

Sermon 16th September 2012 by Revd. Ron Ingamells on his 80th Birthday in St. Mary's the Parish Church of Buckden.

It is always a privilege, and a responsibility, to preach and today on my 80th birthday it is a special privilege to preach here to this responsive and critical congregation!

Thank you Vicar Ally for allowing me to do so.

I had a very great day on Tuesday. I was invited to lead the service and dedicate a new Memorial, at the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire, in memory of the YMCA members who served in areas of conflict and those who lost their lives doing so.

Two other things happened on that day. General the Lord Dannatt unveiled the monument but without a highly intelligent and efficient person to cut the strings which held the veil together until the cord was pulled it would not have worked! I did it beautifully!! He may have still been there pulling away. Also, I used Sat. Nav. for the first time and I was so reassured when I arrived home and was told 'You have reached your destination'! It is just possible for those of my age to get confused!

A little confusion came into my mind as recently when I have thought '**Who am I?**' What is my real identity?

I am not alone in asking this. You know by now that I don't know very much about anything BUT I do know a little about two famous people, with almost completely different experiences. John Clare, surely one of England's greatest poets and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian.

Bonhoeffer who was born into a cultured family in Berlin. He was a lecturer, a theologian, a poet, a pastor - loved and remembered wherever he ministered (Germany, London, America) and a great opponent of Hitler. For a peaceful person to agree to take part in the assassination of Hitler was an immense decision. For it he was executed in April 1945 within the sound of the advancing allied forces. When in prison he wrote..

Who am I? They often tell me I
step out from my cell,
composed, contented and sure
like a lord from his manor

Who am I? they also tell me
I bear the days of hardship,
unconcerned, amused and proud
like one who usually wins.

Am I really what others tell me?
Or am I only what I myself know of me?
Troubled, homesick, ill, like a bird in a cage,
gasping for breath.....

Then later

Who am I? Lonely questions mock me.
Who I really am, you know me, I am thine, O
God! (1)

Then, surely one of England's greatest poets, John Clare - after those many years in Northampton Asylum... in one of his most moving poems Clare asked this very question :-

I am – yet, what I am, none cares or knows,
My friends forsake me like a memory lost;
I am the self consumer of my woes

and later in this poem...

I long for scenes where man has never trod,
A place where woman never smiled or wept;
There to abide with my creator God,
And sleep as I in childhood sweetly slept;
untroubling and untroubled where I lie,
The grass below – above the vaulted sky. (2)

So, '**who am I?**' - A preacher – yes, sort of/a trainer of youth workers – yes, I was/an organiser of concerts and poetry festivals - yes/ a fund raiser – yes/ a lover of many sports –yes but...

Who am I?

Since 4 years old I knew intuitively (not by studying creeds and doctrine!), I knew one thing above all else, I was '**A child of God**' – **which I realise makes me no different to anyone here – we are all children of our heavenly Mother and Father God.** This also meant that I have been like a child... wayward, sometimes good, difficult, loving at times, awkward, sometimes happy, sometimes sad.....

But deep down knowing that there is a God of love and one who holds my hand when in deepest need; one who forgives when things have been wrong; one whose promise 'I am with you always' rings through in genuine love.

One who is a rock '**and to that rock I'm clinging**' as we shall sing in a few minutes.

But, an even deeper and more potent question is that asked by Jesus in the clear air and running water of Caesarea Philippi .. **'Who do you say I am?** This echoes through the centuries – challenging and demanding of each generation, & of us, an answer...

Peter's answer was **'You are the Christ.. The Saviour.. The messiah'**...

My answer is 'Yes, Peter is right..' but let me try and unpack this ... I want to say also... 'you are the liberator of the oppressed, you are the one who walks with the poor of the world, you are the challenger to governments, institutions and churches to be **inclusive**, you are the one who broke down the barriers of age, of race, of sex and tribe.. you are the one who heals and reconciles individuals and communities'.

I illustrate this with a true story of the power and love of Jesus in reconciliation. In the 1970's I met a German pastor - Richard Nevermann. He told me how his mind had been poisoned by Hitler – a member of the Hitler Youth – fought on the Russian front and there was left for dead BUT two Russian peasants found him and, risking their own lives, took him in and nursed him so that he could make his way home. That experience of love changed his life. He became involved Reconciliation work linked with Coventry Cathedral. But, the story goes on – I invited him to preach at St. Peter Mancroft in Norwich. He preached his first sermon in English and the end of the service one of the congregation went to him, hugged him and said 'For thirty years I have hated the Germans for all they did to my family and others,

today that hate has gone forever.' It was one of my most emotional moments!

Finally, and you will realise why I say finally...inevitably one look towards the end... not gloomily or miserably but I recognise that 'time like an ever rolling stream bears all its sons away'. When I think of the kind of death I hope for I want to quote from a sermon by the Sub-Dean of Durham at the funeral of Ruth Etchells. Although I did not know her I knew of her reputation as a literary scholar, a leader in the church and Durham University and a writer. He said..

'I will come to you.... and take you to myself so that where I am, there you may be also'. As she slipped into *extremis*, sometimes I wasn't sure if she could hear me, and yet to my 'amen', I heard a whisper, 'Amen, amen, amen'. Her spirit was singing. And on that late Saturday evening before she died, once we had assured her that Andy Murray had got to the Olympics final and that we had three gold medals on that Super Saturday, she said to me, 'I'm ready' as, in the presence of *her family* she was anointed for the last time and we prayed our *Nunc Dimittis*.' (3)

I would like a death like that, but just a change in the question. My question will be 'did Norwich City win? If not - don't tell me!

Who am I? A child of God, for which I give thanks.

Who do you say **I am?** You are the rock and **'to that rock I'm clinging.'**

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- The Offertory Hymn was 'How can I keep from singing'

- (1) From the Poems of John Clare edited by J.W. Tibble
- (2) From the Prison Poems of Dietrich Bonhoeffer – translation by Edwin Robertson
- (3) Quoted by kind permission of the Sub-Dean of Durham Cathedral

Please note that this is not an exact copy of my sermon as I preach only from 'headings' and therefore found it hard to reproduce!

Ron Ingamells