
Who are You?

John 1: 6-8, 19-28

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on December 11, 2011, by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

I wonder what you feel like when you see a photograph of yourself. I know a number of people who claim they always look bad in photographs. Think about the logic of such a conviction for a moment. You see yourself in a photograph. You think, "That person doesn't look as beautiful, charming, witty, relaxed and cool as I like to think I look. Either the equipment is faulty, or the photographer is hopeless, or I have a gene that makes me drop all my fine qualities the moment someone points a camera lens at me – or, and this is the most likely, I have the kind of warm and effusive personality that's just impossible to capture in a single two-dimensional image."

We could simply say, "That's what the photograph shows, so I guess that's what I look like, and maybe I should deal with it." But no. We say, "I always look terrible in photographs." In other words, "I know who I am. No one else does. Least of all that cruel, distorting, cold-hearted camera."

"I know who I am." Do you? Fair enough, you know you're more wonderful, more exquisite in looks, intelligence, character, taste, talent and style than anyone could describe or capture. But do you really know who you are? One of the features of university culture, with its emphasis on youth, its social media networks, and its transitoriness, is that it gives us innumerable opportunities to present ourselves to one another at our best. Isn't that what a Facebook page is? A chance to say, "Hey y'all out there, I'm in the middle of a wild party right now but I love ya and here's a few photos of me that don't do me justice (of course) but at least remind you that I'm lotsa fun!"

We're constantly making it easy for people to understand how brilliant but unthreatening we are. One thing people have started putting on resumés is a little line under their full name that says "Goal." What follows is a succinct but generic summary of everything they have to bring to the world – something like, "High achiever who selflessly wants to use my outstanding gifts with inevitably less wise and gifted people, and to apply my mastery of all technology (including that not yet invented) to bring about lasting change in the world."

When we're immersed in such a culture of digitally-enhanced appearances and fleeting connections, it's very hard to answer the question, "Who are you?" Instead, we're constantly answering the question, "Who can I *persuade* people I am?" What we call successful people are those who've convinced a large number of the public that they're brilliant but unthreatening. And that's why successful people often find this question, "Who am I?", particularly hard to answer: because they've peddled their publicity so many times they've started to believe it themselves. Success is a drug that makes you think your identity and character are products you can market to unwary consumers. You think you're fooling them but in the end the one you're really fooling is yourself.

By contrast when you've had months or years out of work, when you've had the courage to admit the one thing in life you truly want and yet it's never happened for you, when you've experienced a terrible illness or injury that's left you in need of long-term care, or when you or your family have had to bear a private burden together that, if exposed, would bring down a cloud of public shame: if this is your story, then the likelihood is you do know who you are, even if who you are is a daily struggle with distress, disappointment or despair. That's one of the few things an experience of genuine deprivation can give you: a deeper understanding of who you truly are.

John's gospel begins with a great sweeping prologue locating Jesus at the heart of God's purposes and at the heart of the universe. And then we find ourselves abruptly face to face with a man giving testimony, a man also called John, a man who sets up stall some way from the epicenter of Israel, some way from Jerusalem, from the Temple, from the people who decided what was godly, indeed on the other side of the Jordan,

outside the traditional boundaries of the Promised Land. John doesn't have a website, he doesn't have a Facebook page, it's hard to know who he is and what he stands for. Think about the Occupy protesters – they really wind people up, some of them challenge hygiene norms, and they won't translate their protest into concrete demands, so no one knows who they really are. That's where they get their power. In all respects they're like John.

The high and mightys send their lackeys to say to John, "Who are you?" He has an answer for them. "I am not." It's a funny kind of answer. He repeats it several times. There's something almost aggressive about it. But that quickly makes sense when you realize that the people John's talking to are messengers from the very same crowd of leaders who'll put both John and Jesus to death two or three years after this conversation. This isn't an idle game of Twenty Questions, where only John knows the answer and everyone else has to guess and he takes delight in shaking his head and saying "Uh-uh." This is a cross-examination with John's head on the block. His life depends on his answer to this question.

Eventually John puts his interrogators out of their misery and gives them a straight answer. "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" These words are a quotation from the prophet Isaiah. They're a clear statement from John that he's well in line with the way God has worked over centuries and prepared Israel for this moment. But they also say a lot about John. They say what he is – a voice; where he is – in the wilderness; what he's doing – crying out; and what is really going on – the Lord is coming soon. John is asked the question, over and over again, "Who are you?" And his answer is, "I can't answer that question except in relation to Jesus." Think about those words for a moment. "I can't answer that question except in relation to Jesus." Is that your answer?

The recent French film *A Very Long Engagement* tells the story of Mathilde, a young woman from Brittany, crippled by polio. She falls in love with a young man named Manech. Manech goes off to fight in the trenches of the First World War, but before he does so, the couple seal their love and promise their hearts to one another. Manech takes a knife and carves into the trunk of a large tree the capital letters MMM, which stand for Manech loves Mathilde – the middle M representing the French verb for love, spelt "aime" but pronounced "M." Manech repeatedly carves these three capital letters on trees and paints them on walls wherever he goes – it becomes his signature tune, his logo, the one thing he knows about himself and wants to tell the whole world.

But things don't go well in the trenches for Manech. He's accused of injuring himself in order to avoid combat, is court-martialed, and as punishment, in the middle of the Battle of the Somme, is thrust up and out of a trench and pushed into No Man's Land. That's the last anyone hears of him.

His beloved Mathilde refuses to believe this is the end of the story. After the war she hires a private investigator and searches high and low for news of him. She finds a letter from another soldier in the trench. The letter describes Manech's final walk in No Man's Land and how he was last seen carving into a tree the letters MMM. She realizes that at the brink of death the one thing he knew about himself was his union with her. But she won't stop there. She continues her intrepid investigation, en route finding that Manech had received a pardon from the President of France, but that the pardon had been suppressed by the commanding officer. Eventually Mathilde's all-consuming search bears fruit, and she discovers to her unbridled joy that Manech survived the ordeal, is still alive, and is being cared for in a rehabilitation community. In the final scene of the film, Mathilde is reunited with her beloved fiancé Manech. But Manech is a changed man. He doesn't know who Mathilde is. He doesn't remember anything about their love or about the trenches. He doesn't know who he is.

This is where the film ends, but just imagine how the story might continue. Loving this man, and having spent so long searching for him when everyone thought she was crazy and obsessed and chasing an impossible dream, and having finally found him, surely Mathilde is not going to stop there. Surely she's going to stay by his side until he learns to think and feel again, until life begins to come back into focus. Even if he can never

remember their youth together in Brittany, before too long all his memories and impressions will be infused with Mathilde, just as they were before, only with different details. It's not hard to imagine that one day again, perhaps without knowing he's done it before, and did it at the defining moment of his life, Manech might carve the same three letters into a tree trunk, MMM. The truth is, he doesn't know who he is without Mathilde. He never did. And now, the other side of hell and oblivion, he never will.

That's what John is telling us in saying no to all his interrogators' questions. He's saying, "I don't know who I am. I only know who I am in relation to Jesus. I am a voice, I'm one crying in the wilderness, I'm one making a way for Jesus. I don't have any purpose in life, any goals in life, any satisfaction in life, any bearings in life, any wisdom in life, any security in life, any identity in life, aside from Jesus. Jesus is the way I know I am."

Think back to the story of Mathilde and Manech, and their very long engagement. Think of yourself as Manech, and Jesus as Mathilde. Imagine the story in three scenes: scene one before the war, scene two in the heat of the battle, and scene three after the war.

Some of us identify with the story before the war. Manech could follow a number of paths in life, but he chooses to associate himself with Mathilde. In just the same way for many of us Jesus is a choice, a figure with whom we choose to identify, and our faith is something from which we could theoretically disentangle ourselves, just as it's possible to loosen oneself from an inauspicious engagement.

But others of us might see ourselves more in scene two, at that moment when Manech has been rejected by his own superior officers, and thrown into the wilderness of No Man's Land, and is facing his near-certain death. Here he knows no truth other than Mathilde. Will that be us, moments before our near-certain death? Will we know no other truth than that Jesus loves us? Will all we know be that Jesus carved his love for us onto the trunk of a tree and has been carving it ever since?

And yet again others of us may feel the most profound portrayal of our faith comes in the final scene of the film, where Mathilde, who has already given so much and loved so deep and searched so far, begins to whisper words and make gestures of faithful, abiding, love to a man who no longer knows who he is or who she is. Here are we, like Manech, not knowing who we are, where we are, what's going on, hidden away in our little self-absorbed existence; and here is Jesus, kneeling beside us, whispering, playing, teasing, drawing us into this new world that we half-remember, half-yearn for, partly resist and partly embrace. But without Jesus we would have no idea of it, and scarcely ever do we realize that it's only possible because of this same Jesus who's telling us about it. And one day we may carve our love onto the trunk of a tree. But we might be blissfully unaware Jesus has been in the tree-carving business not just for us, but all along.

Without Jesus, we don't know who we are. Sure, we can discover our home, our tastes, our dreams, our sexuality, our colors, our rhythms, our learning styles, our psychological metrics, our star sign, our DNA, our genes, our ancestors' dwelling place, our voice, our family tree. These can all be helpful in their own way. But none of them disclose the most important thing about us. Like John, what really matters about us is to what and to whom we are a witness. What is a witness? A twentieth-century French spiritual writer [Emmanuel Suhard] had the answer to that question. He said, "To be a witness consists not in engaging in propaganda, nor even in stirring people up, but in being a living mystery. It means to live in such a way that one's life would not make sense if God did not exist."

That's the answer. John was a mystery to his interrogators. But he knew who he was. He was a living mystery whose life made no sense if Jesus was not coming. Maybe you feel your life makes no sense right now. Maybe you don't know who you are. Maybe your life is a mystery even to yourself. But Jesus has carved your name beside his into the trunk of a tree. Jesus is calling you to be a witness. Jesus is kneeling beside you, whispering your memory and imagination into a life that he has searched you out for and made possible for you to enter. Jesus is the living mystery in whom alone you can discover who you are.