

“Who am I?” I speak in the name of Jesus the Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

Yesterday, the 9th of August, marked a very special day in the history of South Africa. You may recall that we as a nation celebrated National Woman’s Day. This has become an annual public holiday. The 9th of August commemorates the national march of women on this day back in 1956.

The reason? The women of South Africa decided to petition against the Pass Laws that required them to carry a “pass” or permit to enter certain geographical areas. This was part of the previous government’s plan to control racial movement, segregation and urbanisation.

History informs us that more than 50 000 women staged a march to the Union Buildings in Pretoria in order to protest against the Pass Laws. What makes this specific protest so unique in comparison to most of the protests that have taken place in this country, is that once arrived, the 50 000 women stood in absolute silence outside the Union Buildings for thirty minutes.

After half an hour, the protesting women sung the now famous song, with the words, “You strike a woman, you strike a rock...” This same song has come to represent the strength and courage of woman in South Africa.

This raises an interesting question. Are you and I defined by who we are or what we do? Much has been written in recent years by both sociologists and psychologists alike around identity and how we form and maintain it. For example, Erikson proposed that we all progress through eight life stages. A person experiences various conflicts through their lives and only once resolved are they able to progress to their next life stage and thus their identity continues to evolve through life experiences.

Many contemporary people in the world around us remain fixated on building their identity in terms of materialism. People build their identities around which car they drive, the clothes that they wear, where they live, who they socialise with and the money that they are able to earn and spend. This physical, materialistic form of identity is popular because it is deemed as easy to generate, highly visible and comparable. But who is the real person hiding inside the fancy clothes and expensive car?

In today’s Gospel reading we read how Jesus warns us of false prophets or false teachers. At the time of Jesus there were many different philosophies and ideas that people were basing their faith and identities on. Jesus was aware of how important identity and a sense of “belonging” was to his faithful followers. He encouraged His disciples to first be “in God” and then the “identity” would follow. This is what we mean when we say, “Who you are is more important than what you do.” For it follows that what we do will be tempered by who we already are.

You see my brothers and sisters in Christ, if we first build our identity in Christ, then what we do is through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Therefore our actions will be rooted in love and Christ. But, if we first act in order to build an identity, we run the risk of building a false identity that is not based on truth and light. This is a subtle but important difference. It is not what we do but who we are.

For if we follow Christ

Then we will seek his will

For if we follow Christ

Then we will take his Word to the world around us in action and deeds

For if we follow Christ

Then we will find salvation through His death and resurrection.

And so our identity is built... on the rock of Jesus.

Which reminds me of the 50 000 women who marched to Pretoria back in 1956. Their actions were not defined by what they did, but who they were. They were the marginalised and discriminated women of South Africa. They stood together and celebrated their unity as women with a cause. The action came afterwards. Hence the power of their unity as they stood in silent protest against the unjust laws of the country.

You strike a woman, you strike a rock. You strike a Christian, you strike the rock of Jesus upon whom we build our faith and identity. Never before in the history of mankind has it been so easy yet so difficult to build a genuine identity for ourselves. It is so easy to create ourselves on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram and forums. Sky News reported this week that children as young as six now have the same technological capacity of a forty-five year old adult when it comes to using smart phones, tablets and the computer. Thus, theoretically speaking, children from the age of six are now capable of building an on-line identity for themselves... this is concerning... for who are we at the end of the day? Does our on-line identity define ourselves or do we define our on-line identity?

I would suggest that for many people the lines of distinction are now blurred...

Jesus calls us as Christians to be rooted in Him, to be rooted in the faith of the church, to be rooted in the love of God, to be rooted in the power of the Holy Spirit, to be rooted in the community of the faithful...

This is how we as Christians should be building our identities... this is core to our well-being in Christ so that we are able to bring His light to the world in a manner that is both illuminative and genuine... this is crucial if we are to avoid being labelled as false prophets with false identities.

It is not what we do but who we are... For if we are first in Him, then what we do will automatically be in Him as well.

No one said that building and maintain our identity in a progressively materialistic and shallow world is easy. The temptations are real and strong. It is so easy to be caught in the trap of becoming a "Sunday" Christian who put on their "Sunday" Christian identity when Sunday comes around. This is our challenge. To be real in Christ, every day, every waking moment, so that our identity becomes complete in Him in a way that build and completes our personal identity. This is fulfilling and self-actualising. It is real and powerful. It is of and for God.

Do we perhaps need to examine our personal identities? Do we perhaps need to hone our personal identities so that we are more Christ- like in who we are.

Are we perhaps so focussed on what we do and have and want, that we have forgotten who we are?

May God bless you in this week ahead as you re-examine your personal identity and what is important to you.

Amen.