



22 February 2009  
Quinquagesima  
Choral Evensong  
2 Kings 22 vv. 1–8, 11–13; 23 vv. 1–3, 25  
Hebrews 11 vv. 8–16

**Reading the Bible as...ID:  
Who do you think we are?**  
By The Rev'd Dr Alexandra Clarke

Who do you think you are? The highly popular television series which traces the family trees of celebrities has captured that fascination which many of us hold with the questions of who we are, where we have come from and therefore, perhaps most intriguingly of all, who can I be? My husband's family is able to trace their ancestry back to before the Norman Conquest. That's quite an impressive feat, and requires a very large sheet of paper, but whilst lists of names may provide a sense of belonging, mere names alone do not really answer questions of identity, or satisfy our longings for a sense of purpose and direction in life. And it's that particular element of identity, to do with purpose or mission, which is so powerful. I want to consider how a sense of identity as a particular people of God has shaped and reshaped nations and people, through biblical, medieval and modern times, leaving us with a question for today.

So we begin with our first reading from the 2<sup>nd</sup> book of Kings, telling how King Josiah, repairing the temple, came across a lost law book, widely believed to be Deuteronomy. When it was read aloud, he was distraught to realise how shocking the religious state of his nation was and so he ordered widespread reforms. 2 Kings portrays a king of spiritual excellence over-hauling the religious identity of his nation, redefining what it meant to part of Yahweh's people, in the firm belief that he was restoring the God-given pattern of national life and worship. He didn't create a new religion, but he created a new identity for his people. And this had profound implications.

Shortly after Josiah's death, the kingdom of Judah fell and most of the ruling class was exiled in Babylon. A major religious dilemma ensued. Did their defeat mean that Yahweh wasn't as powerful as the Babylonian's gods? Had Yahweh abandoned them? Would their identity as Yahweh's people be lost? If Josiah's reforms had *not* taken place, that may have been the case. But in fact, something totally different, uniquely distinctive, and definitive even for us today, took place.

The passion of Josiah's reforms had produced a strong religious identity, which provided a robust framework from which they could approach the dilemmas of exile. Crucially, this meant that the Jews did not abandon their religion when faced with the apparent defeat of their God. Instead their theology and practice was refined and adapted to meet their circumstances. For example, the reforms required that sacrificial worship should only be offered in the temple in Jerusalem. Once exiled, how their religion could withstand this blow? Jeremiah's response was that Yahweh could be found *wherever* the heart of man sought Him sincerely. Ezekiel too insisted that God could be present to His people wherever they were. These views neatly solved the immediate problem, but they also marked a significant shift in theological thinking. The Jews were beginning to understand Yahweh to be the God not only of Israel but of all nations, so the successes of those other nations could therefore be seen as part of God's plan for the whole of creation. So a theology of monotheism was developing with all the universal implications that that entailed. It wasn't a direct development from Josiah to monotheism, but his return to the Book of the Law gave a theological backbone to the people which enabled them to turn an apparent defeat into a rich theological opportunity which has profoundly shaped the world.



22 February 2009  
Quinquagesima  
Choral Evensong  
2 Kings 22 vv. 1–8, 11–13; 23 vv. 1–3, 25  
Hebrews 11 vv. 8–16

This re-defining of oneself in the light of a recovered precedent is not confined to Biblical events. Any historical moment of deep upheaval which shakes the foundations of society is likely to produce a process of redefinition, but when fuelled by religious consciousness and desire the effects can be truly profound.

In English history, one such a fulcrum was the Norman Conquest. After 1066 the new, foreign, ruling class appropriated not only the wealth and political leverage of the defeated Anglo-Saxons, but also the collective identity and spiritual heritage that went with it. The new monastic community at Durham Cathedral, for example, went to extreme lengths to justify their guardianship of the cult of St Cuthbert, deliberately rewriting history in the process. The miracles which the dead saint continued to perform after the take-over were different from those which he had performed previously. In fact, the dead saint seems to have undergone a major personality revamp in the centuries after his death, reflecting the needs and aspirations of the new community. When the Venerable Bede described St Cuthbert in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, we hear of a gentle, humble saint, pious yet embracing. By the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the saint had a very clear appreciation of the subtleties of property ownership, the rights of religious communities and the delicate games of power played out by the local nobility.

The Community of St Cuthbert was an intelligent and able community and it understood the power of identity. Yet to claim that they were cynically misappropriating their spiritual inheritance for financial and political gain, would be to misjudge them. These monks were strongly motivated by the presence and the spiritual power of their patron saint. Their entire lives and being were dedicated to serving God through this icon of holiness, and in the process they shaped one of the most powerful institutions of the region: in today's terms they embarked on a multi-million pound regeneration project. Spiritual identity mattered, it was the fuel which powered much of the political, military and economic consciousness of the day. And its impact (in the formation of Durham) has had a lasting effect on the world today.

We could trace this process in its different guises through many of the major turning points in history: for example, the effects of Martin Luther's reading of St Paul in the 16<sup>th</sup> century changed the world beyond recognition. Such developments are testament to the extraordinary power of spiritual identity over the human consciousness. A power which not only transforms the individuals who enter so deeply and passionately into a new identity, but a power which shapes the world for generations to come.

When the Pilgrim Fathers left European shores for a new land in the 1620s, their motivation was not primarily economic or political. They were passionately inspired by the book of Hebrews, which we heard in our second reading, which spoke of the faithfulness of the patriarchs in responding to the call of God. Like their scriptural models, the settlers understood that they were but sojourners on the earth, and their true home was in Heaven. Escaping persecution in Europe, their ultimate destination was not principally the land which would become the USA, but the heavenly kingdom. A very great many did not survive the voyage, and many more perished in the bitter winter of their arrival: to embark on such an undertaking required a total commitment to the ideology of the movement, and a full identification with the biblical model of faithful response to God's call. They can have had no idea of the impact of their actions and ideals for future generations: it was their concern with connecting with the model of the past which shaped the future so profoundly.



22 February 2009  
Quinquagesima  
Choral Evensong  
2 Kings 22 vv. 1–8, 11–13; 23 vv. 1–3, 25  
Hebrews 11 vv. 8–16

If the past is a foreign country, so is the future, but the country of the future has always been founded by the settlers of the past. And for religious communities, the past has its roots firmly within the Bible. But what of our future? On what models will the global communities of the next generation base their various identities? If the events and words of the past month are an indication of things to come, then the world is entering a new era with the Presidency of Barack Obama, a man profoundly shaped by the traditions and history which bore him. A BBC journalist wrote of him on the day of his inauguration:

‘Because of the colour of his skin, Mr Obama was not merely another primary candidate - he was a character in the long and painful story of America's evolution away from a past of racial division and violence.

Mr Obama seemed to sense it too - his speeches were littered with allusions to history, because he understood that you cannot shape the future unless you understand the past.

We hear a lot about Mr Obama's fascination with Abraham Lincoln, that other man of Illinois who appeared at a moment of national crisis to win a civil war to abolish slavery. Will Mr Obama turn out to be a similar kind of figure?

We will see what Mr Obama does with the history which is now his to shape - but the history he embodies is already written.’

And how will your history shape your future? Who do you think you are? Will your identity and influence on the world come from a passion for the life and legacy of Jesus Christ? Do you already identify with individual characters in the Christian story? Have you heard a calling, like the child Samuel? Do you feel unequal to your calling, like the prophet Jeremiah? Have you been forgiven and set free, like the prodigal son? Has your life been ripped apart, only to be repaired so much more gloriously, like St Paul? Will you allow the Christian story, the living Word of the Bible, to shape and mould and direct your deepest desires and longings?

Identity matters. The past matters. Our future is born of it. May our identity as a people of God shape the future we will build for generations to come.

Amen.