

Kia ora koutou katoa. Well as you know Tuesday is Anzac Day, a day that has essentially overtaken Good Friday & as the most sacred day on the NZ calendar. It's a day on which we remember the sacrifice & courage of the NZ & Australian armed servicemen who died in WWI & all the subsequent wars since. **NZ & Australia lost around 80,000 men** in WW1, & altogether **11 million soldiers perished** in that senseless carnage where front lines often fought over yards of bloody mud, sacrificing thousands of lives, only to be pushed back from it again a few months later. In addition to 11 million soldiers perishing, **7 million civilians** were killed in that war. Overall a whole generation was lost. So its right that we should & it is proper that we should remember these men. Like most NZ families, I have a relative I never met, a great uncle who perished at Gallipoli. His name was David, He was 21 years old, the only son of my great grand parents, & some one who had planned to study at Knox & become a Presbyterian minister if he had returned from the war. But of course he never did. So I will wear the red poppy for him & so many like him who fell in that senseless war. I also wear a white poppy. Now the white poppy is created to remember not just the men, but the countless women & children who died. The white poppy also acknowledges the courage of the men who, often due to their Christian convictions, refused to fight, & were conscientious objectors - and for that stand were tortured & even executed.

Those who fought, & those who refused to fight, were equally brave, & so it is right to remember both I think.

But today, I'm not wanting to examine the Scriptures concerning violence & war, & what Jesus says about that - we will do that some time, because it's incredibly important. But rather, today I want to start a two-part series looking at **our identity as children of God**, and as members of God's family. I'm not going to totally answer the question of who we, are but in this part-one message, I hope to make a start.

The question of Identity - knowing who we really are - is absolutely key, foundational to everything else that follows in life. And this has never been more crucial, for we are living at **a time in history** when developing a resilient sense of personal identity has never been more complex or confusing. **Once** upon a time it was a pretty **simple** process for the average human being. If you grew up on a farm, you very likely became a farmer; if your parents were bakers, you very likely became a baker; if your parents were school teachers, it was very likely you would become a school teacher too. Of course, in those simpler times, there were huge negatives around that simplicity - peoples choices were were very narrow, and especially if you were a **woman**, or a **minority ethnic group**, appalling restricted. But now, here in the 21st century, the journey of understanding who were really are, or what our real, identity is, has never been more complex or confusing. Where once upon a time, the options were suffocatingly limited, now it feels as though they are **overwhelmingly too many**, with more options & more information bombarding us then we can ever possibly process. For many people, trying to work out a sense of

personal identity, working out who we really are, is no longer a life time's **unfolding** in the context of a loving & supportive **family & community**, surrounded by mentors & adult **role-models**, but a terrifying roller-coaster ride **alone** through maze of a million mirrors, and a million choices, where **you & you alone** are expected to make the right choice.

And no body feels the pressure of this more than **young people**. We now live in the age of **Facebook, instagram, snapchat** & a hundred other social media options, & with this we've reached this incredibly scary point where people feel they have to **construct** their own personal identity - one that looks **beautiful & all together** - & then get it out there on facebook. Where once building a sense of identity was a life long process, surrounded by **adults (aunties, uncles, grandparents, neighbours)** who really knew you & genuinely cared for you, & it was built through **rites of passage & overcoming real challenges**, it has now become for many people a **solo project & a competition** to construct & project the most **attractive**, the most **successful**, the most **cool identity** that you can come up with, & get it out there for everyone else to see & evaluate you on. And Facebook in particular ramps up this pressure, because of course the pressure is on you to put your **best image** up there - the **best profile picture** you can take, with the wittiest posts, or pictures from the amazing overseas trip you're on. And all of this just raises the bar higher; in a game that leaves so many people **feeling inadequate** because everyone else seems to be living an awesome life, while **we simply struggle along**, just trying to keep our head above the water line.

Now, if you have ever felt like this, or feel like this today - **I have two pieces of Good News for you**. The first is that this message that says you are not good enough, this message that says everyone else is more beautiful or more successful or more liked or more wealthy than you - **is a big, fat lie**. And the second piece of Good News I have for you, is that **there is a God who knows exactly how you were created** & knit together in your mothers womb, who sees you, who understands you, who gets you, who is head over heels in love with you, **who likes you**, and who **will go to any length** to bring you back into relationship with himself. In fact, he did go to any length, the most extraordinary length possible, when he put on flesh & blood & came as Jesus to tell us in person how much he loved us, and then **took on the powers of darkness that oppose us**, and he entered into a **titanic struggle** for our salvation, for our lives, to the point of dying in our place as a ransom, **his very life as a ransom**, to purchase back our ownership & set us free. That is how much this God loves us, & **this** is how far our God went to re-establish a relationship with us. Jesus said *"I have come that you might have Life, and Life in all its fullness"*. This is the Jesus who is risen from the dead, who is alive, & who is still calling to each of us today.

Now as to that lie, **that big fat lie that whispers to us** in our darkest moments & tells us that everyone else is more successful & more beautiful & more adequate than we are - this lie comes from **the enemy** of our souls, from the **father of all lies**, from the one Jesus said has come **"only to steal, kill & destroy"**, & to rob us of life. Because you know what, every person on this planet (apart from a few extreme narcissists) - **everyone struggles &**

sometimes feels inadequate, & sometimes wakes up in the middle of the night worried, frightened or sad. This is just **what it means to be human**, and for us to have not yet entered the fullness of the Kingdom & the life that is to come.

And once we understand that we can start to help one another, to **empathise** with one another, and to be a community that **supports** one another - rather than a group of people **competing** with one another.

One of my favourite quotes is this one that says *“Be kind to every person you meet, for we are all fighting a great battle”*. We are all in the same boat. We are all to one degree or another **broken**, to one degree or another **damaged**, to one degree or another **sinful**, and in need of **grace**, in need of **forgiveness**, and need of **acceptance**, and in need of **love**.

OK, now let's start by talking about **the nature of God**. Of all the things that are said about God in the Scriptures, particularly in the New Testament, the most succinct definition of God's very nature, God's very essence, God's character, is found in a three word description, in **1 John 4:16: GOD IS LOVE**. Not God has love, or God does love, or God shows us love - but **GOD IS LOVE**. This is the heart of the heart of the heart of the nature & character & heartbeat of God. Now going right back to the creation story in **Genesis** to find what the essential nature of each of us is, of every human being is, we read in **Genesis 1:27** that

*God created humanity in his own image,
in God's image he created them,
male and female God created them.*

So we too are created for love. **We are created to give & receive love**. But there's a problem, as we continue on through the Genesis account - by Genesis chapter three, man & woman are getting it wrong, are ignoring God's instructions & commands & are **beginning to believe those lies whispered** in their ears by the enemy of their souls, the serpent, satan. And what happens after that? Adam & Eve begin **blame shifting**. It was her fault, no it was his fault. They become **ashamed**, hiding from God & concealing things from one another. Within a generation, this race that was created for love is **killing one another**, & on & on it goes until today; and we look around & we find this Biblical account to be tragically & undeniably accurate. We are **alienated from God**; we are alienated from each other, and we are alienated from our own souls, from our own true self's. And with that many of us are no longer sure who we are or what our real identity is.

But here's the **Good News** again - the best news ever: let's now read that passage in **John 1:12** again - *“to all who do receive him, to those who believe in his name, he gives the right to become children of God”*. This is incredible isn't it. When we come to Jesus, he gives us **the right** to become children of God. And you see the two step process involved from our side: **believe** (head) and **receive** (heart). It's not that complex is it?

And then if we skip over to the first letter of John, written by the same author - he picks up this theme again, & expands upon it:

1 John 3:1-3 *“See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. 2 Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. 3 All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.*

Children of God - and this is what we truly are, & were always made to be!

And what John then goes on to say is that this status of being God’s child is a **progressive process** of moving on towards even greater things - for we are being transformed more & more into the likeness of Jesus as we follow him & as we spend time with him; this hope, this vision of becoming more & more like Jesus in the future causes us to push into Jesus more & more in the present , & as we do so, lo & behold we find our selves **knowing Jesus better** & actually becoming more like him. It becomes a really **positive, transformative cycle**: the more we realise we are loved, the more we want to spend time with Jesus, the more of ourselves we give to Jesus, & the more of his love we find.

in all aspects of life, **Jesus is our forerunner and our role-model**. Even in this. For Jesus, in his **humanity & in his dependence** on the Spirit of God, had to face these same tests of identity, & finding his identity in God. Sometimes we get into this mindset that Jesus wasn’t really a human being, you know he was **divine, the 2nd person of the trinity**, so he didn’t really have to go through the same struggles we go through (and actually this an ancient heresy called Docetism - which said Jesus wasn’t really a human-being, he just appeared to be). But if anybody believes that, they clearly haven’t read the book of **Hebrews**.

Hebrews 4:15 tells us that *“we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin”*. Knowing this adds even more depth to that passage we heard Liv read earlier from **Matthew 3 & 4**. At his baptism (**Matthew 3:13-17**) the heavens are opened, the Spirit descends, and the voice of the Father declares *“This is my son, my beloved, in whom, I delight”*. (In Mark’s version, in the 1st person). Immediately following this event Jesus is lead into the **desert** to be **tempted and tested** by the devil. Notice that the first two attacks begin with the taunt/challenge *“**IF** you are the son of God...show us how powerful you are & turn these rocks into loaves of bread”*. The 2nd one: *“**IF** you are the son of God, throw yourself down from this temple, because, you know, if God really loves you, he’ll catch you - & everyone watching with will see your power & agree you are the son of God”* So do you see what is happening? - these **attacks** are focused **on the sense of identity** that Jesus had just had revealed to him at his baptism - his identity as **the Beloved son of God**, who the Father was delighted with even **before he had healed**

anyone, fed anyone, saved anyone, or taught anyone. But the devil is trying to undermine & shake that sense of identity, & trying to get Jesus to **shift his sense of security & identity** away from who is in relationship with God, & shift it instead to what **spectacular & impressive thing he could do for God, for the world, for himself** - that would look good to anyone who might be watching. Now if Jesus hadn't clung on to his identity as the beloved son of God, in whom God delighted, he would have been **a sucker for that third temptation**, that offer of all the Kingdoms of this world, **gained with-out hard work**, gained with-out **sacrifice**, gained with-out having to go through the **cross**. *'Only one little thing you have to do Jesus - stop finding your identity & purpose & authority in God's love, & find it the power & splendour & pride of being incredibly successful, incredibly wealthy, incredibly powerful & ruling over all the Kingdoms & Empires. I mean forget this servant-leadership nonsense. Forget this suffering on behalf of others. Jesus - I can give it to you right now, in an instant, on a silver platter. All you have to do - a small thing - is worship me.'* Jesus is tempted in every way we are, & we are tempted in every way Jesus is. **We too are tempted to try & build our sense of identity** on what we **do**, on what we **accomplish**, on how much **power** we have, on how much **wealth** we have - rather than on our **relationship with God** & on the fact of being **completely & unconditionally loved by him**.

And here's the thing: if Jesus hadn't gone into this battle armed with the knowledge of who he really, really was, and how much he was really truly loved, he would not have been able to **withstand that withering test** and series of temptations. And **so it is for us** as we go through life. We will not be able to stand tall in the face of every **temptation & test & tragedy that life will throw** at us, unless we know, really know, how **deeply loved** we are by God, & how much he **delights in us** as his **beloved child**. This is the foundation of a truly secure **identity & self worth & self image** that cannot be shaken or **corrupted**.

We'll we've just been through **Easter**, and over these past few weeks we have been looking at **the cost** to God of showing us how much he loves us; the cost to **Jesus on the cross** so that we might know **salvation** and be **set free from all the powers** that would other wise hold us captive.

We were created to be God's children - but we **wander away**, we forget who we are, we get ourselves lost. How powerful it was when Paul T narrated & acted out the story of the **Prodigal son** for us last year. Now, the son never stops being a son, but through his own foolish decisions, his rebellion, his fecklessness he wanders away from his fathers love & protection & provision & ends up in a very, very **bad & lonely place, a desperate place; the father never stops loving him** or looking for him. The father **never hates** the son, or is filled with **wrath** towards him - the fathers heart is filled with nothing but **love & longing** for this lost son. And at last the son comes to his senses & starts to make his way back to his father (which is what is meant by that word '**repentance**') & there is this incredible scene of **reconciliation & being reunited**.

Now here's the thing: like the prodigal son, we were **created for a high purpose, for a high calling**. But we too have wandered away from it, and **we can never fully be the people we were created to be**, until we come back into relationship with the God who **created us, & knows us** better than we know ourselves, & who **loves us** even more deeply than we love ourselves.

OK lets switch track to the other passage Liv read for us this morning: In **Galatians 3:23-29** we read that (I **paraphrase**)

until Jesus came we were kept-in-custody under the Law. This Law became our tutor to lead us to Christ, & faith in Christ. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor! For you all are sons of God through faith in Christ. All of us who have been baptized into Christ need to keep putting-on Christ as our identity. And now for those who are in Christ, there is no Jew nor Greek, there is no slave nor free, there is no male nor female. For we all are one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are spiritual descendants of Abraham— & heirs of all the promises made to him.

Now if we read a little bit further in this same passage we also read that *we are no longer slaves, that we have received adoption, in order to make us all sons, & that with the Spirit of God's son in our hearts we cry out "Abba, Father!" , and that we are heirs of all that God has for us!* (**Galatians 4:1-7**)

Again you see the **echoes of the prodigal son story in this**. The prodigal son, once he had come to his senses, decided he would return home to his father, but - because of the foolish decisions he had made, squandering his inheritance - he feels that he is **no longer worthy to be called a son**, so he will ask his father simply to take him on as a **servant or as a slave** on the family farm.

The son has come home **ashamed, filthy, broken, in rags, barefoot**. And the father runs out to greet him, throws his arms around him, & before the son can get his prepared speech finished, the father is calling out to the servants *"Quickly! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Kill the fattened calf and let's feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is now found."*

In having the **best robe** placed on him, the Father was telling the Prodigal as well as all those watching, that his position as son was being **fully restored** & that he has fully come into **the father's approval, love and protection**. He was being fully **reinstated as an heir** of all that the father owned & had.

Similarly with the father placing a **ring** on his son: in the ancient Middle-East, placing a ring on someone was a sign of great **affection and a symbol of authority & inheritance**. Back in **Genesis 41:42** Pharaoh removed his signet ring and put it on Joseph's hand when installing him into office in Egypt, and places a fine **robe** across his shoulders.

All that we see **happening to the prodigal son, applies to us as well**: when we come into relationship with God, we come into that place of **total acceptance and love and intimacy** where-by our hearts **cry out 'abba, father'** - which as you probably know, abba is the Aramaic word for **papa** that Jesus himself used - a term of tremendous **intimacy**. Now as I was preparing this message, I glanced around & noticed on Richard's book shelf a book entitled "*Is it OK to call God mother?*" And if you have ever read William Young's wonderful book "*The Shack*", you might also have asked that question. And it's **not a flippant question**: I have met & you will meet people who have been so **abused & damaged** by their natural father's, that trying to think of God as father is really difficult & traumatising problem for them. For someone in this position, thinking of God as a **mother-figure is a safer**, more loving, & more intimate image. And that's ok.

There is much more to say about all of this, & we will in two weeks time, when I do part-two of this message. But let me finish with this. **Jesus is our forerunner & our role model**. Just as he began his public life **secure in the knowledge** that he was **God's beloved, someone that God delighted in, & had called by name** - so too do you & I. **When trials & temptations & tragedies arrive**, as they must; when we have those moments when **we lie awake in the middle of the night** & are tempted to fear or despair - **lean into God, & lean into your identity as God's precious, beloved son or daughter**.

Let us be conscious & deliberate about building our identity, our self-image, our security in life on nothing else but what Jesus has done, and on the unconditional love of God for each of us as his child made in his image. Those same words he spoke to Jesus - 'You are my beloved in whom I delight' - he wants to speak to you & I too.