



Who am I?

How times change. When I became vegetarian 37 years ago, the choices, especially when eating out, were very limited. And yet now, there are not only plenty of options for vegetarians, but increasingly so for vegans. This week several of the large supermarkets have launched whole ranges of vegan dishes to coincide with 'Veganuary' – the practice of going vegan for the month of January. I turned veggie when I came across an article on whaling in a Sunday magazine, and then soon after another on factory farming, and the epiphany was complete. I'm sure it didn't help that the school path bordered two walls of the local abattoir. If I'm honest, I missed meat a lot at first, especially as I'd always been a big meat eater and didn't really like vegetables. There was quite a lot of ribbing at school from detractors who thought it was just a passing fad, but it was something I felt passionately about and there was no going back. It was a personal epiphany and is now part of my identity. This way of life is one of which the places where I shop are well aware. Every couple of months I receive in the post a selection of vouchers, reflecting my grocery preferences and habits. Usually they include discounts on fresh fruit and vegetables, yoghurt, detergent and Quorn. I know my eating habits are slipping when I also receive money off coupons for chocolate and Kripsy Kremes!

The two experiences weren't related, but it wasn't long after I became veggie that I first read George Orwell's classic dystopian novel, 1984, written in 1949. I was of the generation where we read this seminal work around the time when it was set. This was before the advent of mass mobile phones and indeed, when computers were still a specialist piece of kit, with huge hard drives and monitors. If you wanted to produce a document quickly, then you invested in an electric typewriter. The kind of surveillance we encounter in our daily lives now was then still the stuff of sci-fi. Our cities today are full of cameras, some to protect, others to enforce. Our mobile phones have inbuilt tracking devices. We leave digital footprints throughout our everyday lives.

As technology becomes ever more sophisticated, so concerns about privacy grow and boundaries blur. We are frequently receiving advice on how to protect

ourselves from identity theft and reading of court cases where someone feels their privacy has been invaded or violated. This week our church bank card was temporarily stopped because the bank's computer system detected what it deemed to be some 'unusual recent spending activity.' Not so unusual coming out of our busiest month of the year during which we bought hundreds of mince pies, alongside craft supplies and chocolate for 150 children's activity packs in carol services, hosted a huge Christmas lunch for over 90 guests and opened our doors for additional nights in our Winter Shelter on New Year's Eve and New Year's Day. But the computer doesn't quite understand the religious and spiritual aspect of our shared life and faith here at St James's. Ironically, although we are a church, the bank's computer doesn't comprehend that part of our identity. It knows what we are but not who we are.

Who am I? These are questions we journey and wrestle with throughout our lives. From our early years when we first recognise an emerging sense of independence, through teenage years and into adulthood, life is a constant journey of discovery in terms of likes and loves, of our strengths and weaknesses, our comfort zones, our career and relationship choices, our sexuality, our friendships, our hopes, fears, dreams and ambitions and how they intersect with our physical, social and economic circumstances. We recalibrate our identities at the beginning and ending of relationships, the arrival of children, at career changes or promotions, when we're sick or injured, when we lose jobs, houses, social standing, when we're bereaved.

For all sorts of reasons there are parts of ourselves we prefer to keep hidden, or reveal to only one or two people in a lifetime; there are aspects of our personality we would rather keep completely under wraps. It's a common criticism of both the Christmas round robin letter and of Facebook postings that we impose our own accepted filters, only sharing the good stuff; the happy events, the successes and achievements and we rarely admit, let alone post the tough stuff; the disappointments and failures. There are some things we don't ever want anyone else to know. Sometimes we are concerned or fearful of

being judged and rejected by others; we struggle with guilt, shame, anger, hurt and betrayal.

Both the famous psalm – 139 – we’ve sung this morning, and our Gospel remind us that there is one and only one who literally knows us inside out. “O God, you have searched me out and known me . . . and are acquainted with all my ways.” The late Anglo-American writer Christopher Hitchens was one of many who find this concept unnerving or even disturbing. In *God Is Not Great*, he wrote “If there was a permanent, total, round-the-clock divine supervision and invigilation of everything you did, you would never have a waking or sleeping moment when you weren’t being watched and controlled and supervised by some celestial entity from the moment of your conception to the moment of your death ... It would be like living in North Korea.”

For me, Hitchens overlooked or chose to ignore the primary characteristic of God: love. Yes, God knows us more deeply than we know ourselves because God, as the psalmist puts it, knit us together in the womb. But God also loves us more deeply than anyone else. “Where can I go then from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?” For some, like Hitchens, this might sound claustrophobic, but for many, it is a source of great comfort; an assurance that even in our darkest hours, even when we no longer know who we are in the face of trauma, heartbreak, pain or despair, God is yet with us, still loving us. It is, as both the psalmist and Nathanael realise, beyond our comprehending, but both, in their own way, affirm that this intimate relationship is a source of grace, comfort, strength and hope. Indeed, we too acknowledged that intimacy in our liturgy today, when we prayed to God “to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden.”

As we continue to reflect upon the stories, experiences and epiphanies of the men, women and children who once wore these clothes that hang above us, we pray that they may have a real sense of the presence of God in their lives, to bring, comfort, strength and hope as they seek to forge new futures and identities, irrevocably changed and shaped by the horrors they have (please God) survived.

Nathanael begins from a place of scepticism, not unusual amongst a people who have been waiting

generations for the Chosen One. When Philip comes to tell him of Jesus, Nathanael’s response to Jesus’ humble home town is, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” The Gospel speaks to us in every age afresh, and I’ve found it very difficult to read that line without being reminded of the credible reports of the crude and derogatory language allegedly used by Donald Trump only days ago to describe African nations along with neighbouring El Salvador and Haiti. However, Trump seems incapable of acknowledging, let alone learning from his shortcomings, whereas Nathanael, in encountering Jesus, has an epiphany which completely changes the course of his entire life.

After the visionary prologue to John’s Gospel, this calling of the disciples forms the narrative bridge between the introduction of the Cosmic Word and the signs, wonders and discourses of the person of Jesus of Nazareth. What is so understated and yet so powerful in these early scenes, is that this carpenter from Nazareth, born of Mary, elicits a response to the Creator of Heaven and Earth. The allusion to seeing the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man points to Jesus, in human form, replacing the ladder of angels from Jacob’s vision at Bethel. Jesus has come to connect heaven and earth directly, that we might live in God and God in us, to leave us in no doubt as to who he is and who we are.

Times and technology changes, but not human nature. We are still children of the same God, who loves us beyond our imagining, who seeks not to coerce but to encourage. This year, as we prepare for our Human Rights pilgrimage to Nuremberg and Auschwitz, many of us are exploring the writings of the German priest and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who spoke out vociferously against the Nazi regime. He was arrested by the Gestapo in 1943 and imprisoned and was hanged in 1945. A prolific writer, Bonhoeffer’s collected works from prison reveal a searing humility and honesty about the pain of being separated from his family and yet a deep, deep faith. In a poem he wrote shortly before he was put to death, entitled *Who am I?* (with which I close) he nonetheless struggled with questions of identity and yet the conclusion strongly echoes the voice of the psalmist in Psalm 139, and the steadfast love he found in his Creator. Even if he sometimes wondered who he was, he never doubted whose he was.

“Who am I?”

Who am I? They often tell me
I stepped from my cell’s confinement
calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
like a Squire from his country-house.

Who am I? They often tell me
I used to speak to my warders
freely and friendly and clearly,
as though it were mine to command.

Who am I? They also tell me
I bore the days of misfortune
equally, smilingly, proudly,
like one accustomed to win.

Am I then really all that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I myself know of myself?
Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
struggling for breath, as though hands were
compressing my throat,
yearning for colors, for flowers, for the voices of birds,
thirsting for words of kindness, for neighborliness,
tossing in expectation of great events,
powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,
weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,
faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?

Who am I? This or the other?
Am I one person to-day and to-morrow another?
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
and before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling?
Or is something within me still like a beaten army,
fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am Thine!