

Trinity 14 2013

Last weekend I met up with friends from my youth - always a risky business - and there was a person I had not seen for maybe 40 years. It took a while to recognise her.

I began musing on how much of the young me was actually still present now. At a molecular level, presumably there had been enormous change. Would any of the atoms making up my body be the same ones as were there 40 years ago? At a social level there was possibly even more change. There were things I did then that I wouldn't do now, and vice versa. So what was the essence of me that remained? Was it a bit like homeopathy - you only needed the tiniest amount, almost a memory?

Is it this little nugget of 'me-ness' that remains when all else has been purified away by the consuming fire? Whatever it is, it is quite elusive. Am I the person who can confidently get up into a pulpit and preach or the person who has to steal themselves before making a phone call to a stranger? Am I the person who can be exceptionally patient in traffic or the one who loses their temper when kept waiting at the opticians. We are all very complex and we react quite differently in different situations and with different people. We wrap ourselves in layers of disguises. Like the actress that cannot be seen with makeup, we cannot be seen as we really are, with our imperfections, our greed, our impatience, or our pride on show for anyone to see.

Our disguises are often quite comfortable, they insulate us against the world. We can become very fond of them, in fact, quite proud of who we seem to be. It is this pride that is condemned in Ecclesiasticus and in the gospel. It is not condemning genuine joy in having done a job well - what we might call taking pride in one's work - but in a false sense of one's worth. If we are wealthy or have a role that gives us status, that will often open doors for us. That can make us feel very important, and start behaving as though everyone else should respect our superior status. We would automatically assume that we should have a place at the top table. If we are not careful, we might even find ourselves saying 'do you know who I am?'. Mind you, that is a risky phrase. I am reminded of the Queen Mother who apparently asked this at an old people home, and the lady answered, 'no dear, but if you go to the office just down the corridor, they will be able to tell you.'

If some disguises are put on by ourselves, others are imposed upon us by society. If you are very poor, if you have facial disfigurement, if you have a very bad speech impediment, if you have lost your memory or your brain has been altered by dementia or injury, the disguise does not work in your favour. Society may write you off. Of course you would occupy the lowliest place, of course no-one will listen to your opinions! People may say to you 'who do think you are?'

God sees right through all these disguises, the flattering ones and the unflattering ones. He sees right through to that elusive 'me-ness', the little grain that he knew even before our birth and will know long after our death. That piece of us is God-given, so we cannot have pride in it, but others may respect it and honour it.

Understanding ourselves is not a new age thing. Throughout the ages, Christians have meditated to come closer to God, to see themselves as God sees them and to enable them to see others as God knows them – to see through the disguises.

C.S. Lewis, that master story teller, put this so well in his Narnia book *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. The boy Eustace is a pompous little boy, sullen and selfish. He finds a dragon's hoard and his greedy thoughts turn him into a dragon. As he painfully learns about himself, and wants to change, Aslan comes to him to free him, and claws off layer upon layer of dragon-ness until a new Eustace is revealed. That better Eustace was there all along, but hidden by the greed and selfishness.

¹²The beginning of human pride is to forsake the Lord;
the heart has withdrawn from its Maker.

When we think we are worth something because of our own efforts or because of our looks or intellect or skills, we are taking pride in the wrong thing. We are of value because God loves us. Only God can give us value. And, competitive beings that we are, it is really hard for us to accept that God loves each and every person. The closer we are to God, the more we will be able to see the beauty of all of that he creates and all that he loves. We will value the hills and the valleys, the trees and the birds, the people we know and the people we have not met. We will be able to open our doors to all kinds of people, maybe to entertain angels unawares. As the writer of the Hebrews suggests, we need to be content with what we have. I would go further, we need to be content with who we are, we do not need disguises.

for God has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you.' So we can say with confidence,

'The Lord is my helper;
I will not be afraid.