

¹⁶Be joyful always,¹⁷pray at all times,¹⁸be thankful in all circumstances. This is what God wants from you in your life in union with Christ Jesus.

¹⁹Do not restrain the Holy Spirit;²⁰do not despise inspired messages.²¹Put all things to the test: keep what is good²²and avoid every kind of evil.

²³May the God who gives us peace make you holy in every way and keep your whole being—spirit, soul, and body—free from every fault at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.²⁴He who calls you will do it, because he is faithful.

(1 Thessalonians 5:16-24)

In the gospel of John, we find another John, the Witness. This is not John the Baptist. Sure, he baptises (Jn 1:25), but his primary role is to testify to the Word. The eternal Word who is Wisdom and who is also God (Jn 1:1-5). There are too many John's in this message so to avoid confusion the gospel writer will be called the *author* and the one generally known as the Baptist will be called *John*.

The questions the author presents in today's reading are who is this John? and, what authority does he have? These questions replicate one of the author's major themes in his telling of the gospel, the question of Jesus' identity. The author deals with this question of identity, a question of Christology, somewhat differently to the authors of the other gospel writers. Matthew, Mark and Luke lead their hearers on a journey that leads from Jesus the man towards Jesus the Messiah. The author of today's gospel reading questions how is this divine being, Christ Jesus, to be recognised and known.

One answer to the question of Jesus' identity is to look to the light (Jn1:4-5). That light is something that glows within people's life, it is a kind of joy. Nehemiah says, "The joy of the LORD is your strength" (Neh 8:10). Paul says, "Joy is a fruit of the Spirit" (Gal 5:22-23). What does John say?

The first thing he says wasn't included in our lectionary reading but it is significant. John testifies 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me' (JN 1:15). So first he places his own identity humbly in relationship to Christ's identity. Having received Him and believed in His name, John is a child of God (Jn 1:12). John's witnessing to this relationship is probably what implored the Judeans from Jerusalem to send those priests and Levites to find out who this John is.

Having first prioritised his relationship to God, John answers the interrogators with three '*I am not's*'. He is *not* the Messiah; he is *not* Elijah and he is *not* the prophet (probably Moses). In a way it seems that the clarity of him saying who he is *not* gives greater understanding to who he *is*. He *is* the faithful witness, 'the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord' (Jn 1:23). Quoting Isaiah 40, John identifies himself as a voice from the margins of society and also as a voice pointing towards the future. Luke's gospel tells us that John has been pointing towards the future *joyfully* since before he was born (Lk 1:39-45).

In this author's gospel John is the first witness in a parade of witnesses. The parade includes the Father, Scripture and the works of Jesus himself (Jn 5:31-39). The author doesn't stop at that list though, he also gives an invitation to those who

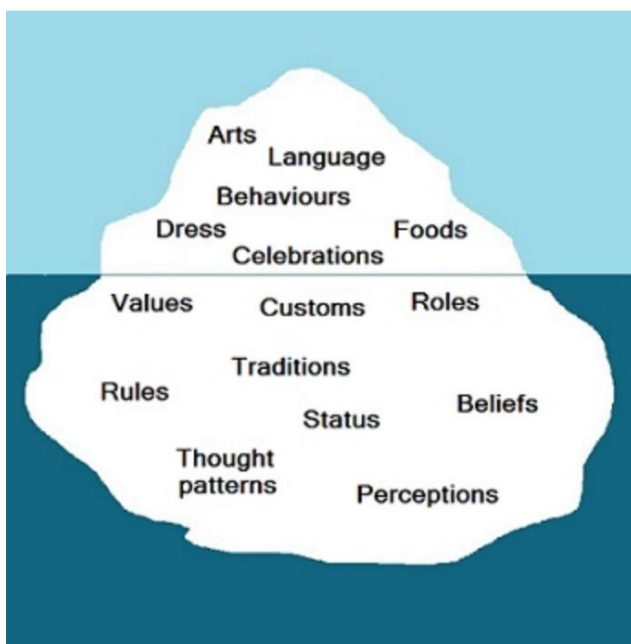
believe 'that Jesus is the Messiah', to witness to their faith through the joyful expression of life that is His gift (Jn 20:31).

So, as witnesses to Christ Jesus as our living Lord, our work, our life together and even our personal proclamations can be faithful expressions of the joy that is our relationship with Christ. Following John's lead, I can tell you that I am here in this community as a response to the call of Christ. Yes, I do believe that call can be heard through conversations with the councils of the church.

My identity, like yours I'm sure, is deeply connected to Christ. My identity, like John's can also be more clearly known through some 'I am *not*' clarifications. I'm quite sure you know, that like every other minister with whom you have shared your community journey, 'I am *not* your saviour'. I am also *not* your mediator, in the relational and/or theological differences that you may experience, nor am I the one with all the answers.

I am, however, someone who cares deeply about the voices from the margins, in many ways I have fought to keep myself on the margins of the church so as not to confuse the power of the Gospel with the power of the Church; I'm not sure I'm that successful but I try. I am also someone who has seen and experienced the joy of thriving Christian community in a vast array of expressions. I have no doubt about the future of the gospel nor of the church that can carry it forward.

In some ways these characteristics of my identity hold the joy that Nehemiah and Paul proclaimed. In the challenging circumstances of transition my joy is in the strength of the Lord and my joy is in the fruit of the Gospel for the world. I am certain that I am not the most experienced nor the most faithful follower of Christ here. God's light and life are here among you and your joy will shine that light into the future. As we wait upon the coming of Christ anew, the bearing of His vulnerable humanity and the Eternal Wisdom of His life overcoming death, let us reflect together on the deeper identity of who we are as witnesses in joy in this place.



The Cultural Iceberg picture says that much of cultural identity is unseen and below the surface. Transition aims to identify the deeper aspects of our communal identity.