

A friend of mine posted an article on Facebook headed '**WHY MANY WELCOMING CHURCHES ARE DYING**'

SLIDE 1 'It's no secret that our culture is becoming increasingly 'secular.' What's frustrating is that a lot of churches still operate with the assumption that everyone knows about church. When we meet people who don't know which Christmas Carols are Christian and which are secular; when they don't the Lord's Prayer, instead of trying to teach them, we blame the culture.

'Where I believe my church and others fall short is meeting people where they are and joining in on the conversations they are already having. We still seem to want people to meet us where we are.'

'Not only do we assume that a majority of our neighbours know about church, we also look at outreach through the lens of the question 'How do we get people into our pews' rather than actually being with them, where they are.'

Between 40 and 60 come don't normally attend church – the truth is some among us have already been in conversation with these good people. It's where we go with that and the quality relationships we build; the conversations we have and the praying that undergirds it – in a way that's true of all we do in Jesus' name.

THIS IS ENCOURAGING

II ACTI8 - 25 young people next year when they all come – a wonderful problem to have - one solution might be to have a girls and a boys group. But, who will take it? Pray to the Lord of the harvest. **THIS IS ENCOURAGING AND CHALLENGING**

I may have mentioned this before. In August 1968, about 15 months after Dad died, we travelled round the North Island meeting up with several of Mum's friends from earlier in her life. In Hamilton we stayed with an old nursing friend. The friend's mother lived with the family – a woman who, from my 19 year old perspective, could easily have lived in the time of Queen Elizabeth the first let alone the second - I see things differently today.

For some reason I was left to talk with her and she asked me who I was. When I told her, it tripped a memory and she described growing up in a community in what I now realise was the 19th century. In minute detail she talked about the path she took to school and all that. At the end of her story she asked again, 'who are you?' We repeated this process about 5 times (a new experience for me) until after she'd asked the 'who are you' question for the sixth time, she said in a wistful voice, well who am I?

ISAIAH 43:1-7

But now, this is what the Lord says –

he who created you, Jacob,

he who formed you, Israel:

'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have summoned you by name; you are mine.

2 When you pass through the waters,

I will be with you;

and when you pass through the rivers,

they will not sweep over you.

When you walk through the fire,

you will not be burned;

the flames will not set you ablaze.

**3 For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour;**

LUKE 3:21-2

When all the people were being baptised, Jesus was baptised too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’

Prayer

Gracious God, by your countless gifts, we’ve been sustained through life. We live in ‘the red,’ so to speak, indebted to you for all your gifts.

We thank you for those who’ve lived the Christian faith before us so that we saw, we heard, we believed and we followed:

- ***For pastors who preached the word, who comforted us and guided us***
- ***For teachers who imparted the story of your grace, who told us about Jesus, and who never gave up in the face of our misunderstanding or bad behaviour***
- ***For those quiet saints of the church who lived before us in such a way that we wanted to follow you, longed to fashion lives similar to theirs. We know that we wouldn’t be here today if not for their gifts.***

Loving Lord, each time we pause to take stock of our life's journey, every time we pause to remember who we are, we also remember whose we are.

We are your beloved children, cherished, gifted and loved. For all the good that has come to us, for all that’s been, and is, and is yet to be, by your grace, we thank you. Amen.

Who am I? Over 47 years later I remember her question. Who are you? From today’s texts there are some directions:

**‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have summoned you by name; you are mine.**

And for Jesus at his baptism – Jesus who are you?

‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’

It’s sometimes difficult amid the conflicting claims and confusion of our day, to remember who we are. For young people, ‘who am I?’ is a particularly pressing question. The search for the self, the quest for one’s identity consumes much of our teenage years. There are myriad causes, groups, philosophies, and cults that are willing and ready to name them.

Who am I?

I hear some say ‘You’re mostly a sexual being,’ the movies, the soaps and songs tell you; lusting and being lusted after. Your body is your most important possession; nurture it, love it, display it, caress it, show it off. In some ways this might be the problem the Auckland Grammar ex-students have – as if their sexual identity is all they are.

II I hear others say 'You're mostly a brain - a rational, thinking, reasoning being; absorbing facts and figures, going to school, being educated - endless school, seemingly endless education; living only to learn, not learning to live. It's not who you are but what you know' the schools tell our children through twelve plus years of education; and most important has it been assessed?

III I hear the political right wing say 'You're mostly a maker and spender of money, a capitalist, a worker, a producer, an obtainer; preparing for your first mortgage with a two-car garage and forty years of mortgage payments.' Well - that's what the advertisers and bankers say.

IV 'You're a self-centered, autonomous being,' the modern, scientific, secular world tells us. 'Nobody will look out for you but you. You're the most important project in your life; nurture, care for, and love your adorable 'you.' Look out for number one, satisfy, soothe, make happy, thrill, care for the lonely little 'you.'"

The truth is that the identity question of 'Who am I?' is no longer over and done with by age twenty-one. There are those in their thirties and fifties who still ask the question, still experiment, mixing in this and that, hoping the whole thing will jell before it's too late. I'm with Robert Fulghum on this; in his late 50s he was still trying to work out what he wanted to be, who he would be when he grew up.

To the pressing question 'Who am I?' today's texts give two answers:

The God of Isaiah says,
'you are mine.'

**2 When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you.'**

A reference to the exodus experience no doubt but also a foreshadowing of Christian Baptism

The God and Father said of Jesus, '**you are my son**' and of you, 'you are my son, my daughter.'

And Jesus' church responds to the 'Who am I?' question by saying, 'You are baptized.'

This week in the Christian calendar two great events in Jesus' human experience are remembered. Wednesday was Epiphany Day – the day the wise men came. And for the first time, (don't know how I've missed it), I noted the wise men came to see Jesus at a house (so the Nativity film scene that has the wise men arriving with the shepherds doesn't quite cut it). We should have sung today, 'We three Kings of Orient are.'

And when many years later, Jesus was baptized in the Jordan by John, John prophesied that he would baptise 'with the Holy Spirit and with fire.' And when Jesus was baptised, the Spirit descended; there was a reassuring, comforting, identifying voice from heaven. '**You are my son**' - this is God's Son, the one with whom God is well pleased.

In our baptism, like Jesus, we are also identified as God's much loved children. Like Jesus, we also receive the gift of the Spirit to reassure us, empower each of us – so we pray.

Who am I?

The Christian message is not that we should try hard to 'act like somebody.' The Christian message is simply, 'We are somebody.'

Who am I?

Baptism says that we are named as Jesus' followers and that we are somebodies, and that we belong to God. God keeps what he purchases, and on the cross an awesome price was paid. In times of great doubt, when struggling through his dark nights of the soul, Martin Luther would sometimes touch his forehead and say to himself, 'Martin, be calm, you are baptized.' In times of our doubt, inner turmoil, hopelessness and confusion we, too, would do well to touch our foreheads and remember our baptism.

To conclude:

'A few summers ago, a young man in our church returned home from his first year at university. He appeared at my office to tell me I wouldn't be seeing him at church while he was home. When I asked why, he told me, 'Well, you see I've been doing a lot of thinking about religion while I've been away, and I've come to the conclusion that there isn't much to it. I've found out that I don't need the church to get by,' he said.

I responded by saying I found all that interesting.

'Aren't you worried? I thought you'd go through the roof when I told you,' he said.

I'd known this boy for about five years; I'd baptized him a couple of years previously, and had watched him grow during his high school years. He came from a difficult family situation. The church had taken an interest in him and had a hand in making it possible for him to go to university.

'No, I'm interested, but not overly concerned. I'll be watching to see if you can pull it off,' I told him.

'What do you mean 'pull it off'? I don't understand. I'm nineteen. I can decide to do anything I want to do, can't I?'

'When I was nineteen I thought I could too. I'm saying that I'm not so sure you'll be able to get away with this,' I said to the increasingly confused young man.

'Why not?'

'Well, for one thing, you're baptized.'

'So, what does that have to do with anything?'

'Well, you try forsaking it, rejecting it, forgetting about it, and maybe you'll find out,' I suggested.

'I can't figure out what being baptized has to do with me,' he said.

'For one thing, there are people here who care about you. They made promises to God when you were baptized. You try not showing up around here this summer, and they'll be nosing around, asking what you're doing with your life, what kind of grades you got, what you're up to. Then there's God. No telling what God might try with you. From what I've seen of God, once he's claimed you, you don't get off the hook so easily. God is relentless in claiming what's his. And, in baptism, God says you belong to him.'

The boy shook his head in wonder at this strange, perverse brand of reasoning and more or less stumbled out the door of my study. In a week or so, he was back at his usual place on the second pew. The Spirit was present; the baptizers had done their work. God's possessiveness had remained firm.'

How easy it is to forget who we are and whose we are. This Christian community is here to remind us, to remind one another, that we've been bought with a price, that someone greater than us has named us and claimed us and seeks us and loves us with an everlasting love.

Remember your baptism; thank God; affirm again in the silence what you said to him that day. And if any of you feel called to be baptized – say the word afterwards.