

## IDENTITY AND DESTINY

→ Within the life of the Methodist Church, this service in which we participate today is held up as one of the most significant and important acts of worship in the year. Some words that we'll hear spoken shortly will remind us that "we meet, as generations have met before us, to renew the covenant which bound them and binds us to God." This act of worship today gives us the opportunity to renew our commitment to God as we respond to his love and grace in a very personal way, but as the preamble to the liturgy for this service in the Methodist Worship Book reminds us, it's not just about that one-to-one relationship that we enjoy with God in Christ, but it's an act of the whole faith community. It's something that we do together, which reminds us of our unity and which encourages us to support one another as we seek to fulfil our commitment through the year.

.....Other words that we will hear in this service remind us that in this covenant that we celebrate today, "God promises us new life in Christ." How wonderful! What a gracious, generous, loving God we have! But Christ? Who is this Christ? Who is this Jesus? How much do you really know about him? How well do you really know him? If you were faced with that question "Who is Jesus?" what might you say and what would your answer be based upon? Images from a television play or a book you've read; stories told to you by your parents or your Sunday School teachers; things that other people have said? Or would your answer be based on what the Holy Spirit has revealed to you as you've read God's word and what you've experienced of Jesus in your own life as you've relied on his words and followed his ways?

→ Over the next two terms, all of us have a fantastic opportunity to really get to grips with who Jesus is – the promised Messiah, the Saviour of the world. And we're going to do that by embarking on this Essential Jesus programme. Many of you here will recall that almost three years ago now we followed the Essential 100 programme which helped us to gain an overview of the story contained within God's word. This Essential Jesus programme will help us to really discover what's so special about Jesus as over a period of time, reading 5 passages per week, we cover 100 bible passages from both the Old and New Testaments that will help us take an honest look at what Jesus said and did, so that we can determine who he really was and is.

..... So all of us are encouraged to follow the pattern of weekly readings set out for us in this book and then in our worship, both on Sunday mornings and evenings, in our Home Groups and in the Wednesday morning prayer group, we will explore the themes that arise from those readings. So, whilst there is information about the passages that we will be reading and studying in the church notices, in the magazine and on the website, if you haven't got your copy of this book yet, I would encourage you to get a copy from the church bookstall today so that you can join everyone else in starting on this programme tomorrow and benefit from the commentaries that are provided to help you think about and reflect on the readings!

→ As you embark upon these readings this week you will consider the thoughts of three people who were close to Jesus; John and Peter, two of his disciples and Paul who had a very special encounter with Jesus. But this morning,

just for a little while, I want us to focus on the thoughts of Peter as we heard them just a moment ago and I hope that we'll find that in discovering who Jesus is, we also discover who we are and where we fit into the bigger picture of the Church amongst whom we make our covenant today.

..... Sometimes we're challenged to ask ourselves questions like "Who am I?" and "Why am I here?" and "Where am I heading?" Maybe this Covenant Service when we're challenged to submit ourselves to God's will for us is such a time for asking those questions? And it's not always easy to find answers to these kinds of questions but here in this passage from Peter I think there are perhaps some answers for us.

→ In verse 9 we read "But you are the chosen race, the King's priests, the holy nation, God's own people, chosen to proclaim the wonderful acts of God, who called you out of darkness into his own marvellous light." Five things in there that tell us something about Jesus and something about us too! First of all Jesus picked you out, Jesus picked me out, to know God and be known by him, to love him and be loved by him. You are a chosen race. Not chosen because of your skills or your looks or your academic achievements but simply chosen because God made you and God loves you. You're not more valuable or less valuable than anyone else. You didn't earn it or deserve it or fulfil any particular criteria. You have quite simply been chosen to be on the receiving end of God's love shown in Jesus because that's his nature and that's his character and he wants you to experience that in your life. Jesus has chosen you to be his friend, his disciple.

.....Secondly, Jesus lets you in and he lets me in to God's kingdom. We are God's children and the death and resurrection of Jesus means that we have immediate access to him. It's a strange parent that insists that their children speak to them through a third party. And it's just like that with God. We don't need to have someone else speak to God on our behalf. We can come right into his presence and talk to him for ourselves. And more than that! We can be useful in that kingdom too for we are all ministers, we are all priests. That's not just something reserved for those who wear collars and gowns. All of us can offer useful service within God's kingdom because Jesus let's us in. We are the King's priests.

.....The Peter goes on to say, "You are a holy nation." You're not ordinary people anymore. You have been set apart for God. That's what the word holy means – to cut or to separate. When we describe someone who has exceptional qualities we sometimes say that they are "cut from a different cloth." And that's just what you are and I am. We are cut out for something far more special than the world around us might suggest. God has more for you. Jesus has set you apart.

.....After that Peter talks about us being God's own people! Have you ever noticed how people quite like to show off the things that they own; a new car, a new piece of jewellery, some new furniture, a new dress, some new trainers? Well, in a strange way that's just like God with us, his children. God is the creator of all things, so in one sense, everything is God's. But this means something special. This is like God putting our picture in his wallet to show to anyone he meets. This is like God putting our picture on the fridge. This is God showing us off because we are his

children. We are the ones that he longs to spend time with now and for all eternity. We are his people.

→ So Jesus, the cornerstone in this thing called the church picks us out, lets us in, sets us apart and shows us off. Finally he puts the spotlight on us. He brings us out of the darkness in which we try to hide and reminds us of our identity. We are God's people; loved, forgiven, called, chosen to serve. That's the answer to "who am I?" Every time we feel like we don't measure up; every time we feel as if we have nothing to offer; every time we feel useless, we need to remind ourselves that we are God's chosen people, living stones being built together with Christ in his church.

.....And then when we know who we are, that leads us neatly on to "why are we here?" Rick Warren, the author of "The Purpose Driven Life" says, "You were made by God and for God – and until you understand that, life will never make sense!" You were made for God, not vice versa, and life is about letting God use you for his purposes not you using God for your purposes. "Why are you here?" "You are the chosen race, the King's priests, the holy nation, God's own people chosen to proclaim the wonderful acts of God." We can't really talk about who we are without talking about who God is because he made us who we are so that we could show the world who he is.

→ Over the next twenty weeks or so, as we follow this programme of reading and teaching together, may each of us not just grow in our knowledge and understanding of who Jesus is, but may we fall more deeply in love with him as we recognise just who he is and what he has done for us. It is through Christ that we are called by God into this amazing covenant where we acknowledge that it's not all about us anymore, but it's all about him and where we commit ourselves to being who he wants us to be and to doing what he wants us to do.

.....As we share in this covenant service again today, may each one of us remember that we are chosen, called and commissioned by God. That's who we are, that's who we're meant to be, that's who we're called to be! Will you so trust God that you are willing to let him choose what you do, what you become, where you are sent, who you work alongside, how you are treated – that's what the covenant prayer in which we will share in a moment demands of us. It may sound tough, but let's remember that there is no safer pair of hands in to which we can place our lives. There is no one who loves us more than God himself. So trust him with your life, trust him with your future, trust him with your dreams and your ambitions and see what amazing things he will do in you.

.....And as we gather around this table to share in bread and wine, let us remember that we do not do this by ourselves. We are living stones, being built together with Christ as our cornerstone. As we gather around this table let us remember our oneness in Christ and be reminded of our need to encourage one another in the commitment we make today.