

Chapel Talk to Sherborne Girls, Sunday 10th October, 2010

Who are you? he asked

I'm the son of a carpenter. At thirty, I left my father's workshop to become an itinerant preacher. I'm from a small town called Nazareth. I have no wealth nor rank, no vestiges of power.

No, the man countered. 'I mean who are you? Not who your father was or where you're from. Who are you?'

You want to know who I am and what I do? Then read the Good Book. It will tell you. I am the light of the world. I am the bread of life. I am the good shepherd. I am the resurrection and the life. I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he shall be saved. I am the vine and you are the branches. I am the way the truth and the light. I am a conduit, the messenger of God

And you, Who are you? Don't be scared of using a little metaphor if it helps.

Well, I am my facebook page. I am who my CV says I am. I am how people perceive me to be. I am part New Look, part Banana Republic with a dash of Gap and Prada. I am tempted by Topshop and layered in Liberty, incensed by Yves St Laurent, charmed by Chanel. I am beholden to Boden, wooed by the White Company, part i-pad, part mobile phone number, part twitterer, an image in a mirror. Is that what you mean?'

Not really. Dig deeper. Who are you?

'Like, I'm the daughter of the generations before me. Do you want to know where I live or what my family does?'

No, I want to know who are you. Under the wrapping, under the costume, under the veneer, away from the badges, the prizes, the grades, the trophies. Who are you?

It is a tough question. A really tough question to answer. Unless we are pushed, it is one we avoid even asking ourselves. Perhaps, because we don't really want to know the answer. After all, if we are quite happy living in the moment, doing what we like with

those we like, why should we worry about who we are. We're having fun. We're happy. That's enough.

But we know it's not. It's not enough. For such happiness is transitory; and if we allow our lives to become aimless and rudderless, devoid of purpose, like corks in a fast-flowing stream, we will have lost control of who we are and what we want to be.

Near the end of his life Leo Tolstoy's ***Ivan Ilych*** asked himself the question:

What if my whole life has been wrong? It occurred to him that what had appeared perfectly impossible before, namely that he had not spent his life as he should have done, might after all be true. It occurred to him that his professional duties and the whole arrangement of his life and of his family, and all his social and official interests might all have been false. He tried to defend all those things to himself and suddenly felt the weakness of what he was defending. There was nothing to defend

It's scary how quickly life passes, scary that you need to plan now, to get the foundations right, not for what you want to be in the future, but who you want to be. More than a job. More than a bank account. More than the sum of all you have and know.

It is said that the closest you ever come to perfection is when you write out a job application or more pertinently, your UCAS form. Because you write down the very best about you, leaving out the bits you don't like. We all do. It's just a list of things, boxes we've ticked, but it's not quite us. It may open doors, this form and, armed with it, we will confidently head out into the world, but one day, like Ivan Ilych, we will wonder how we got here? To find out who we are, therefore, we have to attempt the question. Who are you?

It's a little like that exercise you are given in English classes of writing your own obituary. We have to ask the right questions. Arthur Schopenhauer once wrote that '*We forfeit three quarters of ourselves in order to be like other people*' Are we living our lives to please others, to court popularity or just to be accepted? Are we abdicating responsibility, giving away control, allowing other people to decide how we spend our time? Are we who we want to be?

Jesus did not let others define who he was; he defined who he was. He did not seek other labels, although labels were thrust upon him. He was not concerned with fame or self, but in living his life according to his values and his beliefs.

We live in the age of every child matters, a phrase too often translated as 'I matter.' Celebrities promote this idea in their designer children, who they love to near suffocation, fighting their corners, not caring who else is trampled on by the way. It's a disease that's spreading. Who am I? And when do I get my ten minutes of fame? And all the time we are inextricably linked with those we live with, symbiotically so, whether in the classroom or in the boarding house, or anywhere we choose to go.

In *Midnight's Children* the narrator asks: *'Who am I? My answer is: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been, seen, done, of everything done to me. I am everyone, everything whose being in their world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I've gone which would not have happened if I had not come.'*

And so we should see ourselves, not as islands, but as part of the main, as paid-up members of society with a contribution to make, part of a continuum that stretches forwards and backwards, through the generations.

In school, you are challenged to better yourself, to set yourself targets for what you do, especially academic goals. And yet the true challenges lie within. Finding the ethical you. The moral you. Writing a mission statement based on your values. Not vacillating like Prufrock, each day *'preparing a face to meet the faces that we meet'*, but having your beliefs firmly nailed so that you know what you want from life when the time comes to move on.

We know that school can be like a circus at times – lots of performers, a few clowns, some wild and unruly beasts, people juggling their work and life balance, even some lion tamers, but at the end, after the show, we all have to leave the Big Top. Some years ago, Jimmy Jewell was the saxophone player with Gary Glitter's rock 'n' roll circus. The show was failing and Jimmy hadn't been paid for weeks so he raided the petty cash in the

middle of the night and left a note saying: '*Goodbye cruel circus, I'm off to join the world*' And so do we all at some stage. We leave. We go out to face the world. And we need to be ready for it.

Our second reading, the story of Levi, tells us of Jesus confronting the prejudices of those about him. Why do you eat with such people, asked the Pharisees? And Jesus answered them I am not here to spend my time with those who already think they are good enough. And so we might ask. Are we good enough? After all, we abide by the rules. We support our charities. We do our bit. But if the giving doesn't hurt us, or inconvenience us in some way, does it still count? Is it just easier, for instance, to open a charity in Nepal than to work in a night shelter in Yeovil? I think of Kid's company and the inspiring work they do in London and wonder how we can ignore the social problems, problems of deprivation and loneliness in our own towns while setting up a refuge for homeless yaks in Tibet.

Next door, the Prep school has just adopted a Latin motto: *Non nobis solum* - Not for ourselves alone. Because we want our pupils to learn the importance of service, of consideration for others so that, in time, their lives will be judged, like a tree, by its fruits and not by its leaves. To be properly charitable, we need to look even closer to home than that, to within, at how we live our lives, how we treat each other? Charitably? Kindly? Or critically, snidely? Cruelly?

Who are you? How do you answer the question? And how would the person next to you answer the question about you? What face do they see?

In your lives, you will encounter the prejudice of undue expectation. You will be told, endlessly, that the opportunities and advantages of the world are not fairly distributed, that you / we are the fortunate ones. We have so much more, more opportunity, more possessions, more wealth, more of everything. We should not beat ourselves up over the fact. Inequalities exist. But these inequalities do place upon us a responsibility. A responsibility to use any advantage we may be given to grow some clear values, some sense of mission and some sense of social responsibility. To

make the most of what you have been given, as Jesus taught us through the parable of the ten servants.

John F Kennedy said *'It is the fate of this generation to live with the struggle we did not start in a world we did not make. But the pressures of life are not always distributed by choice.'*

So it is for us. The advantages we have should be balanced by the social responsibility we carry, to lead our life well and selflessly. In the end, the only possession we have of any intrinsic value is the sense of our own worth, the value we place upon ourselves. The face we see in the mirror last thing each night.

Success, fashion, wealth and status may be what we most aspire to outwardly, but they are shifting sands and should never define us as people. And don't, except in the most shallow of friendships. Instead, kindness, generosity, charity, tolerance should be the touchstones in our lives, what we look for in our friends, what our friends look for in us, a reflection of all we think and do.

Who are you? We should try to answer the question by using present participles and abstract nouns.

We should try to close the gap between the CV and the 'who, me?' We should aspire to be more than a bunch of labels or a shadow of somebody else

We should remember we are not the sum of what we gather up in money and authority, but what we give away in love and kindness. We are not who we see in a mirror but how others see us as through the lens of a camera

Not what we possess but what we don't allow to possess us.

And in these things we have the best model, the best exemplar of all in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ who is the light of the world.

Amen.