

The True Son

Mark 1:9-13

Introduction

How are people defined or identified? How do you describe someone? Where do you even begin? Some people are defined by their past. If you've heard American presidents introduced you may hear the announcer say, "Would you please give a round of applause for president Bill Clinton." Even though there's been a couple of presidents now between Bill Clinton and today, it has become convention to continue to refer to past presidents with the title, "The President." Many of us define ourselves by our present jobs or location (I have quickly learnt that many people around where I live see themselves as someone of Laidley, rather than the Lockyer Valley ... because that would align themselves too closely with Gatton!). And there are some people who define themselves by their future. If you don't know what I'm talking about when I say that some people define themselves by their future, have a look at certain dance practices or football matches. I've seen a bunch of dads and mums looking on with that look that tells you what they're thinking, "I'm the dad of a professional ballerina and I'm going to make sure it happens." Or, "I'm the mum who gets to see her child play football for Australia .. and no one better stand in my way ... I mean, my child's way."

So people can be defined by their past, present or future but there are three other, more common, ways of defining who someone is. First, someone's identity can be defined by how that person sees his or her self (his or her personal identification); second, a person can be defined by others (identity by declaration); and third, a person can be defined by his or her actions (identity by verification).

This morning we're going to see that these three ways of defining a person are applied by Jesus and to Jesus and specifically in relation to Jesus' identity as God's son.

Sonship by Identification (Mark 1:9)

To start looking at Jesus' identity we do need to remember the very start of Mark's Gospel where Mark says, "The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God." Last week we paid attention to how Jesus is the Messiah and how the Old Testament looks forward to Jesus, providing his back story. This week we're focusing on Mark's next title for Jesus, that he is the Son of God.

In verse 9 we're told, "At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan." However, earlier in verse 4 we were told that "John the Baptist

appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Why is Jesus getting baptised if he was sinless? To answer this we need to remember that “The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him.” Obviously hyperbole is being used here because we know that some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law opposed John the Baptist, but going to John and being baptised by him is presented in the Gospels as what faithful Israelites, faithful Jews, did.

By Jesus coming forward to be baptised by John, Jesus is presenting himself as one of the faithful people of God. Jesus is a true Jew and, as such, Jesus identifies himself with the people who are collectively called God’s son. In the Old Testament this is one of the ways God describes the nation of Israel. God speaks in Hosea 11:1, saying, “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.”

What is Jesus’ personal self identity? Jesus, by aligning himself with the people of Israel and doing what good Jews should do in response to the preaching of John (and that is to be baptised), identifies himself as God’s son.

Sonship by Declaration (Mark 1:10-11)

Today, a person’s self identity is regarded as the most important definer of who someone is. A person today doesn’t have to define themselves by their family, their background or even their birth gender. However, this emphasising of a person’s self-identity over (and sometimes against) any other definers of identity is a very modern concept and is also a very western concept. You don’t have to go back very far in time to see that there have been a number of other factors which, for good or for ill, were used to define someone’s identity. If you went to non-western countries today you would also see different factors which define someone’s identity. This may be the state in China, your caste in India, your religion in the Middle East and so the list could go on.

Through history, probably the single biggest factor in defining someone’s identity has been the identity given to a person by his or her family and most especially by his or her father. It is important then that we look at how Jesus is identified by others and especially by his Father. How Jesus’ father defines him is recorded in verses 10 and 11, “Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’”

So here we have a public declaration as to who Jesus is. Jesus is indeed God’s son. This declaration that God is well pleased with Jesus points us all the way back to the

creation story in Genesis 1 where God creates the world and all the creatures in it before making humanity in his own image. At the end of that creative process we're told, "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good." (Gen 1:31a) Just as God was pleased when he saw Adam and Eve, his son, in the garden, so God is pleased with Jesus, his son, here.

Sonship by Verification (Mark 1:12-13)

We're getting the picture then, in this account in Mark's Gospel we've seen that Jesus self-identifies as God's son ... but so what? When I was a kid I heard the song, "Down Under" and self-identified with the lyrics describing the Australian who was, "six-foot-four and full of muscles." I don't know what went wrong but I fell about four inches short and my muscles seem a little bit too soft or moved to the wrong position on my body from what I envisioned as a kid. Just because someone self-identifies as something doesn't mean that it's going to happen.

"But," you may say, "doesn't God declare Jesus to be his son and that he's well pleased with him. That's what make all the difference." Does it? As I just said, God's declaration that he is well pleased with Jesus points back to Genesis 1 where God saw that his creation was very good but we know what happened next don't we? In Genesis 3 Adam, God's son, eats of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Is Adam, and as such humanity, still made in God's image after the fall? Yes, we are still made in God's image but Adam was no longer God's son like he was before the fall.

A good start does not necessarily mean that the person really is going to live up to his or her potential or identity. A person may self-identify as something and may even be identified in the same way by others, even those whose opinion really matters, but when do we know what someone's identity truly is? When a person fulfils his or her identity in practice.

Perhaps you've heard the reports which seem to come round every four years of someone going to the Olympics seeking to fulfil their destiny to be an Olympic champion. Such sports people often have the self-identity of being an Olympic gold-medalist as that is what has kept them enduring the countless hours of training. This self-identity is regularly combined with the declaration by family members, coaches, the media and fans that they really are champions (and not just in the "hey, you're a champion because you did your best," kind of way!). But what will define whether they really are Olympic champions or not? It will be whether they win a gold medal. In the Olympics it's as brutal as that, you're

either an Olympic champion because you won a gold medal or you're just a really good sports person.

Now, turning away from the Australian religion of sport and back to the Bible, we need to ask the same question here. Jesus self-identifies as God's son and God the Father declares Jesus to be his son, adding that he is very pleased with him. But will Jesus truly be God's son in a way that Adam and Israel failed to be? Will Jesus' identity as God's son be proven? Do we have here identity by verification or not?

Mark records the testing of Jesus in verse 12 and 13, "At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him."

This is one of those occasions where the brevity of Mark means that things are not as clear here as they are in Matthew and Luke but there's still enough information for Mark to get his point across. There are three stages to this section and I'll just highlight the important aspects.

First, we may find it somewhat confusing to read, "At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness." It is the Holy Spirit who compels Jesus to go into the wilderness where he will be tempted by the accuser. Why would the Holy Spirit do such a thing? And to God's son and all?! Jesus is compelled to go into the wilderness for the reason we have just discussed, is Jesus really the son of God or not? Jesus' identity as God's son has to be verified through testing and that is precisely what Jesus faces.

Second, we have Jesus being tempted by Satan. We're not explicitly told that Jesus was fasting and nor are we told how Jesus resisted temptations like we are told in Matthew and Luke where the specific nature of the temptations holds some significance. What can be deduced from this is that Jesus' claim to be God's son is being put to the test.

Finally, we're told very simply, "[Jesus] was with the wild animals, and angels attended him." What?! Is that it? It's all over? Yes, it's all over. Satan has gone but Jesus' vindication, his verification that he really is God's son, is confirmed by Jesus being in the apparent peaceful presence of wild animals and attending angels. Finally there is harmony between humanity and the earthly and heavenly creation because here really is God's Son. The angels serving Jesus also points us forward to what we'll start to hear about next week, that Jesus brings the Kingdom of God. Even the angels submit to Jesus.

Conclusion

What then do I say in conclusion and what application is to be made in relation to what we have just heard? Many of you know that I strongly believe that the truths of the Bible have to impact our lives and be applied.

As we have talked about a person's identity being shaped by a person's self identification, will I say that we need to know the identity of who we are and truly believe it? That may be true, but that's not the point of this passage.

We also talked about identity by declaration, that our identity is shaped by how others perceive us. If I was seeking to make an application on this point it would be that we should listen closely to the way God describes us and declares our identity to be. But again, that's not the point of this passage.

Finally, we talked about identity by verification, that ultimately it is how we prove our identity by our actions. And if I was to make an application out of this it would be to call each of us to live out our identity as Christians, not just being a Christian on Sundays but being a Christian every day of the week. But yet again, that's not the point of this passage.

Well what is the point?! What are we suppose to do? That's fine for Jesus and all, but what about us?! And that actually does bring us to the point. This passage really is all about Jesus and not what we do. The whole point of this passage is to show that Jesus truly is God's son and he doesn't stuff it up like Adam and the people of Israel. The whole reason Jesus needed to be the true and verified son of God is because you and I can't.

Is there an application then? Yes, there's an application. Reading a passage like this should move us to simple, humble thanksgiving. Stop and say thank you. Be thankful that Jesus is the Saviour of the world that you and I are not and nor could we be.

The more I chewed over these few sentences, the more I realised that this is precisely what you and I need to hear and respond to with a stilling of ourselves to focus on humble thanksgiving. I am encouraged when I hear from people about ideas and hopes they have that our church will impact our community. That is great, and I do indeed pray that our church is known for being salt and light to the people of Laidley and Hatton Vale and the Lockyer Valley, but I pray that such efforts arise from thanksgiving and humility, knowing that it's not dependent upon us but rests upon Jesus who proved himself to be truly the son of God.

[Pray to close]