

Saul of Tarsus knew exactly who he was.

“[He was] circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”

Saul was a Jew, and he was proud of it, because Jews were the chosen people of God. They were chosen to keep the law, and boy o boy, did he keep the law or did he keep the law - ‘as to righteousness under the law, blameless’. His badge of honour as a ‘Hebrew born of Hebrews’ was his circumcision. Saul’s self identity was entirely bound up with his understanding of what makes a Jew special in God’s eyes - his obedience to the letter of the law.

Saul felt totally secure in this self identity, until the day he heard about this new sect who taught that God could be approached *without* keeping the letter of the law, *without* circumcision, *without* Temple rituals, perhaps even without being a Jew! That shocked him to the core. It made him angry. After witnessing the execution of one member of this new sect in Jerusalem, Saul joined in the persecution of these followers of Jesus of Nazareth. Persecuting this new sect became a new feather in Saul’s cap of being a Jew: ‘as to zeal, a persecutor of the church’.

Persecuting people who threaten you identity is, of course nothing new. Such zealous persecution of the church made Saul feel secure again, at least on the surface. But it didn’t really work. Something inside was nagging. Perhaps there was something more to God than just obeying the letter of the law. Why, for instance, did that Stephen who was stoned to death in Jerusalem pray for his persecutors rather than curse? This Stephen seemed to have something that Saul did not possess, despite having kept every known commandment he could find in the book! Stephen was more secure in his self identity than Saul, without having to pay the price of frantic self policing. That, of course, only made Saul angrier.

Then, one day, something snapped inside. Saul of Tarsus took leave of himself, the self that was founded on approaching God through obedience to the letter of the law. Of *that* Saul of Tarsus, he now says, 'I don't know that man!' -

"Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ."

This step of self denial was so drastic that Saul changed his name to Paul. This Paul looks back at his life as Saul the zealous Jew and says,

"I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord."

In one of his other letters, Paul described this 'surpassing value' like this: 'For freedom Christ has set us free.' (Galatians 5:1) It was as if Paul was let out of the confines of a prison, a prison that he built for himself using the commandments of the law, into a wide open space. He felt free for the first time, so much so that he now regards the previous life as 'rubbish'. 'Rubbish' is the polite translation of the Greek word Paul used in Philippians 3:8. In the less squeamish times of the King James Bible, this verse was translated like this:

"I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung ..."

All the things in the previous life that gave Saul of Tarsus his self identity, Paul now counts as just so much 'dung'. Interestingly, this new life, which Paul describes as of 'surpassing value', is a life of far less certainty than his previous life lived as Saul the Pharisee. Back then, he knew exactly what the score was -

"... circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ... as to righteousness under the law, blameless."

Frighteningly, the pass mark was 100%. But Saul was quite sure that he had passed! Now, such certainty is gone. Instead,

“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. *Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.*”

Certainty of attainment has been replaced by a journey, a journey on which the only certainty is the call to continue to journey on.

Paul would have had no difficulty understanding what Jesus meant when he called folk to deny themselves and follow him on a journey to find life. On the road to Damascus, Saul of Tarsus took leave of himself, and became Paul, and realised that he had found himself for the first time. Freed from the confines of an identity that he had to strain every fibre of his being to guard, he now has an identity that comes as a gift from without: ‘Christ Jesus has made me his own’. He is now free to journey with this Jesus, wherever it may take him.

We all have identities that we love to guard; identities that we believe we cannot do without; identities that give us a cosy sense of security. This is so whether we are talking about us as individuals, or collectively as a congregation. For me, my identity is very much bound up with my scientific rationality, which endlessly analyses everything to smithereens. For us as a congregation, our identity may be bound up with our wonderful music, or our half a million pound of reserves in the bank. Nothing wrong in themselves, but when we become too cosy in any of these things, they become prisons.

Christian discipleship, again whether as individuals or as a congregation, consists in hearing Christ’s call to take leave of these

guarded identities, however authentic they might have been when we first acquired them, to move on to a deeper level of self discovery. In another one of his letter, Paul puts it this way:

“For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.”
(Colossians 3:3)

To discover more of this life that is ‘hidden with Christ in God’, we have to take leave of the life, the identity, that we think we have grasped. And not just once, but repeatedly:

“Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own.”

Significantly, such ‘taking leave’, such ‘self denial’, is not something that we can just decide to do for ourselves. To do that would be to practise deliberate schizophrenia - a case of psychological self harm. Self denial only becomes a step of discipleship when it is done in response to hearing a call from the one whose own self denial took him to the cross.

And He calls us at all sorts of times and places. He sometimes calls us when we are quietly going about our familiar daily business, as when he first called those Galilean fishermen. He sometimes calls us when we are in the middle of seething psychological trauma, as when he called Saul of Tarsus in the middle of another angry mission to persecute the church. He sometimes calls us when we are in dire need, as when he called blind Bartimaeus begging on the road side. He sometimes calls us when we’re living in affluent comfort, as when he called the rich young man who had great possessions. All you can be sure is that the call will come unexpectedly.

When such a call comes, you can guarantee that it will make us feel very insecure. Paul the Pharisee was called to take leave of approaching God through keeping every letter of the law, something that he had done since he was weened from his mother’s milk.

Paul's illustrious ancestor Abram the patriarch was called to leave his comfortable life in the metropolis of Haran to go to somewhere over the horizon without precise GPS coordinates. I may be called to stop rationalising like a scientist all the time. St. Peter's may, shock horrors, be called to have fewer anthems, or less reserves in the bank! No, surely not! We would rather die than do that.

Quite so. That is why 'taking up the cross' is such an apt metaphor to speak of the kind of 'self denial' that we are talking about here. The old securities and certainties have to die before we can discover more of the real self that is hidden in the depths of God in Christ. Such calls are uncomfortable; such calls are easy to ignore.

Lent is therefore a season set aside to consider whether we are in a position to hear such calls to take leave of our treasured selves: whether we have missed or ignored such calls in the year past, and how we'll make sure that we do not miss them in the year to come. Missing such calls, whether as individuals or as a congregation, will be tragic, for

"those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?"

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, graciously call us to deny ourselves and follow you, and give us the grace to hear and obey. Amen.