

**Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> July 2019**  
**Trinity 4 (C)**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**OT: Deuteronomy 30.9-14**

**NT: Colossians 1.1-14**

**G: Luke 10.25-37**

Liverpool Parish Church has gained something of a reputation for itself in music and the visual arts. I was showing one of my predecessors around the Church Gardens – or the ‘Sculpture Park’ as I like to call it – last week and we reflected on the on-going need to animate not just our site, but also the minds of those who visit us. By providing visual stimulation that we lift people’s eyes and minds from the course they have set themselves, or perhaps Baedeker has done for them, and open their consciousness to new ideas and a sense of the divine. Art is a place of encounter. And yet the best way to look at art is not to look at it, but behind it. What haven’t I seen when I first look at it?

Some time ago a member of the congregation recommended a tremendous book on art history to me – I’ll give the details when we publish this sermon on the website – and it particularly focuses on interpreting art through the details we hardly see. What is the snail doing in the foreground of Francesco del Cossa’s fifteenth century painting on the Annunciation? How does the servant girl reaching into a chest behind the main subject of Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* help us to interpret the scene? And so it is also with the characters in today’s Gospel reading. From Jacopo Bassano in the sixteenth century to Vincent Van Gogh in the nineteenth century, paintings of the Good Samaritan story show in the foreground one man putting another on a donkey, but perhaps the real story is when we look in the background, and see two figures walking away.

We need to look behind the Good Samaritan, because we make him the centre of the story,

but let's make the other characters the centre. They are the only ones who give themselves an identity, one a priest, and the other a Levite. Both of them, of course, men of religious prominence. And we know the story well, even if we had not just heard it read, because it is those who have assumed a religious identity who seem not to measure up to the expectation of that identity. Being true to our identity is not about wearing a badge, but about inhabiting that identity to the core. Our reading this morning from St Paul's Letter to the Colossians gives us an alternative example, when he speaks of Epaphras. Paul writes, "He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit." This is the religious identity which is respected and held in regard, trusted by Paul both in his ministry and in his reports back to Paul. Identity is important, but an assumed identity is not a real identity.

The contrast in our Gospel reading is, of course, the Samaritan himself. It is difficult to say that being a Samaritan is really an identity in itself. It locates where he is from, but no more could I say that the fact that I am British defines my identity, because of course it does not. The Samaritan was not Jewish, but again this is a matter of distinguishing him by what he is not. In the story, both the Samaritan and the injured man are left without identity, without any further description about who they are and their place in society, and yet they are placed at the front of the picture.

Identity is important, but we are also measured by it. The Samaritan doesn't claim an identity, but we give him one through his acts. In the Sacristy, just before this service, our friend Grace, who worships alongside each of us Sunday by Sunday, officially changed her name by deed poll. On the face of it, her name is about identity, and we all know that in the last few months Grace has allowed the rest of the world to see the identity with which she

associates, an identity which she came to realise some time ago. When she spoke to me about changing her name by deed poll, she said that she wished to combine it with the renewal of baptismal vows. Needless to say, for situations such as this, the Church of England has produced guidance notes, and it also recommends renewal of baptismal vows. If we were to do this, I felt that it should be on a Sunday morning, because baptism only has its fullest meaning within the community of the baptised.

I'm not sure that a name is an identity: in the history of semiotics, Saussure would probably not even call it a 'signifier', though it is undoubtedly an identifier. Not an identity, though. Identity is about existence and Being, and whilst gender is a constituent part of our Being, the Christian must prioritize not gender or sexuality as the signifiers of our Being, but rather our existence in the Image of God, and it is that identity which we affirm at baptism. As Grace changes her name, it is entirely appropriate that her identity, as a member of the community of the baptized, and a creature made in the image of God, is affirmed. This is our identity as well.

And so we return to the story of the Good Samaritan, and the men in the back of the picture. Their inability to live the identity they assumed is illustrated in the way they walked past without helping the wounded man. If our identity is amongst the baptised, how do we live that identity? In this story, Jesus teaches us about being a neighbour, but, more importantly, about how we live in his image. This is our identity and it comes with both challenge and reassurance. Perhaps most importantly, it doesn't really come with decision, because identity is about the core of our Being, and this is what Grace is affirming today, but it is also what the Good Samaritan demonstrated in the story: he did not decide to help the injured man, but it is what he was always going to do because of his identity. That is not to

say that we do not have to make decisions about the right way to live out our identity, but we know how to live our lives, because we know who we are. Neither names nor gender define our identity, but our baptism does, and as we watch Grace re-affirm the promises of baptism, let us all remember the things we choose to be, and the things we really are. Let us put our identity at the front of the picture, because it is by our identity that we are really known.

Further Reading:

- Daniel Arasse, *Take a Closer Look*, Princeton University Press (2013)
- Church of England Pastoral Guidance for use in conjunction with the Affirmation of Baptismal Faith in the context of gender transition (2018):

<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2018-12/Pastoral%20Guidance-Affirmation-Baptismal-Faith.pdf>

Fr Crispin Pailing