

The Power of Identity

Matthew 16:13-20

19th Sunday after Pentecost

23rd October 2011

Although there is much that is still mysterious and uncertain about the life and times of Muammar Gaddafi, I think one thing is certain about this man. He was absolutely paranoid. Whether he suffered from paranoia before seizing power in 1969, or whether he became paranoid in subsequent times as he struggled to keep control of his people, is unclear. Historians and psychologists will, no doubt, debate this question for many a long year. But, however and whenever this mental illness beset him, paranoid he was. Constantly fearful and mistrustful. Always looking over his shoulder. Seeing enemies around every corner. Trusting no-one. Believing that even his best friends and closest allies would suddenly turn against him. Christopher Hitchens, writing about Gaddafi earlier this year, and comparing him to the former Romanian dictator, said, “The actual evidence ... is that Gaddafi has reached his Ceausescu moment: a full-dress meltdown into paranoia, megalomania, and delusion.”¹

Gaddafi's paranoia manifested itself in many different ways. In her article “The Rise and Fall of a Tyrant”, Ruth Pollard says that “he devoted himself to isolating Libyans from the influences of the outside world - he banned the teaching of foreign languages in schools [and] made travel even from one side of Libya to the other difficult.” And, quoting a story by a local Libyan businessman, she goes on to say that, “Whenever Libya's national soccer team was playing in the Africa Cup, football commentators calling the matches were forced to adopt a unique way of describing the game – they were only ever allowed to mention the players by number, never by name. Gaddafi's name was the only name that was ever allowed to be uttered on television or in public. Most Libyans did not even know the names of any of the government's ministers – the only names you ever heard were [those of] Muammar Gaddafi and his sons.”²

Although Gaddafi gave the impression that he didn't give a toss for other people's opinions of him, yet he always seemed to be so obsessed with his personal appearance in the eyes of others. The ridiculous uniform he wore and his obvious hair transplant made it all too clear that he wanted to be seen as a man of authority, still the young and vibrant army officer he was when he took power. And he wanted people to see him also as a mover and shaker on the world stage. “I am an international leader,” he said at a meeting of the Arab League in 2009, “I am the dean of the Arab rulers, the king of kings of Africa and the imam of Muslims, and my international status does not allow me to descend to a lower level.”³

Though Gaddafi was filled with such arrogance and contempt for other people, nevertheless he was constantly consumed by what other people were thinking about him.

He was always looking for ways in which he could force others by whatever means – intimidation, torture or the fear of death – to accord him the honour and respect he felt was his due. And when he didn't get the admiration and esteem he craved, he simply convinced himself that people felt like that anyway. “They love me, all my people,” he said in an interview earlier this year, “they would die to protect me.”⁴

Now, I wouldn't go as far as to say that any of our political leaders in Canada are paranoid. On the other hand ... mmmm ... maybe. There's, what's his name? Or, you know, what's her name? No, no, perish the thought! ☺ But, if not paranoid, our political leaders certainly are very protective of their image and, especially at election times, they do all they can to make sure the public perception of them is exactly what they want it to be. Why do you think that, at previous federal elections, our revered prime minister adopted a warm-and-fuzzy, softer look with sweater-clad, family-man commercials? Why did he suddenly take to performing with different musical groups all over the place? Because he wanted the voters to forget about the stiff, formal side of his nature, depicted in these photos early in his prime ministerial career. Photos of him shaking hands with his son and daughter when he took them to school instead of hugging them. Of course, political leaders care what people think about them. They say they don't, but they do!

One person I never thought would have been overly concerned about other people's opinions of him was Jesus of Nazareth. Because, during his days on earth, he was a man on a mission. Unswerving in his focus. Above the flattery of friends or the hostility of enemies. Guided by words from on high rather than any human words. Yet, here he is, in Matthew's Gospel, asking the disciples what other people are saying about him. What do you hear on the grapevine, he seems to be asking. What are other people's opinions of me? “Who do people say I am?”⁵

I wonder why Jesus asked this question. Was he unsure of himself? Did he need to ask this question of identity to help him find himself? To try and get a sense of who he was supposed to be?

The song, “The Flower of Scotland”, which has become Scotland's unofficial national anthem was composed some years ago by singer/songwriter Roy Williamson who was part of The Corries folk group. Williamson, who died in 1992, was very well known at that time in Scotland and would have been instantly recognisable by the majority of the population. One day, after giving a concert at a nursing home in Edinburgh, Williamson was chatting to the residents and signing autographs. One elderly lady didn't quite seem to realise

who he was so, with a smile on his face, Roy Williamson asked her, “Do you know who I am?” Quietly, she replied, “Oh, I’m sorry, my dear, I don’t know who you are. But, in this place, if you want to know who you are, you just go over to the nurses’ desk and they tell you who you are.”⁶

Now, Jesus did not need to be told who he was. He had not forgotten. He did not need to discover his own identity. What he did want to do, though, was be reassured that the disciples knew who he was. That he was not just a carpenter from Nazareth. Not just an itinerant preacher or miracle worker. But much more. He wanted to be sure they saw beyond his humanity to another dimension. To his divine dimension. And it was Peter – impetuous, temperamental Peter – who got there first with the right answer. “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.”⁷

Isn’t it strange that, some 2,000 years later, people are still asking this question, “Who is Jesus?” Magazines publish articles. TV channels run documentaries. Theologians write books. Religious leaders pontificate. Ordinary individuals constantly ponder. All grappling with this question of identity. “Who is Jesus?”

And the answers are many and varied. “A great teacher,” say the Jews. “A great prophet,” say the Muslims. “A spiritual genius,” say the Buddhists. “A great healer,” say Christian Scientists. “Just an ordinary man,” say liberal Protestants. “The Man for Others,” said Dietrich Bonhoeffer. “A deranged lunatic,” said George Bernard Shaw. “A God Presence,” says Bishop Spong. “The Divine Spark,” says Tom Harpur. “A Man of the Spirit,” says Marcus Borg. “A social revolutionary,” say liberation theologians. “Just a mythical figure,” say atheists.

Unfortunately, though, very few people answer the question of Jesus’ identity by saying, with Peter, that he is the Son of God. Fewer and fewer, in today’s world want to make the seemingly outlandish claim that Jesus was both human and divine. Does this mean, therefore, that we 21st century Christians are “off the hook”, so to speak? That we can dispense with this mind-boggling assertion about Jesus?

I think not. No matter how intellectually-challenging the idea of Jesus being the Son of God may be in today’s world, yet it is still integral to our faith. To be Christians, we need to believe that God was present in this man Jesus in a unique way. We need to believe that his nature was not only human but also divine. We need to do this so we might reap the benefits of all that Christ did by his death and resurrection. After all, it was only by taking on our humanity and suffering as God as well as Man that he had the power to overcome evil, to win our salvation, to accord us forgiveness and give us the gift of new life.

But, even more than this. Because Jesus was God in human form, it means that we too can be the vehicles of God’s action and channels of his power in the world. If we affirm God in Jesus, then we open ourselves to God’s working in us and through us to serve others in better and more effective ways.

A mother wanted to encourage her young son to play the piano so she bought two tickets to a performance by the famous Polish pianist, Paderewski. When the night arrived she found their seats near the front of the concert hall where the large Steinway was parked by itself on the stage. Soon the mother found a friend to talk with and she did not notice the boy slip away. When 8:00 p.m. arrived the house light dimmed, the spotlights came on, the Steinway was bathed in light, and only then did this mother notice that her son was seated at the piano bench, where he began innocently to plunk the keys in a rendition of “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star”. The audience roared, his mother gasped, but before she could retrieve her son, Paderewski himself appeared and moved quickly towards the keyboard. “No, don’t stop, keep on playing,” he whispered to the boy. And reaching past him with his left hand the Master began improvising a bass part, and then with his right hand, he reached around on the other side of the boy to add a running obligato. The crowd was spell-bound and the piece concluded to thunderous applause.⁸

Is that not exactly the way God works through us? When we open ourselves to the presence of a higher power in Jesus, he lovingly enfolds us, graciously inspires us and encourages something wonderful from our feeble efforts. Like Peter, when we affirm Christ as the one in whom God is present, we are not only saying something about Jesus. We are also opening ourselves to being used by God for his work in the world. Which means we are standing at the threshold of life’s most exciting adventure.

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¹ Christopher Hitchens, “Don’t Let Gaddafi Win”, *Slate*, <http://www.slate.com>, March 14, 2011

² Ruth Pollard, “The Rise and Fall of a Tyrant”, www.theage.com.au, October 22, 2011

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Matthew 16:13-16

⁶ From a story told by a friend, Alan Weatherhead.

⁷ Matthew 16:16

⁸ Norman Pott, “The Abiding Question”, *The Protestant Hour*, www.sermonmall.com