

Richard Dawson Sunday 9 November

Ephesians 4¹⁷⁻²⁴ / Matt 16²⁴⁻²⁶ / Romans 6^{5,6}

In a 2010 Newsweek column, golfer Tiger Woods offered an honest evaluation of his mistakes. He wrote this...

“Last November everything I thought I knew about myself changed abruptly, and what others perceived about me shifted too My life was out of balance, and my priorities were out of order. I made terrible choices and repeated mistakes. I hurt people whom I loved the most. And even beyond accepting the consequences and responsibility, there is the ongoing struggle to learn from my failings. At first, I didn't want to look inward. Frankly, I was scared of what I would find—what I had become... Golf is a self-centred game, in ways good and bad. So much depends on one's own abilities. But for me, that self-reliance made me think I could tackle the world by myself. It made me think that if I was successful at golf, then I was invincible. Now I know, that no matter how tough or strong we are, we need to rely on others.”

The interesting thing I find is that Woods represents perhaps a less common expression of self in our current culture. The more common expression is something I have seen much of over 25 years in ministry and something much more destructive and

that is people who despair about themselves; people who have little regard for themselves and whose 'self-view' is skewed not towards arrogance but towards loathing – towards **self-loathing**. Mental health is perhaps one of the greatest issues facing our culture today.

Did you know that approximately one in seven young people in New Zealand will experience a major depressive disorder (and one in five will experience some kind of serious mood disorder) before the age of 24. We are currently thirteenth out of thirty four in the OECD for suicide with our greatest at risk age groups being 15 to 29 with another peak at 45-49 and another at 80-84. But the stats hide I believe a much greater unhappiness in kiwis – a sense of either being unloved or, and this is more to the point, being unlovable; a sense of disappointment at what life has dealt us and at times a deep despair over ourselves and it's against this background that I want to make these comments because it seems to me that the Bible and biblical answers to this particular issue haven't been a lot of help.

But before I continue I just want to ask you this morning, how do you feel about yourself? Are the majority of your thoughts about yourself negative? Do you see yourself as not particularly likable or worthy of love? Do you see yourself as basically unimportant except perhaps to a few people?

If this seems to describe you can I begin by simply saying two things to you. The first is, don't ignore these feelings as if they

will just go away. You need to talk with someone about this and you need to address these feelings. You need help.

The second thing is this. This is **not how God sees you and whatever else you may believe about yourself you should know this. From the beginning of your life to its very end and beyond you do have a God who loves you and who notices you and who wants the best for you; who has given up His Son for you and who continues to feel and be effected by everything you feel and are exposed to. This I believe is the gospel; the Good News of God – we have a God who loves us, even as we are.**

Our readings today deal with the self in what, at first sight, appears to be a pretty harsh manner. Basically it would seem that the way to deal with self – the only way to deal with it is to kill it. Thus we have Paul in Romans saying...

⁶We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. (Roms 6)

And again in the words of Jesus...

²⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. (Matt 6)

But this is not the end of the story for the Bible contains another narrative around ourselves that offers quite a different view of God's attitude towards ourselves.

The Psalmist, for example, will say...

⁴ What is man that You are mindful of him, And the son of man that You visit him?

⁵ For You have made him a little lower than the angels, And You have crowned him with glory and honor.

⁶ You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands; You have put all *things* under his feet, (Psalm 8)

And Jesus will hint at this treasuring of human life when He says...

²⁸ Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. ²⁹ Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. ³⁰ And even the hairs of your head are all counted. ³¹ So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. (Matt 10)

So God treasures us enough to know exactly how many hairs we still have in our heads. God loves us. God knows us. God values us. So what's the deal with 'self?' How are we to understand 'ourselves?' What's going on with this language about the death of self?

Let me give two quick answers to this. The first is rather technical but is still important. Of the 4 main passages in the letters of the NT dealing with 'self' all understand self in a slightly different way to the way we might generally today. When **we** say 'self' we refer to everything that we are – to our bodies, to our mind to our behavior, to our spirit and that, of course, makes it rather difficult to feel at all positive about who we are. Not so in the New Testament. Rather where we have reference to 'self' in the New Testament we usually are referring either to our 'old self' or our 'new self' or as it is in Romans our 'old man' and our 'new man.' Where this occurs what is meant by 'self' is defined almost entirely by two relationships central to our history as a race. These are our relationship either with Jesus or with Adam. So Paul envisages two beginnings for humankind – one with Adam which is tainted by sin and all that goes with sin and one with Jesus in which the first beginning is discarded or, at least, superceded. The Adamic 'self' is a 'self' which indulges in all the behaviours which the Bible considers destructive and evil and so when we talk about the death of this self or leaving this self behind what we're talking about specifically are the behaviours, habits,

thought patterns and passions of a self which has no regard for Jesus.

The new 'self' on the other hand is a 'self' defined by its relationship with Jesus. And this is where the whole narrative around death arises. Paul pictures our old self dying with Christ and our new self rising with him and by this he means at least two things.

Firstly he means that those who express faith in Christ establish a kind of legal position **with God** so that God will not hold our sins against us **because of the work Christ has done in dying on the Cross**. Put more simply, we choose to take advantage of God's work, Christ carries us; we choose to say yes to a state of freedom from condemnation.

Legally we have an out, a get out of jail free card in Christ and we need it. Anyone who thinks they become sin free once they've become a Christian only needs to ask the person who is most closely related to them to find the truth. Not that we continue in sin deliberately although that is always a possibility or that we don't work on ourselves. It's just that our journey towards perfection will not finish before death. We will continue to need forgiveness from sin all of our life.

Secondly, Paul understands that when we put our faith in Christ we enter a world and a context of new possibilities and new priorities. And we do so because we begin, through God's Word,

to **think like Christ** – to think differently in relation to almost everything. Remember those words of Pauls in Romans 2...

²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Roms 2)

Once we accept the work of Christ into our lives and make him Lord we begin, quite simply, to have a mind transplant. We begin to change our minds about a whole lot of things and particularly about ourselves! And this brings me to my second point.

So God isn't interested in killing us; in destroying who we are; in emptying us of our identity or in robbing us of any sense of self. God loves who He has made us but we do have an issue and that issue is how we come to understand who we are.

Fundamentally the Bible says we need to look at this question with new eyes or, at least with new glasses. Formally, in our life before Christ we understood everything apart from Christ – we didn't take Christ's view into account. Now, in our new life with Christ our task is quite simple – to understand everything from His point of view and the wonderful thing about this is that as we do this we will come to meet some new people and the most surprising new person we'll meet is... ourselves.

AMEN