

Who Are You?

Ephesians 1:3-14

Grace, peace and mercy are ours through the triune God. Amen.

What happens when you meet someone for the first time? Perhaps you shake hands (or tap elbows these days), you exchange names, but then you need something more to say. Maybe you ask questions that help you to put the person into some kind of context. You might ask, for example: "So, do you live around here?" Or, as we sometimes hear in church circles, "And who are you related to?" Or even, "And what was your mother's maiden name?" We try to work out how we fit, or how this new person fits into the world we already know. And often, if you are anything like me, you might revert to the classic question, "And what do you do?"

This can be seen as the appropriate level of social engagement, the right social currency, to establish who someone is. And so, we often define each other by what we do. To some extent, that's our identity.

Our text today from Ephesians doesn't play by these rules at all. In fact, it turns this sense of worth or identity, who we are, completely on its head. It says that what we do doesn't make us who we are. Instead, it shows us that our identity comes from what God has done for us. And how do we know what God has done for us? The letter to the Ephesians says that God has revealed his plan, and his saving action, in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus shows us that what God is up to is absolutely cosmic in its scope and proportions.

This letter to the Ephesians is quite different from the two letters that Paul wrote to the young church in Corinth. Those two letters were written to address and correct errors in teaching and practice. They are quite stern in their tone. In contrast, the letter to the Ephesians is written to reassure its readers of God's generous and lavish love for them, as revealed in Christ. Its tone is much more effusive and generous, to match the generosity of God's grace. As we look at the first part of chapter 1 today, we hear of the avalanche of gifts that God has given us: blessing, election, adoption, redemption, forgiveness, inheritance — we are blessed and we are loved!

Now, some of these words might not mean as much to a modern audience as they did to the people of the fledgling church in ancient Ephesus. For example, the word "election", or choosing. It's nothing to do with choosing political parties to form a government. And it's everything to do with God's generosity, because it means that God has chosen us to become God's children, part of God's family. Now, before we start thinking that this makes us special in some way, that it's about who's in and who's out: it's actually about the enormous scope of God's generosity, bigger and better than our wildest imaginings. God chooses to come to all people, through Jesus Christ.

Another word that's a bit different today is "adoption". In the ancient world, this meant that an ordinary person like you or me might be taken under the wing of a rich, powerful patron or benefactor. In the ancient world, "inheritance fantasies" were reasonably common in the literature of the time. People would dream of being adopted by a benefactor. When a benefactor adopted you, you inherited not just their wealth, but also their social worth — which was very important in that ancient culture of shame and honour. You were set for life: you had riches, social standing, and security — no more worries! The nearest thing today might be the way we dream about winning the lottery — if only we had managed to buy a ticket. Or more likely, if someone thought we were

just so wonderful that they just had to give us the winning ticket! In those days, when you were adopted, there was no more shame — all the benefits of your benefactor became yours.

So if somebody asked you who you were, what your identity was, you were no longer just plain old Sue. After adoption, you had a new identity. You were now “Sue, daughter of Sir Alan of the Organ”. Or something like that.

Now, this way of understanding ‘adoption’ becomes downright spectacular when it is God who’s in the role of the adopter, the one who gives the inheritance. First of all, this is the benefactor to end all benefactors, because God doesn’t have just enough to give to a *single* adopted daughter or son. This is our God of limitless love and generosity! He can, and does, adopt *everyone* into God’s family. As the letter to the Ephesians makes very clear, God’s plan is for *all* things to be unified in Christ. There is no place, and more importantly no person, that God’s love cannot reach — no one or nothing is hopeless.

Now, this is important, because sometimes it’s hard to see ourselves as worthy candidates for adoption. We know all too well our failings, our sins, our brokenness. We imagine that, with all our imperfections, we must surely be incompatible with God, whom we know (after all) is the source of all goodness, and is perfection personified! But God has that problem solved too, and the answer is right there in verse 5:

God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself *through Jesus Christ*.

In and through Christ, God sees us as his beloved children. It is Christ’s perfection that shines, and Christ’s righteousness that enables our adoption. Christ transforms our brokenness! The good news is that God’s grace in Jesus Christ precedes us, surrounds us and sustains us. As we hear in I John 4:19, “We love because God first loved us.” This means not just as a response (where God was nice to us so we’ll be nice back); but as enablement: we are able to love only because God, who is love, first loved us and gave us his love.

So through Christ, and through the gift of the Holy Spirit in baptism, we are adopted as daughters and sons of God. But there’s another surprise coming as well. Remember that, in the ancient world, an adopted person inherited all the standing, position, and privileges of the one who adopted you. So what is the position, the status, the privilege, so to speak, of being adopted by God?

Well, our adoption does not make us ‘special’ in relation to other people. To find the answers about our adoption, we can look at Christ, our forerunner and our model. Like Christ, we are called to specific tasks of serving God and our neighbour. We are not called to privilege or special status, to lord it over other people — we are instead called to discipleship, and to the suffering of the cross — when God calls us, he calls us to come and die — most especially, to die to self... we are not to be self-serving, but to serve our neighbour.

Or to put the same thing another way, we are called to live in, and celebrate, what Christ is doing to redeem aching souls and our suffering world — to pay attention to what God is doing in our midst, and in the midst of our world. In fact, more than that, we are called to join in with God, to take part in his action in the world. We are the body of Christ, and we are to bring Christ’s presence with us wherever we go.

Actually, this is a very important point to keep in mind about our baptism. Our baptism is not something that just joins each one of us, as an individual, with God. We are baptised *into community*. We become part of a family, God’s family, where all are equal, and who together are the body of Christ in the world.

As St Teresa of Avila, a saint from the 16th century, said:

Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

We are called to be God's children, to have our identity in Christ. Through baptism we are reminded again and again of who we are and whose we are, brought back to the sheer joy of living as God's beloved people. And in this joy we can join together in praising God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms, because we are united with Christ. Amen.

Video of the service including the above sermon: <https://www.youtu.be/JTIXH258-qk>