

Who am I ?

Genesis 2: 15–17; 3: 1–7; Matthew 4: 1 – 11;

Seasons are a part of our lives, Seasons in the natural world and Seasons within our lives. A friend lent Ron the book “Man for our time”, the story of Robert Laidlaw. I’ve also begun reading it and discovered the season in Dunedin when people were queuing to hear the gospel and find forgiveness and freedom from sin. I wonder how Dunedin would cope with a season of revival similar to the early 1900’s when crowds had to be turned away because there was no room for them in the hall. This happened night after night – God was present in a real way and many people came to Christ. I found it also wonderful to go to the Ravi Zacharias meeting on Sunday evening and see the people pouring in – the meeting was inspiring.

In the church we also celebrate seasons. We are now entering the season of Lent. What is Lent you may say?... Barbara Brown Taylor in her book “Home by Another way” describes Lent – she said – “Lent's not in the Bible – it's really more of a "church thing." Her words reminded me of Kristin’s message to us a week or two ago how as the centuries passed the churches message became less effective. Taylor explained it this way.... Many years after Jesus had not returned as quickly as expected, the followers of Jesus had learned to accommodate their own lives to the surrounding culture, finding "no contradiction between being comfortable and being Christian." So much for martyrdom, bold witness and challenging the powers that be, speaking out or standing up for the poor and the marginalized. Instead, Taylor says, our ancestors in faith "decided to be nice instead of holy” (*Home by Another Way*).

The church Taylor says, created Lent as "a springtime of the soul." (In fact, the English word "Lent" comes from the word for "spring.") Not particularly

fitting for us in the Southern Hemisphere but some of us perhaps may have that urge to clean house thoroughly even in the autumn, (I'm not sure I often do) however the church recognized the need for a spiritual spring cleaning and offered "forty days remembering Israel, Elijah and Jesus who each spent challenging times in the desert. Lent's 40 days were to cleanse the system and open the eyes to what remains when all comfort is gone...to live by the grace of God alone and not in our own strength.

When our children were babies I desperately tried to teach my second daughter to use a dummy. She was fretful often and I thought the oral satisfaction of something to suck would be helpful. However I didn't achieve it, she only spat it out. Taylor suggests that in early Christianity as now, folks had their "dummy's or pacifiers," by this she meant all the things and ways that keep us from feeling what it means to be human. We have habits or things we do or own that can convince us that we don't really need God. In fact, Taylor believes that just about all of us struggle with an addiction to what we need "to fill the empty place inside of us that belongs to God alone," a space that we can't possibly fill on our own, by our own efforts and wits. Unfortunately, we seem unable to recognize that deep hunger for what it is, "the holy of holies inside of us, – the uncluttered room of the Lord our God" to use Taylors words (*Home by Another Way*). or (we used to call it the God shaped vacuum). There is an old and familiar saying that says **"You only know who you are when you recognise whose you are"**

So let's look at our reading from Genesis. Adam and Eve were both together in the garden when the serpent came whispering. The serpent suggests that God is not to be trusted saying "Did God really say...?" sowing the seeds of doubt, and then states, "You will not die" contradicting God's words. The serpent appealed to that part of Adam and Eve that was the empty place inside – the part of them that was searching for identity – the space they couldn't fill on their own.

Adam and Eve's confidence in God was undermined – perhaps they could fill that space inside of them themselves, discovering their own identity outside of God – “when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil,” said the Serpent. Who needs God after all, when you can be “like God” all on your own? They made the mistake of listening to the serpent and their insecurity came to the fore and they attempt to define themselves apart from God, but they only defined themselves against each other – such a tragedy but unfortunately this scenario continues to happen often today.

Now to Matthew. This lonely struggle in the wilderness follows immediately, after the wonderful experience down at the river when Jesus was baptized and the sky opened up, and the Spirit descended, and the voice of God **pronounced him God's Beloved Son**. Jesus accepts baptism, humbly, from John, in fact, he insists on it "to fulfil all righteousness."

The experience of Jesus in the desert is exactly the opposite of Adam and Eve. Jesus experienced not only hunger and loneliness but challenging temptation. The “content” of the devil's temptations include the capacity to turn stones to bread, call upon angels for safety, and the promise of power and dominion, each again is primarily about identity. **Notice that the devil begins by trying to undermine the identity Jesus had just been given at his baptism in the previous scene. “If you are the son of God,” calling that identity into question.** As with his exchange with Adam and Eve, the devil seeks to rob Jesus of his God-given identity and replace it with a false one of his own manufacture.

Notice, too, that Jesus resists this temptation by taking refuge in an identity founded and secured through his relationship with God, a relationship that implies absolute dependence on God and identification with all others. **Jesus is content to be hungry as others are hungry, dependent on God's Word and grace for all good things. He will be at risk and vulnerable as are all others, finding safety in the promises of God. The Scriptures he uses assure him of God's trustworthiness. He will refuse to define himself or seek power apart**

from his relationship with God, giving his worship and allegiance only to the Lord God who created and sustains him.

All the various temptations we may encounter stem from the primary temptation to forget whose we are and therefore to forget who we are. Because once you don't remember who you and whose you are, you'll do all kinds of things to dispel the insecurity that attends any human life and to find that sense of security and acceptance that is essential to being happy.

There are many temptations in this world. Each day we are besieged by countless advertisements that seek to create in us a sense of lack, insecurity, and inadequacy, undermining our God-given gift of identity with the promise that if we buy this car or use that deodorant or make our teeth brighter we will be acceptable. The message of the consumer-consumption culture is simple: *you are not enough*. Not skinny enough, smart enough, pretty enough, strong enough, rich enough to deserve respect, love, and acceptance. And here's the thing: it's an absolute lie, a demonic attempt at a kind of identity theft far worse than the one we've been trained to fear. And Jesus offers us a way out, a way to safeguard our identity by lodging it in God's good gift and promise.

Jesus also does more than that; He also demonstrates just how deeply God loves us by going to the cross. Jesus died to show us that God already loves us and has declared **that we are not just acceptable but also treasured, priceless beyond measure.**

It is important for us to take great care that we don't become side tracked and listen to the many whispers around us, leaning on the values of this world and not upon God's good gift and promise to us. Think back to the beginning of this message – are there things in our lives that we put our faith in or lean upon instead of taking strength from our identity in Christ – from the presence of Christ in our lives. I know I am a bit of a doer, always doing, making myself busy – serving helping but I have to remember that my strength and identity does not come from what I do but from the

presence of God in my life – taking the time to enjoy the presence of God because it is in the joy of the Lord that I find my strength.

There have been Lenten resources emailed out to you – Lyn Baab has written a beautiful one based on the psalms which you will have received – so make use of it – take the time to spend some time in the presence of God especially in this lead up to Easter.

Like those earlier Christians who settled into a comfortable faith, we're tempted today to turn away from the suffering of the world, tempted to build our own defences against doubt and risk, tempted to concentrate not only on our own needs but also our wants, before thinking of others. In doing so, we forget whose we are, too, and therefore who we are. Miranda is trying to help the children look outward with the 40 days of generosity until Easter and those of you who are parents here can encourage them.

The devil is all talk, empty talk. The devil's whispers are completely misleading. Perhaps we need to spend some time in those empty places within us that belong to God alone, listening instead to a gospel larger than we have ever considered, and opening ourselves for what is yet to come. Let us do a lot of listening in these weeks as we head towards Easter. Let's remove the things we use to fill the gaps and allow God to do a new work in our hearts and lives. Our identity is in Christ!!!! Who am I? I am God's beloved child, and my identity comes as a gift and a promise – we only know who we are when we realize fully **whose** we are. Our identity is also reinforced by the people we hang out with so it is important for us to hang out at church, be surrounded by the family of faith and also if at all possible be part of a home group keeping telling each other that we have **great value, worth and purpose**.

I close by reading you this wonderful passage from Ephesians 3. Drink in the words and allow the love of Christ to fill your hearts, to fill that room

inside you that is set apart for the Lord your God. As we do this we will be given the strength to look beyond ourselves, able to trust God for everything, remembering our calling to bring God's light into the world.

These words are also on your newsletters.

New Living Translation (NLT) Ephesians 3:17 19

¹⁷ Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong. ¹⁸ And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. ¹⁹ May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God.