

# **A Sermon Preached by Canon Simon Butler**

## **Third Sunday of Easter**

**15<sup>th</sup> April 2018**

**1 John 3: 1 - 3**

During this service Sophia Robinson was baptised.

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The other day I had the privilege of spending time with a group of parents of teenagers in Battersea because of a sermon I preached last summer. I was invited to go because these parents had a something in common, which was that each of their children was trans-sexual. I'd preached about transsexualism at the request of a member of the congregation and someone had seen it on the website and felt it would be useful to share some of my thinking with these parents. It was a privilege to be there.

Transgendered teenagers are in most ways like most other teenagers, exploring their identity and their place in the world. Of course, trans children have that challenge in spades, as gender is but one other aspect of 'who am I' to get their heads round. The task of discovering identity today is enormous for young people – with so many ways of defining themselves, not just in gender and sexuality, but in countless other ways, which those of us who can only dimly remember our teenage years can only imagine. Combined with the challenge of peer pressure, it can be a minefield. Preparing young adults to be resilient and psychologically prepared for this is an important task of parenthood.

Which naturally leads me to ponder the question of identity for this young child we are baptising today. It is an enormous gift and a huge responsibility to raise a child – not one that I have been given. Any parent worth the name will naturally wonder

about what sort of person they want to raise their child to be and many will worry about what the future holds if things go wrong. Anxiety, thy name is 'parent', as one person said to me. We pray especially for Miles and Alice today, along with Sophia's godparents, as they help her to grow up secure in herself, as the person shaped by their example, but beautiful and unique in her own self.

So what can we say about identity, about who we are as people? What does faith in Jesus Christ tell us about who we are, about who Sophia is, about who I am and who you are?

I looked back at that sermon I preached last summer which got me to the meeting I went to last Monday evening. I said this, "When we baptise someone, as I stand at the font I often pray these words, *"We thank you, Father, for the water of baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection.* At the font, through faith in Jesus Christ, we are given a new identity that transcends and renews all the other ways we understand ourselves...Jesus is now our identity, it is his life which lives in us, and we are the Body of Christ in the world."

For the Christian person, irrespective of all the other identities we receive through biology, nationality, race and culture, the most true thing about us is that we are Christ's. It matters not just *who* we are, but *whose* we are. We belong to Jesus Christ.

Last year Archbishop Justin Welby got an enormous shock, something that would unsettle most of us. He discovered, through a journalist, that his father was not his father. He was not the son of Gavin Welby, but of Sir Anthony Montague Brown, Winston Churchill's private secretary. DNA testing revealed the truth. But what was Justin Welby's response. Giving an interview to the Daily Telegraph, who had

approached him confidentially with the story, Welby said this, “There is no existential crisis, and no resentment against anyone. My identity is founded in who I am in Christ.”

This is what Christian faith is fundamentally about: about receiving a new identity in Christ. The most “you thing” about you and the most “me thing” about me is that we are Christ’s. *Who* we are begins with *whose* we are.

And that’s what we hear about in our Epistle reading today, which you might like to turn to. Let’s – very briefly – explore it.

“See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.” In a world where we often see ourselves as the creators of our lives and their meanings, where belief is no deeper than what we feel, this is a radical departure. Before you, me, Justin Welby and Sophia Robinson are anything we are Christ’s. Among the cafeteria of approaches to God on offer in the world, the pick-and-mix worlds of weird, usually dishonest, spiritualities, and the false autonomy where we think that freedom to choose is the most important thing about being human, this is extraordinary. Christian faith makes us distinct, gives us the way to belong to God and invites us to grow through life, taking on more and more the identity of the one to whom we already belong. The best thing that could be said about Sophia at the end of her life is that people saw Jesus Christ in her.

“The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.” Such a claim about belonging to Christ is, in the world that St John writes to, exclusive. Being a Christian sets a man or woman apart from the world, not in the sense of escaping from it, but in the sense of taking on a distinct identity as belonging to Christ. If our faith does not seem strange to those around us, if the values we teach Sophia and

all our children don't set them apart from the crowd, then we will have failed them. The problem with peer pressure is real in today's world; but for each and every Christian person, whose identity is in Christ, we should be experiencing peer pressure each and every day. To stand out from the crowd in the office in terms of ethics, the treatment of workplace colleagues, the way in which we face the difficult decisions that characterise business, government and all the other avenues of human service. The world does not know Christ; it will, at some level, find our living out our faith, deeply strange indeed. If we don't feel different, then we perhaps need to return to the question of whether we truly know ourselves as belonging to Christ.

"Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure." So how can we live Christlike lives? How, whether we face the day to day challenges of standing out from the crowd, or the deep challenge to his identity that Justin Welby faced, how can we face these things? The answer I think is to have hope in Jesus Christ. The epistle of John tells again in this verse who we are: God's children. But it also says that, even though the future is uncertain, what we do know is that we shall be like him. What values to teach and to live by? Not, I would suggest, the values of success in worldly terms of fulfilment in material terms, or even happiness in relationship terms. The goal of our living, and the guarantee that faithfulness to Jesus Christ is that he is our future and that, as we believe in him, as we trust him in our daily living and our multiple identities and our raising of our children, as we believe in him, so we become like him. Whether we are a teenager searching for our identity, an ambitious career-minded professional, or even someone nearing death – believing in Jesus and thus becoming like Jesus, is both a compass and a comfort.

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We are an anxious people in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century; we have much to worry about both individually with all those choices and responsibilities that come from late capitalism's consumer culture, and corporately, be it climate change, life after Brexit, or the consequences of the bombing of Syria. To that anxiety, Jesus Christ offers the gift not of a solution to our worries, but himself as the way in which we should approach them. If we know only one thing in this world, if you or I or Sophia end this life possessing nothing but the knowledge of whose we are, then this life and all it has been will have reached its goal.

We are children of God.

We are God's beloved.

We are Christ's.

Believe it and become it.

Amen.