

Questions of Identity

In the name of him who has covered each of us with a robe of righteousness, dear friends in Christ: Applying for a passport, boarding a plane, purchasing alcohol, and until recently, voting – these are all examples of times at which you are required to produce some form of identification, some kind of proof that you are who you say you are. This is necessary because we want to prevent criminals from obtaining passports, terrorists from boarding planes, minors from purchasing alcohol, and dead people and illegal aliens from voting. Showing proof of ID at such times is a precautionary measure; but as you know, it's not foolproof. Criminals can and sometimes do obtain passports, terrorists do on occasion board planes, some minors are able to purchase alcohol, and illegal aliens and dead people still vote. My dear parents, God rest their souls, both switched party affiliation shortly after their deaths and have been voting for the other side of the aisle ever since. (I'm joking ... at least I think I am.) But how is this possible? Quite simply, it's because some people aren't who they say they are. They put themselves forward as someone they are not.

But think about it: suppose you are required to give proof of ID. Most of the time that means showing your driver's license, right? It displays your name, address, date of birth, sex, height, eye color, photograph, and signature. That's it. It describes certain things about you, some of which can change. You can change your name and address. You can't change your date of birth, but lots of folks do lie about their age and try to appear younger than they are. You could wear colored contact lenses. You'd have more trouble changing your height. And despite what our society is increasing being told to believe, you cannot change your sex. But even assuming all the information on your license is accurate, it only describes certain personal attributes; it really doesn't say *who* you are.

This leads me to ask, *how do you identify yourself?* Who really *are* you? Take your name. When all is said and done it's just a label – one chosen for you because your parents liked the sound of it or decided to honor a relative of the same name. But your name is not *who* you are. And when you are being introduced to someone for the first time, whoever is doing the introduction will give more than your name. They'll give some context. They'll say who you are in relation to other people. This is Bob my brother, Terry my doctor, Karol my wife, Joe my plumber. We are identified mostly by *how* we are related to others and by *what* we do. Indeed, this is why so many names come from occupations like Baker, Taylor, Wagoner, and Smith.

We know the writer of this morning's Gospel as St. John the Apostle and Evangelist. He was the son of Zebedee, the brother of James, and a disciple of Jesus. That's how we identify him. In the text we read, he is telling about St. John the Baptizer, the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, and the forerunner and herald of Jesus. That's how we identify him. *We* do; but the Jewish leaders who sent priests and Levites to interrogate him didn't. They wanted to know who he was – or at least, who he was claiming to be. They wanted him to identify himself.

Why? It's because John was making a big stir. As we heard in last week's Gospel, the whole population of Jerusalem and Judea was streaming out into the desert to hear him, presumable in stages. He had become a major celebrity. And people were talking about just who he might be. No doubt his back story played a part in this. People would have known about how his father, Zechariah the priest, had encountered an angel in the temple; how he was told that he and Elizabeth would become parents in their old age of a special son, a prophet of God; and how Zechariah was temporarily struck mute for his unbelief. There was something auspicious about this child. People wondered what John might become and make of himself. Now, some thirty years later, they had a good idea. And some were openly speculating that he might be the Christ, the long promised Savior of God's people; or, if not the Christ, one of the other persons whom popular opinion mistakenly imagined would precede the Christ.

The Jewish religious leaders wanted to know who John was claiming to be – and for two reasons. First, because there had been others who turned up claiming to be the Christ. They were not. They were instead overly zealous Jewish nationalists who thought they could stir up the people and lead a war of rebellion against the occupying Romans. These rebellions with their leaders claiming to be the Christ were quite literally “short-lived”, crushed by the Romans without mercy. But they also caused increased security measures by the Romans on the whole country: more lock downs, curfews, security check points, what have you. If John was just another one of these characters, the authorities wanted him shut down for the good of the nation to avoid a lot of needless suffering and hassle. The other reason the leaders wanted John investigated was that they were insanely jealous of his popularity with the masses. We are the ones running this show in a religious sense, they thought. John is stealing our thunder. And we don’t particularly care for his message either. He’s calling *everyone* to repent; not just the obvious sinners, but even good and godly folks like us. That ain’t right.

So they send a delegation to put it to John: Are you the Christ? John emphatically denied it. No, I am not the Christ. Well then, are you Elijah? The prophet Malachi had foretold that “an Elijah” would appear on the scene before the Christ showed up. Recall that the original Elijah in his day had called wayward and idolatrous Israel to repent and turn back to the worship of the one true God. The Lord promised another like him – which John was. But people misunderstood the prophecy. They thought the original Elijah would come back. He didn’t die, remember. He was translated to heaven in a whirlwind. They thought *that* Elijah would return. John didn’t want to feed that false notion, so he denied being Elijah.

They ask, Are you the prophet then? Moses had foretold that another prophet like him would one day appear. It was his way of saying the Christ. But again people misunderstood. In the popular imagination the prophet foretold by Moses was a different person than the Christ. So again, John denied being *that* prophet.

Well then who are you? What do you say about yourself? You can almost feel their frustration. John replies, Me? I’m no one. Just a voice. A voice crying in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord. And here John speaks for all true ministers of God’s Word. The ministry is never about the man, who *he* is; it’s about his message. It’s about the Word of God he proclaims. It’s about the truth he speaks. And John’s message comes through loud and clear: You are a sinner and you need to repent. John’s ministry wasn’t about who *he* was; it was about *who you are*. John identifies each of us by who we are in relation to God and by what we do. We are rebels against God and everything we do is evil, an offense to him. We are sinners in need of salvation. John the Baptist thumps his finger on your chest and says, That’s who you are. And his voice speaking today still so accuses.

But today we hear also from a different John: St. John the Apostle and Evangelist – though that’s not how he identifies himself in his Gospel. No, whenever he refers to himself he says “the disciple whom Jesus loved”. So doing, John wasn’t saying that Jesus was especially fond of him, that he favored him over the other disciples. No, John found his true identity in Christ’s love – Christ’s love that caused him to give himself for sinners. It was his way of saying, Me? I’m nobody; no, I’m worse than nobody. I’m a miserable sinner. But Jesus loves me. I am all about who he is and what he’s done for me. *That’s* my true identity.

The name John means “The Lord is gracious”. And so he is. And today both Johns speak to you personally identifying who you are: a sinner whom Jesus loved and for whom he gave himself. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!