**12th January 2020**

**Matthew 3. 13-17**

The artist formerly known as Prince, Prince Harry that is, is now coming to America. His wife Meghan has already left. It has been the news story of the week – the royals have always been a distraction from the realities of life – like a third world war, airplanes being downed by foreign countries.

It has been long known that Harry doesn’t like being a Royal and all the intrusion and media attention that involves. He is obviously trying to change his identity.

I walked past Dursley Library the other day and there was a poster in the window of a superhero woman – you know dressed in latex, knickers on the outside, mask over her face. It said ‘We Librarians are super heroes…. We know the answers to questions you don’t even know to ask!’ I didn’t go in and put that claim to the test. But I thought that’s an interesting attempt at an image makeover. I’d never thought of Librarians as superheroes before. People stuck in books have always had a bit of a geeky image. The poster claimed that ‘knowledge is power’!

How we think of ourselves is very powerful for our sense of self-worth, our esteem and our mental wellbeing.

There is a debate and usually it is across generations, about how much affirmation you should give a child. Some say that if you give too much then you are in danger of making them into pampered self obsessive brats. Too little and they may have problems relating to others - giving and receiving love and growing in emotional maturity. Some argue that you can never give enough affirmation for we are all wounded and in need of being loved deep in our inner being.

Over the last couple of weeks I have come across a number of articles claiming that at school children are not prepared for the real world of work because they are always being affirmed no matter whether they come first or last in the school race, or whether their homework is shoddy or well researched and presented.

One commentator was arguing that more Saturday jobs is what teenagers need to prepare them for the real world and how opportunities have shrunk to provide them. Libby Purves[[1]](#endnote-1) writes that *in good modern education the emphasis for the first time in history is entirely on you. Your development, your ‘potential’, your scores, your character, it’s all about you! Even work experience in year 10 is for your benefit not the employers as the aspirational send their young to follow irritated solicitors around all day, while the more artful parents drive home the need for qualifications by suggesting a week’s drudgery somewhere cold and mucky.*

*But step into your first earning job and the emphasis changes. Mr Miggins at the newsagent really does not care a jot about your personal development, he just needs the magazine sections sorting at dawn. Sam’s café is not interested in what washing up will do for you, but in keeping the clean plates coming. Your older workmates may at first think you’re a clumsy waste of space. There may be banter. You better suck it up if you want that pay packet. You may feel indignation, but this is adulthood, this is business, this is real’*

We often identify ourselves with what we do and our work. When brought up to believe we can be anything we want to, to live the dream in some Disney sense – reality can be crushing when we don’t get the breaks and chances, we think we deserve.

Friends and family members may not always turn out to be who we thought they were which can also lead us to a period of identity crisis.

Janine Hill wrote in the URC Daily devotions this week [[2]](#endnote-2)*I’m reminded of some words attributed to Archbishop Justin Welby, when in 2016 he made the shock discovery that the man who he believed to be his father was not in fact his biological father. He said, “I know that I find who I am in Jesus Christ, not in genetics, and my identity in him never changes”.

In contemporary life, there are umpteen voices that will seek to tell us who we are – advertisers, public policy decision makers, political propagandists dare I say it (as I write we are in the midst of the general election campaign). We also see the impact of social media on shaping our young peoples’ identities.

Sometimes, we too face destabilising crises of identity. But I take comfort in Justin Welby’s words which seem to echo Paul’s 2,000-year-old sentiments, “I know that I find who I am in Jesus Christ… and my identity in him never changes.''*

The story of the baptism of Jesus has Jesus affirming and being affirmed.

This story has paused many questions in Christian study. Why was an act of repentance, which was what John’s Baptism was all about, needed by someone who was believed to have no sin to confess? The key may lie in the words ‘for us’ in verse 15. John has asked why Jesus needs to be baptised and Jesus replies ‘“Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness’ (verse 15)

In his baptism Jesus was acting as a servant, faithfully identifying himself with and representing the people God had called. The one who would end his life on a cross between two thieves was willing to begin his ministry in a river among sinners. Jesus himself didn’t need to be baptised but he belonged to a people who did. By submitting to John’s baptism in an act of great humility, Jesus took his place among a renewed Israel, in obedience to God’s plan. He would take up the vocation declared in Isaiah, living, proclaiming and fulfilling the liberating righteousness of God’s kingdom. God stands with us in the baptism of Jesus.

Of course, people have being doing what they think is the right thing to do for ages and being righteous has been a feature of human behaviour down the centuries.

People want to be seen to be doing the right thing and getting affirmed by wider society. In our day, for example, raising funds for charity is seen as doing the right thing and our newspapers are full of people wanting to be seen doing the ‘right thing’.

But there are other virtue signallers as they are described in modern society – things you associate with because they give you worth, as much as the cause you associate with is worthy.

At the Golden Globe awards, Ricky Gervais warned the winners in their speeches to [avoid claiming to be righteous](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-50983253) by making political speeches. He said ‘You’re in no position to lecture the public about anything, you know nothing about the real world. Most of you spent less time in school than Greta Thunberg.

For those watching the Christine Keeler drama TV (*The Trial of Christine Keeler*, BBC1 One) recalls a time when politicians who made a mistake resigned. John Profumo gave up high office and devoted himself to a life of good works as his penance. There are politicians today who appear to have no shame about their wrongdoing.

The season for making new year resolutions is full of claims about and desires for ‘righteousness’. Living in a right way – whoever defines what a right way is.

Going to church arguably is not seen as doing the right thing in society as much as it was because of the popular view that going to church is irrational, bigoted and discriminatory - and many people dismiss us with such lazy accusations.

Our secular society has problems in believing in God and appeasing a god. A report this week suggested that atheists are more likely to have a cat that church goers. They require daily offerings, always seem to be judging you and rarely reciprocate acts of devotion. Samuel Perry from the University of Oklahoma says, ‘We own pets because we love their company and the special interaction they provide for us. In some ways pets are actually substitutes for human interaction – but people who are heavily connected to a church already have plenty of social interaction and have the ongoing presence of God with them.’

There you go – we don’t need cats – we’ve got God to love us.

It appears that, by consenting to be washed clean by the Baptist, Jesus is simply agreeing to a conventional cleansing ritual, similar to that followed by all pious Jews. Here, it reveals God’s greater righteousness – that the man who is baptized is the Son in whom God is pleased (Matthew 3.17). He is righteousness personified. He is the one who will cleanse lepers and heal the sick at a time when convention said the righteous people will avoid them for fear of pollution. Far from being tainted by touching the ‘unclean’, Jesus will cleanse them.

Jesus was baptised into the movement that desperately sought to do the right thing of what God requires – but you need to be ever so careful when you are so sure you know what God requires of you.

Roy Lloyd, a Lutheran minister, once interviewed Mother Teresa. He said that one of his questions and one of her answers stands out in his mind as "a bright sun burning in my mind." He asked her, "What's the biggest problem in the world today?" And she answered, without hesitation, "The biggest problem in the world today is that we draw the circle of our family too small. We need to draw it larger every day."

With all that is evil and wrong in this world today it would be easy to answer that question with a hundred different events. That's what makes Mother Teresa's response so jilting. She is saying that the problem is not so much with the world, as it is with us. We need to see more people as our neighbor than we are currently doing.

I see Jesus doing this in his baptism. In his baptism he included us in his righteousness. He identified with humanity, with our need to be cleansed, and our need to be made pure. If you have been baptized you have been drawn, by Jesus' baptism, into the circle of God's family.

The story is told of a pastor's words to a baby shortly after she had baptized him. No doubt, the minister was speaking as much to the congregation as to the infant. "Little brother, by this act of baptism, we welcome you to a journey that will take your whole life. This isn't the end. It's the beginning of God's experiment with your life. What God will make of you; we know not. Where God will take you, surprise you, we cannot say. This we do know and this we say -- God is with you."

And God will be with us as we live out our baptism.

Jesus affirmed us by entering into our baptism. But in his baptism, he too was affirmed by his heavenly father with those wonderfully affirming words: ‘This is my beloved Son, in whom I take delight’.

We all need to be affirmed. We all need to be loved. The deepest and most secure experience of being loved is to know you are valued and loved by God. That is the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Like a dove descending to alight on us – like a hand resting on our shoulder – God delights in us.

The trouble is we think, like most of our experience in life, we need to win approval. We need to earn the affirmation by doing something worthy of praise, something good.

Martin Copenhaver (Whispered in Your Ear) writes how he was praised for learning to walk as a baby. But then realised he had to do more to get the same praise. After a time, I could walk with more assurance but, for some reason, I didn't receive so much praise. In fact, I can't remember the last time that anyone praised me for walking across a room. So, I had to do other things. Simply walking just wasn't good enough anymore. I had to strive to make a splash in other ways, just to get back to that feeling, that feeling of being noticed, of being picked up with a shout of delight, of being valued.

For the most part, we don't have much experience with unconditional love, so we try to create conditions in which we will feel worthy of love. We do not entirely trust love without reasons, so we strive to create reasons for the love received.

And in all that striving, it's easy to lose sight of the fact that my parents did not praise me because of my accomplishments. Rather, they praised my accomplishments because they loved me, and would have loved me if there were no accomplishments to praise.

He concludes:
If parents sometimes have something like unconditional love, a love without reasons, for their children, how much more so does God love God's children? All of our striving to try to win something that is ours already. God values you, not because you have distinguished yourself in some way, but because you are God's beloved.

May you strive for the righteousness of God but know deep down you are loved unconditionally by God.

1. Libby Purves, The Times, Monday 6th Jan 2020 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Jonnie Hill, Ordinand at Northern College and member of Chorlton Central Church in Manchester URC Daily Devotions 9th Jan 2020* [↑](#endnote-ref-2)