

Readings: Hebrews 10: 11–14, [15–18], 19–25; Mark 13:1–8; Daniel 12:1–3; Psalm 16

The main thrust of our thinking together today is this: our identity is rooted in God's love, acceptance and forgiveness of us as his children.

What best describes us?

But let me begin by asking: What best describes you? In other words, what is the most important thing in your life that, in one phrase, best describes your identity? Is it your job or your role in the family or your standing in the community or the football club you support or a significant event that made you famous or...?

The trouble with this sort of identity is that, however important it is, it's not guaranteed to last. A person might lose their job, their family will grow up, their community can change, their team might go down a league. When these things happen, people often feel as though they have lost their identity or that their identity has been changed beyond recognition.

What best described the disciples?

It was a bit like this for the disciples in today's Gospel reading. Their identity was tied up with them being Jews, and the main focus and central core of this identity were the Temple buildings in Jerusalem. So when Jesus predicted the destruction of the Temple, not surprisingly the disciples were unnerved and shaken – they felt as if their very identity was no longer guaranteed to last, as if their very identity was under threat of being rubbed out and destroyed. Not surprisingly, they wanted more information about times and dates, but Jesus only warned of anxiety, uncertainty and insecurity.

How does Jesus describe us?

The priests used to make daily sacrifices but they were never effective because they could not take away sin long-term. Then Jesus changed things permanently. He gave himself as a sacrifice so that the sin that separates us from God would be taken away forever, dealt with once and for all! He gave himself as a sacrifice so that a new and living way to heaven would be opened up! He gave himself as a sacrifice so that a new identity would be given to his friends and followers – and so to you and me.

Because of what he has done, Jesus now describes us as loved, accepted and forgiven people – people who are loved unconditionally by God, accepted unconditionally by God, forgiven unconditionally by God. And this can never, ever, be taken away. And when we know we are loved, accepted and forgiven, we can feel confident about who we are and what we can do – we are secure in our new identity as loved, accepted and forgiven people.

Let's go back to the disciples. Jesus doesn't hide from them that there is hardship ahead. They couldn't know about his coming death and even less about his resurrection. Jesus doesn't give them the details they want. They must have felt very insecure. Perhaps the most important thing is that Jesus describes the coming disruption as 'birth pangs'. Birth is positive – there's no way of avoiding pain and discomfort, but the point of it is new life – a new life which blossomed and flourished after the resurrection, as the disciples built up the church community, based on their experience of Jesus – a loved, accepted and forgiven company of people who unconditionally love, accept and forgive each other. Secure in our lasting identity as loved, accepted and forgiven people who have a place in heaven through Jesus, we are called to build up such a church community today – this building up the church community really matters!

To be faced with the reality of our ultimate identity and security lying only in Jesus, whatever happens, is a challenge to all of us. We are not always aware of how much trust we place in the things of this world until these things are shaken in some way. And so my prayer for all of us today is this:

Lord, may our identity be so deeply rooted
in your love, acceptance and forgiveness of us as your children.

Secure in our new identity, help us to spare no effort
in building up a loved, accepted and forgiven church family
where we unconditionally love, accept and forgive each other.

Amen.