

Here we are some six weeks into the lockdown due to the coronavirus and it's have a strange effect on some people. Apart from the quietness of our streets, and the fact that most shops are closed, the isolation we have to go through can have an effect on our identity. So much of what I do in any given week is part of my identity as a minister. I visit schools, I visit parishioners, I plan and lead services, I get involved in community work and I conduct funerals. All of these activities give me my identity as a minister and there have been times of inactivity when I have felt something of a fraud. I wonder how people in other professions are coping with their identities at this time?

I want to tell you a story about someone else who went through an identity crisis. His name is Jacob and his story is found in Genesis from the Old Testament. Jacob wasn't a very nice chap from what I've read and yet God transformed him into the father of the Jewish race. He was the twin to his brother Esau, and they were born to Isaac and Rebecca. Rebecca received prophesy during her pregnancy that her twins were fighting in her womb and would continue to fight all their lives. The prophecy also said that *the elder shall serve the younger* (Gen 25:25). Esau was born first making Jacob the younger. When the time came for Rebecca to give birth, the firstborn Esau, came out covered with red hair as if he were wearing a hairy garment, and his heel was grasped by the hand of Jacob, and Jacob's name in Hebrew means supplanter or leg-puller.

The boys were very different with Esau being a hunter and an outdoors type, while Jacob just stayed around his mother in the family tent. This led to their parents treating them differently. *Isaac loved Esau, because he ate of his venison: but Rebecca loved Jacob.* As Isaac aged, he became blind and knowing that he would die, he decided to bestow Esau's blessing, or inheritance upon him. He asked Esau go out with his bow and arrows and kill him some venison. Isaac then requested that Esau make a savoury meal for him out of the venison, so that he could eat it and bless Esau. Rebecca overheard this conversation and decided to act. She quickly ordered Jacob to bring two kid goats so he could take Esau's place in serving Isaac and receiving his blessing.

Jacob said that his father would recognise their deception since Esau was hairy and he was smooth-skinned. Rebecca insisted that Jacob obey her and he did as his mother ordered and when he returned with the kids, Rebekah made the savoury meal for Isaac; but before she sent Jacob in to his father, she dressed him in Esau's garments and laid goatskins on his arms and neck to simulate hairy skin.

When Jacob entered the room, Isaac demanded that Jacob come close so he could feel him, and the goatskins felt just like Esau's hairy skin. Confused, Isaac thought that the voice sounded like Jacob, but the hands were that of Esau! Still trying to get at the truth, Isaac asked Jacob directly: *Are you my son Esau* and Jacob said *I am*. Isaac proceeded to eat the food and to drink the wine that Jacob gave him, and then told him to come close and kiss him. As Jacob kissed his father, Isaac smelled the clothes which belonged to Esau and finally accepted that the person in front of him was Esau.

Isaac then blessed Jacob with the blessing that was meant for Esau. Jacob had scarcely left the room when Esau returned from the hunt to prepare his game and receive the blessing. The realisation that he had been deceived shocked old Isaac, yet he acknowledged that Jacob had received the blessings by adding, *Indeed, he will be blessed!* Esau was heartbroken by the deception and he hated his brother receiving the inheritance that should rightly have been his. He vowed to kill Jacob as soon as his father died.

When Rebecca heard about Esau's plans, she ordered Jacob to escape to her brother's house, until Esau's anger subsided. So Jacob escaped with his wives and livestock and eventually arrived at a place called Haran. He stopped to settle for the night and he named the place Bethel, which means God's house. He has heard that his brother Esau is after him and in Genesis 32, we find Jacob at a river called Jabbok which means empty and alone. Remember that Jacob's name meant supplanter or leg-puller. In other words; *trickster or cheat*. I was talking about identity and Jacob would be reminded of his shortcomings every time someone used his name.

***Read Genesis 32: 22 to 32***

Here is Jacob in a place he's called Bethel, and knowing that his brother was bearing down on him, he took his family over the Jabbok River, and then returned on his own to get his possessions. Once he had crossed back over the Jabbok, Jacob was at his lowest ebb, and it was then that he met a mysterious man. The man started to wrestle with Jacob and they wrestles right through the night. This man was an angel sent by God. The angel is winning the wrestling match and he had wrenched Jacob's hip, but Jacob refused to give in. He tells the angel that won't let go of him until he receives a blessing. Finally the angel asks: *What is your name?* He responds: *My name is Jacob.* The angel replied: *Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.*

Talk about a change in identity! Jacob after wrestling with the angel, which demonstrated bravery not previously seen in Jacob, has his identity changed from Jacob the cheat, to Israel which means *Prince of God*. Israel today is the homeland of the Jewish race and Jacob, or Israel; became father to the tribes of Israel. His descendants include the leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel: *Judah, Benjamin, Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Issachar, Zebulun, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher and Joseph*. God transformed Jacob's identity from that of a cheat to a mighty father.

I find it interesting how God can transform identities through the most miraculous of circumstances. Our identity is important and many people in the Bible were insignificant until their identity and name was changed. Simon wasn't an apostle until Jesus named his Peter. Saul was a Pharisee until God changed his name to Paul and he became an apostle and great evangelists. Abram had to become Abraham before he became the Father to the Jewish race.

Sometimes we don't need a name change; we only need a change in how we see ourselves. During this strange time we are living in, when isolation is a requirement of our lives, we can develop a distorted view of ourselves. We can't see our families or our friends, and that can lead to us questioning if we are loved? We can't carry out the duties associated with our work, and that can lead us to question if we're needed anymore?

Our identities can become obscured or forgotten during the times we are living in, but let's close by looking to the Bible for our identity:

Jeremiah 1:5 - Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.

Jeremiah 29: 11 - For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.

Ephesians 2:10 - For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

2 Cor 5:17 - Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

We are living in unusual times, but we belong to Christ, so don't let the oddities of isolation rob you of your identity. There will be a time, and for some this may be the time, that God will call you to fulfil the identity and calling He has for you. Be ready, and stay focussed on Christ and His word. And may God bless you all; **Amen**

*(1434 words)*