

LEAD ON

IDENTITY – LEADING FROM A PLACE OF HEALTH AND SECURITY

BY SARAH PIX

WHO AM I?

It is the most basic question. One that all human beings ask at some point. And one that church leaders need to address in order to lead from a place of health and security.

As mum to two girls entering their teenage years, I can see them wrestling with identity in different ways, looking to exert their mark on the world and establish themselves with others, find their distinctiveness. And yet, it isn't the sort of question that we 'get sorted' in adolescence, but rather one that we grapple with as the seasons of life change.

It is also an area where much confusion and misinformation has crept in, insidiously, over time, to the extent that it can now feel like a battle zone. The lie that 'you can be whoever you want to be' has left many a shattered dream in its wake. And yet, the opposite – 'there's nothing you can do to change who you are; you just have to accept your fate' – is at least as damaging. Identity has become the god of the religion of selfism. Graham Tomlin ponders these ideas of identity in his provocatively titled book, *Why Being Yourself is a Bad Idea*.

How can we think about identity in a healthy way which brings us to a place of clarity, without resorting to endless navel gazing?

I love the late Timothy Keller's contribution here, in *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness*. It is a superb little book, reminding us eloquently that our freedom is found in the fact that the verdict is in, that only the opinion of God as the true judge counts, and

we are no longer destined to perform to bolster our identity. He asserts that freedom is found, not in thinking less of yourself, but in thinking of yourself less.

Recognising the spiritual battle for our identity, Robbie Dawkins has written a book called *Identity Thief*, likening the work of the enemy to someone who steals identities. He highlights how easily we can believe the lies of the enemy to undermine the true nature of who we are in Christ.

IDENTITY AS LEADERS

Identity is also a leadership issue. The all-consuming nature of church leadership is such that all too easily what we do and who we are can become entwined.

There are some aspects of this which are healthy and good, and give rise to an authenticity – after all, my calling is an important part of who I am. But there is also an unhealthy aspect where we rely on our position and profile for affirmation of our worth. This can leave us discouraged when things are not going well, in danger of pride when they are going well, and at the mercy of our circumstances.

For those of us in Christian leadership, it is vital that we wrestle with this, and find a place of peace with our identity. Otherwise, we can end up with deep insecurity looking for a sense of identity in our role, extracting meaning from those around us, rather than being free to serve, free to maintain right boundaries, free to bless, free to celebrate the victories of others.

One of the parts of my theological training that has remained with me (though I confess, I have no recollection of who said it) was the assertion that

for Christians, 'water is thicker than blood' – meaning that our baptism trumps even the closest physical relationships. This is a view that Jesus affirms when his family were looking for him, he responds thus:

He replied to him, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' Pointing to his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.'

Matthew 12:48-50

Ouch! That jars a bit. Do we see our relationship with God as our primary identifier?

Scripture goes further when it comes to our identity, because Paul writes in Galatians:

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Galatians 2:20

Our old self has been put to death. This too has something to say about the new identity that we receive when we are born again. Slave trader turned hymn-writer John Newton put it like this: 'I am not what I ought to be, I am not what I want to be, I am not what I hope to be in another world; but still I am not what I once used to be, and by the grace of God I am what I am.'

Jesus was clear about his identity and it gave him a deep security from which to minister in the face of

opposition and controversy. One of my favourite verses from the gospel of John (although I must confess to having many favourites) is found at the beginning of John 13, where Jesus is preparing to wash the disciples' feet:

Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist.

John 13:3-4

Jesus, knowing who he was, knowing whose he was, knowing what God had given him, knowing his true identity, his true home, was able to serve. Jesus served the undeserving and fickle. He served the betrayer and the denier. He served to the point of giving his life. This is the treasure for the Christian. If we as leaders can grasp who we are, whose we are, all that God has invested in us, and where we belong, our ultimate home – then we will be free to serve with joy.

KNOWING WHO WE AREN'T

Of course, part of our wrestle with identity is about recognising who we are not. Knowing who we are not is also very freeing – it frees us from the suffocating hopes and expectations of others and helps us demolish pedestals.

We need to be able to say, 'I am not the Saviour, but I know someone who is'.



And on a more practical day-to-day basis, knowing ourselves, our strengths, weaknesses, gifts and lacks, and having the humility to own the strengths as gifts, and recognise our deficiencies, protects us from the temptation to think that we can do this on our own, or better than someone else. It keeps us coming back to Jesus as the source of our identity, and the one who supplies our needs, and it keeps us co-operating with our sisters and brothers to do the impossible things that Jesus has entrusted us with.

I am blessed to have a wonderful spiritual director in my life, who has helped me to gain a godly perspective, when I have lost sight of it in the maelstrom of leadership and ministry. I have often seen my lack more clearly than my gifts. One of the things that he would say to me often was, 'Sarah, God has called you to this place for this time – no one else. He called you because of who you are, with all of your qualities, skills and weaknesses, because he knew that you were the leader that the people of your parishes needed right now'.

At times it was hard to believe, but as the waters cleared, the crisis passed, so often I could see that he was right.

Who am I? I am and have been many things over the course of my life thus far. I am a wife, a mother, a woman, a botanist, a church leader, but primarily I am a child of God – welcomed, accepted, chosen, dearly loved, redeemed. And not on my merit, but by the grace of God. All the other things about me find their right place under that umbrella. It is the defining truth in my life.

SOME QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

Often, the way that we respond to criticism is a revealer of our sense of identity.

- What would you deduce about what you believe about yourself from your response?
- What would it look like for you to lead out of a healthy sense of identity? What would change?

