

Isaiah 43: 1-7; Acts 15: 1-18

Identity

From where do we get our self-image?

Diana had originally chosen the passage from Acts so I have stuck with it and combined it with the reading from Isaiah as both texts say something about who God is, and who we are, and how we relate and identify with one another. Advent is a time when we look again at our identity in Christ and its implications for our lives. We currently hear a lot about identity politics, hence my choice of this evening's theme.

The burning issue in Acts is whether or not Gentiles needed to be circumcised in order to be 'saved' – or at least considered proper members of this growing Jewish sect. One of the underlying concerns here is the importance of maintaining a distinct identity. Jews were formerly required to be separate from Gentiles and circumcision was (and still is) a defining mark of belonging. It says; 'We belong to this people of God...'

Ultimately, the council at Jerusalem decided that it was not necessary for Gentiles to be circumcised. The gift of the Holy Spirit had become the defining mark of belonging. Gone were the days of tribal distinction. God had not discriminated between Jews and Gentiles. Later on, Paul wrote that 'There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, but all are one in Christ Jesus. This passage reminds us that circumcised

or uncircumcised, God knows the heart, God purifies by faith, God calls out a people for his name.

It is human nature to want to define and label, for it gives us a sense of security and safe boundaries. Dress codes, use of language, choice of belief system, membership to clubs and associations, joining street gangs, adopting particular worldviews – all give us a sense of who we are. Note also the interest in researching family history on ancestry.com and similar. We want to know who we are and where we come from, and we want affiliation to people who are like ourselves with similar values and interests. We want to belong, somewhere.

Identity is important and attached to it is our self-image. One of the major problems in the spiritual life can be our attachment to our own self-image. There is a tendency to confuse ideas about our self-image with who we actually are in God. All of us have formed a self-image, but our attachment to it, our need to promote it and protect it, and have others like it, can be detrimental to us.

Isaiah presents us with a challenge. He presents us with who God is, and gives us an idea of how God sees us rather than how we see ourselves, which is continually changing anyway.

We are

- redeemed
- called by name
- we belong to God

- we are precious and honoured in God's sight
- we are loved
- we are sons and daughters of God
- we are created for God's glory

Who we are in God is a much more reliable foundation for our being. I'd take God's kind judgement of me over any harsh judgement made by myself. I'd rather have God's patient and merciful image of me than that formed by a critical friend.

God always sees his son, Jesus, in me, and cannot **not** love him! (John 17:22-23). God grounds us in a solid and enduring self-image – no more up and down.

Over the years, I have spent a lot of time with people who didn't like themselves very much; people who doubted and feared themselves. They spent a lot of time and effort trying to feel good about themselves.

The Gospel – the Good News of God – promises us that we are objectively and inherently children of God (1 John 3:2). This is not about psychological or moral worthiness; it cannot be gained or lost. When God's image of us becomes our self-image, we are home free. And this, surely, is very good news!

I'm convicted that so much guilt, low self-esteem, insecurity and narcissism is around because we have allowed our Christian people

to be at home in a world, to take their identity from a world, that Jesus told us not to take as normative to begin with.

As Jesus says in John's Gospel: 'Why do you look to one another for approval instead of the approval that comes from God?' (Jn 5:44).

So many of us accept a successful or a negative self-image inside a system of false images. This will never work.

Maybe we need to heed the advice of Teresa of Avila who wrote: 'Find God in yourself, and find yourself in God.' Then we don't emotionally fluctuate but are built on the Rock of Ages.

Questions: How do you define yourself?

What things inform your definition of yourself.

Can you cope with your self-image?

Which of your self-images (positive or negative) get in the way of your relationship with God and others?

For reflection: Whenever we get defensive or go emotionally up and down, this is a sign that we are attached to a self-image. Do you recognise this fluctuation in yourself?