever loses their life for him will save it.

Last week I talked about why should we follow Jesus: especially in today’s society when we are suspicious about following anyone but ourselves. I suggested that following Jesus was a dare, that it would take you deep, but the main reason to follow him was because he was the dude – the One. In Peter’s words – you are the Christ – the king, the Messiah, the Saviour, the Deliverer. To follow Jesus involves putting your self aside in order to find a new self in Christ.

Jesus says in John’s gospel chapter 8 that ‘*if we hold to his teaching we are really his followers. Then we will now the truth and the truth will set us free’*. But our society believes freedom is doing what you want – don’t have anyone tell you how to live. Jesus goes on in that passage in John: ‘*everyone sins and is a slave to sin. A slave has no place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the son sets you free you shall be free indeed’.*

The Bible says that in one sense no one is free, we are all slaves. We are slaves either to sin or to God. Sin is defined as rejection and rebellion towards God. Either we are in God’s family or we are not. But counter to popular opinion – to be in God’s family is freedom and to be outside is not to be free.

If I am confusing you – come on the Christianity Explored Course!

I read the story of Jenny Taylor the other day in Third Way magazine. It was in a feature related to Valentine’s Day about love and sex and exploring the suggestion that the sexual revolution may have brought more tolerance but the over sexualisation of society is now oppressive – particularly for women and young people.

This is what Jenny Taylor had to say:

*‘I was a very secular journalist for some years. All through my late teens and twenties I lived a typical hack’s life and smoked a lot, drank a lot, slept around and bought the whole package about free love: sex is good, it’s healthy. Not just that, it’s actually politically good, and through it you can make a political statement about suppressed women and about your freedom as a thinker. That was very exhilarating and Germaine Greer was my hero.*

*I bought into all of it until I discovered it was doing me no good at al. I was very much on a downward spiral which I didn’t understand. It is actually how I became a Christian. I became a believer through the writings of St Paul which I stumbled upon about the body, and discovered that I could actually get my life together through some power not of my own.’[[2]](#endnote-2)*

She believes that Christianity has a high view of the body which is something honourable and very good. But it shouldn’t be worshipped as the only thing. She goes on:

*‘I want young girls today to know that sex does not form persons as Sigmund Freud taught. It is I believe abstinence that forms persons. Your character becomes stronger through sexual abstinence. That creates stronger societies. It is the seed, the germ of civilisation.*

*Both my parents were virgins when they got married. That was actually the norm. But ten years ago one survey showed only 1 per cent of women were still virgin when they married. That is a massive change. Another survey showed that the happiest people are the never married women of all categories. Now is there a correlation?*

*Freud really did set religion against sex. He said that it was only the weaklings who colluded in the delusion of religion by not having sex, by trying to justify constraints and restraints. I would say that it’s not that religion is anti-sex, but that the Christian faith has a high view of sex and the body and understands the need for protection. Jesus himself said, ‘the spirit gives life.’ The body counts for nothing in terms of real fulfilment. And we have turned that absolutely on its head’.*

There is a lot to discuss in Jenny Taylor’s article but now is not the place. It speaks to me about the need to know who you are. What are your boundaries, how do you see your body. And crucially, are you more than your body, more than the material. Our secular society places so much emphasis on our bodies – looking after our bodies, pleasing our bodies and our bodily desires. Hedonism is all about bodily pleasure. What if we are more than our bodies?

Jesus says the Spirit gives life. Biblical understanding of the personality suggests we are mind, body, soul and spirit. We have soul and spirit – the seat of our will and decision making and the eternal part of us that can relate to God. There is not much attention in our society about looking after our soul and spirit. Yet that for Jesus is where life is.

There is a real battle for the soul in our nation. Many people in our nation, particularly young people do not believe in God. It is cool to say you don’t believe in God and it is uncool to say that you do believe in God. But if you don’t believe in God you still have the problem of consciousness. Who are we?

Are we just a collection of atoms? Is our mind just electro chemical activity in the brain. If so should we not treat humans as expendable material objects just as say a car, or a house?

I wrote the thought for the weekend column in the Gloucestershire Citizen yesterday (they still welcome articles written by church people!)

I commented on abortion in the light of recent controversy about reports that 4,000 abortions were carried out last year because the foetus was the ‘wrong gender’ and that 40% of abortions have been granted without the consent of two doctors.

I said: ‘It seems that the Abortion Act has resulted in a situation where abortion is now available on demand and no one likes to ask questions or make any judgements. I suggested that the current abuse of the 1967 legislation should caution any hasty move towards legalising euthanasia or assisted dying.

I wrote that

‘I’m not an absolutist when it comes to abortion. I can accept it as the lesser of two evils and I know the agony of many who have been through an abortion. But I baulk at the normalisation of abortion, it not being seen as an evil, that it is just some form of contraception.

I ended the article by suggesting that our society needs a new conversation about respect and responsibility towards all life.

Is human life just material stuff that is expendable? Do we have soul and spirit?

Can mind exist without matter? If it can then the hypothesis of God is possible.

Can a mind exist without a material body – can it be spirit. In our physical universe we are told that is impossible. Yet God is eternal – a different state of existence - where our laws of probability and physics do not apply.

If we have a soul and a spirit – who we are becomes a different question.

The Christian faith claims we have soul and spirit. That we were created in the image of God. We were created for a relationship with God and we will only have any chance of becoming whole, free, truly ourselves when we start on that journey towards God.

In his book the Audacity of Hope, the President of the United States Barack Obama comments on his own conversion to Christianity and writes of the hunger in every human heart:

‘*each day it seems, thousands of Americans are going about their daily rounds – dropping of kids at school, driving to the office, flying to a business meeting, shopping in the mall, trying to stay on their diets – and coming to the realisation that something is missing. They are deciding that their work, their possessions, their diversions, their sheer busyness are not enough. They want a sense of purpose, a narrative arc to their lives something that will relieve a chronic loneliness or lift them above the exhausting, relentless toll of daily life. They need an assurance that somebody out there cares about them, is listening to them – that they are not just destined to travel down a long highway toward nothingness.’*

If there is no God then life is extraordinarily bleak. We become a meaningless machine, a useless passion, a curious accident. If there is a God the picture changes dramatically.

Who Jesus is, is a crucial question. If Jesus is who he says he is – it has huge implications for our lives and the claim on our lives – that we will only be free in Christ, we will only have life in Him.

I hope and pray our Christianity Explored Course may help people to find that assurance that God loves them and Jesus travels with them and they can find their lives, who they are, they can find their lives, in Christ.

There is a story about a little boy who watched as Michelangelo hammered and chiselled at a block of marble. Pieces fell and flew away, but the child had no idea what was happening. Weeks later, the boy returned and was surprised by a large, powerful lion sitting in the place where the marble block had stood. Excited, he ran to Michelangelo and asked, ‘Sir, tell me, how did you know there was a lion in the marble?’

Just as Michelangelo was able to ‘see’ the lion in the marble, so too, God the master sculptor sees what we can become. He gradually chips away at the parts that don’t belong until we become all that he intends for us to be.

Spiritual life is the interaction between the little child, the master sculptor and the emerging beautiful marble lion.

Who are we? Who am I? Who are we becoming?

1. P. Heelas & L. Woodhead, T*he Spiritual Revolution: Why religion is giving way to spirituality*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2005, p128 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Jenny Taylor, Third Way, Feb 2014 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)