

~ Chapter Two ~

I am worthy in the eyes of God

*Trust in the Lord, and do good; so you will live in the land,
and enjoy security.*

Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.

Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act.

*He will make your vindication shine like the light, and the justice
of your cause like the noonday.*

*Our steps are made firm by the Lord, when he delights in our way;
though we stumble, we shall not fall headlong, for the Lord holds
us by the hand.*

PSALM 37:3-6. 23-24

The singer Jessie J was born Jessica Cornish. When she was twenty, she wrote a song called *Who You Are* with Toby Gad and Shelley Peiken. In the second verse she sings about not losing yourself in the blur of the stars, but instead following your dreams and your heart, and being true to yourself. It's an important and rather beautiful message. We are not all the same and we don't need to follow the crowd.

The inspiration for this song came at the end of a three-month trip to Los Angeles. Jessie had been shunted from studio to studio with various producers. "I'm very much someone who lives to be happy," Jessie told Elisa Bray for an article in *The Independent*, "I'm not just about the parties and I know so-and-so – I'm not that girl. So I looked in the mirror and started to cry and said, "Who am I? Music is my therapy" (Elisa Bray, "Jessie J – The girl from Essex who plans to take the pop world by storm" *The Independent*, 10 December 2010). In the same article, Jessie talked about her school days and following her dreams. Writing and performing music could be described as her vocation.

The literal meaning of the word vocation is a "call". But a vocation is more than an ordinary call. It's a call from God. Vocation is about what we are called to do in life, it is also about who we are called to be. Some might describe Jessie's experience in LA as a "stumble" (Psalm 37:24) which led to her writing this very successful track. *Who You Are* is about being true to yourself, and following your heart. The lyrics in Jessie's song are striking and she warns about losing yourself trying to conform to the expectations of others.

Do you know who you are? How well do you really know yourself? Just before I sat down to begin writing this Chapter, I had an email, asking me for a one sentence attribution for myself (in a maximum of twenty words) to go at the end of an article I had written. It took me a few minutes to think about this, and come up with something I was happy with. I went for: "Lucy Russell is a writer and author. She is mum to two sons and has a keen interest in Education". When we are asked who we are, it is most likely that we will respond with our name, job or role, and where we are from. But we are more than this. In St Paul's

Letter to the Colossians he writes, "You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:3). I don't know that I know myself fully. What I do know is that my diagnosis of MS has helped me to understand better who I am. As I write this book, I am beginning to see identification as a gift from God. Through my relationships, and through my MS, there has been a process of revelation. Some of my identity, hidden in Christ, has been revealed to me.

In psychology, sociology, anthropology and philosophy, "identity" is the conception, qualities, beliefs and expressions that make a person. So, "identity" is about who a person is. To a large extent our identities are formed through relationships with significant people in our lives. I have a friend who will tell you that he knows who he is, because he knows what he is not. And what he is not, is his own father. My friend rejected his dad's politics and prejudices when he was five years old, and his father told him his friend couldn't come to play, because he was Jewish. Having formed an opinion about his dad's attitudes and judgements, my friend has spent his life defining his position, and himself, as a polar opposite to all that his father stood for.

As the sociologists, psychologists and anthropologists, will tell you, we either aspire to the characteristics of others, or wish to dissociate from them, and that this is how our identities are formed. If our identity depends on our relationships, then it can't be static, our identities must change and develop through our relationships with others. This also means that our identity is not just our identity, we are not only who we choose to be. We are also who we are for other people: I am a mother, a wife, a daughter. My identity is formed through these roles, and others. What about Jesus' identity? He was a son, a friend and a teacher.

Jesus' identity shows itself through his actions and behaviour towards those he meets. But Jesus' identity is formed not only by what he said and did, but also in the way that those around him responded to him, and in the way his life is recorded in the Gospels, and interpreted by early Church leaders like St Paul. Jesus' identity is also impacted by the way we interpret and respond to him through the Gospels. It also follows that if our identities are formed through our relationships, then our relationship with Jesus influences who we are. But if we are going to have a relationship with Jesus, first we have to get to know him.

Trust in the Lord, and do good; so you will live in the land, and enjoy security

PSALM 37:3

So, who was Jesus? Who is Jesus? Unlike the question, "does God exist?" few people question whether or not Jesus existed. Although, it is quite amazing how many people think that Father Christmas was involved in the Nativity. *The Telegraph* reported in December 2013 that one in twenty Britons think that Father Christmas makes an appearance in the Bible, a proportion which rises to ten per cent among the twenty-five to thirty-five age group. A significant number of people apparently also think that Mary and Joseph might have brightened up the stable with a Christmas tree. More than two thousand people of all ages were polled on their knowledge of the Christmas story in the *ComRes* survey conducted on behalf of the Christian Institute (John Bingham, "Father Christmas granted a walk-on part in the Bible", *The Telegraph*, 21 December 2013). So, when my twenty-two-year-old Cambridge Graduate cousin told me she didn't believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and I responded, "Of course that's up to you, but you can't deny he was an incredible teacher

and a radical”, I shouldn’t have been surprised that she was amazed that Jesus actually existed as an historical figure. Given the evidence of the *ComRes* survey, there may well be a number of people who think of Jesus as a mythical character like Father Christmas in whom you either believe, or you don’t.

But there is no question that Jesus of Nazareth existed as a person. Jesus was born near Palestine towards the end of the reign of Herod the Great. We don’t know the actual date of Jesus’ birth, but it was almost certainly not 25 December, and Father Christmas was certainly not there. Jesus’ parents were called Mary and Joseph, and his family tree went back to King David, who lived about 1000-961 BC. Jesus was brought up in a town called Nazareth in southern Galilee, about one hundred miles north of Jerusalem and a few miles from Sepphoris, which was the largest city in Galilee. Since 63 BC Palestine had been under Roman occupation, as part of the Roman Empire. We don’t actually know very much about Jesus’ early years. He was brought up in the Jewish faith, and he probably learned to read and write in a local synagogue. There is one story in the Gospel of St Luke which tells us something about Jesus while he was growing up. When he was about twelve he went with his family and others from Nazareth to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem. At the end of the festival everyone set off for home. Maybe Mary assumed Jesus was with Joseph and the men, and Joseph assumed he was with Mary and the women. But after a day of travelling, Mary and Joseph looked for Jesus among their relations and friends, and realised he wasn’t with the caravan at all. Mary and Joseph returned to Jerusalem and searched frantically for him. After three days, they discovered him in the Temple, where he was listening to the teachers and asking them questions: “And all who heard him were amazed at his

understanding and his answers" (Luke 2:47). St Luke tells us that when Mary and Joseph found Jesus in the Temple they were overcome, as any parent would be. Mary reacts like any mother, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety" (Luke 2:48). Jesus himself is unfazed, basically saying, "Well, where did you think I would be?" This account reveals something about the kind of person Jesus was: he is intelligent and has confidence. But he is also sensitive to those around him, because having been told off by his mother for worrying herself and Joseph, St Luke tells us that he returned with them to Nazareth and "was obedient to them" (Luke 2:51).

C S Lewis would take issue with me suggesting to my cousin that it was her choice whether or not to believe that Jesus was the Son of God, but that it is undeniable that Jesus was a great teacher and radical. Lewis writes in his book, *Mere Christianity*:

I am trying here to prevent anyone from saying the really foolish thing that people often say about him [Jesus]: "I am ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God". That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on a level with a man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come up with any patronising nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that option open to us. He did not intend to.

C S LEWIS, *MERE CHRISTIANITY*
(LONDON: WILLIAM COLLINS, 2016) 52

Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart

PSALM 37:4

So, who does Jesus say he is? A good starting place for an answer to this question is St John's Gospel. In John 8:58, Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am". And in John 10:30, Jesus says, "The Father and I are one". Which prompts the question, "Who is the Father?" The Father is God, and God just is. God is creative. The book of Genesis opens by telling us both of these things: that God is, and that God is creative: "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth..." (Genesis 1:1). "God is love" (1 John 4:16b). God is wisdom (1 Corinthians 2:6-16). God's creative energy continues; creation is ongoing. God is the potter, we are the clay (Isaiah 64:8). This means that we are moulded and fashioned throughout our lives, just like a piece of clay on a potter's wheel. God knows what the finished work should be, but we are not there yet. I thought I was shaping up to be a vase before my diagnosis of MS, but God is still working at the potter's wheel. God has a clear idea of what I am being created to be. I don't know for certain what God's plan is, perhaps I'm going to be a jug. When James was born, I used to rock him and sing him to sleep, and one of the songs I sang him (as well as *Nellie the Elephant*) was *Abba Father* by Carey Landry. In this wonderfully meditative hymn we invite the Father to mould and fashion us, into the image of Jesus, the Potter's Son.

We are left in little doubt by St John, that Jesus is the Son of God. At the beginning of his Gospel, John writes, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). In John 1:14, it says, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's

only son, full of grace and truth". Towards the end of John's Gospel, Thomas the Twin says to the resurrected Jesus, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28). John is not alone in his belief in the identity of Jesus. In St Paul's letter to Titus, Paul describes Jesus as, "...our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13). And then there is Peter's view about Jesus' identity, which is revealed when Jesus asks his disciples who the people think he is:

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do the people say the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it."

MATTHEW 16:13-19

One of the interesting things about this piece of scripture is all the possible answers that the disciples give Jesus. But Jesus isn't having an identity crisis. He knows who he is, confident in his description of himself as the "Son of Man". What Jesus wants to know is whether the people have recognised his identity. And in fairness to the people, they have recognised something special about Jesus. They might not identify him as the Messiah, but they are making comparisons between him and the prophets. Alright, says Jesus, that's what the people think, now tell me who you think I am. Here the disciples have an advantage over the people, because their relationship with Jesus is closer. While the people might not be sure, Peter recognises who Christ is. It is through Peter's relationship with Jesus, and Jesus' relationship

with Peter, that each is able to identify the other: “You are the Messiah” says Peter, and, “you are Peter” says Jesus. Remember, until this point, Peter is actually Simon, son of Jonah. His identity is changed and shaped by Christ, now Simon Peter becomes Peter, the rock upon whom Jesus will build his Church.

The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, has said that Christian identity is about belonging in a place that Jesus defines for us, “By living in that place, we come in some degree to share his identity, to bear his name and to be in the same relationships he has with God and the world” (Rowan Williams, “What We Mean By Christian Identity – *World Council of Churches Address*”, 17 February 2006). So, how do we root ourselves in Christ? How do we move to a place defined for us by Jesus? In the United States in the 1990s, the phrase “What would Jesus do?” became popular with Evangelical Christians who used the phrase as a reminder to act in a way that demonstrates the love of Jesus. Thinking about what Jesus might do, is a good guiding principle when trying to root our lives and identities in him:

By standing in the place of Christ, it is possible to live in such intimacy with God that no fear or failure can ever break God’s commitment to us, and to live in such a degree of mutual gift and understanding that no human conflict or division need bring us to uncontrollable violence and mutual damage. From here, you can see what you need to see to be at peace with God and with God’s creation; and also what you need to be at peace with yourself, acknowledging your need of mercy and re-creation.

ROWAN WILLIAMS, “WHAT WE MEAN BY CHRISTIAN IDENTITY –
WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES ADDRESS” (17 FEBRUARY 2006)

Our steps are made firm by the Lord, when he delights on our way

PSALM 37:23

Many of us are searching. I was still searching, floundering, when I began writing this book. I believe there is within us a space, which only God can fill. There is a terrific quote in *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life* by David Foster Wallace:

There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship – be it JC or Allah, be it YHWH or the Wiccan Mother Goddess, or the Four Noble Truths, or some inviolable set of ethical principles – is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough. It's the truth. Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you. On one level, we all know this stuff already. It's been codified as myths, proverbs, clichés, epigrams, parables; the skeleton of every great story. The whole trick is keeping the truth up front in daily consciousness.

DAVID FOSTER WALLACE, *THIS IS WATER: SOME THOUGHTS, DELIVERED ON A SIGNIFICANT OCCASION, ABOUT LIVING A COMPASSIONATE LIFE* (NEW YORK: LITTLE BROWN AND COMPANY, 2009)

I used to find fulfilment in my work, but after I had James, I admit that I had an identity crisis. I found myself juggling ironing, housework and caring for James, while all the time comparing myself to other mothers and wishing I was a better, more together, version of myself. The truth, I have learned, is

that we can't find fulfilment in ourselves, any more than we can find it in the worship of money or our own body. And, why not? Well, because we were created for and by God, and like any piece of art, we reflect the talents, or the glory, of the artist who created us. There is more about art, creativity and God in Chapter Five. As I write this, there is a verse from Graham Kendrick's hymn, *Shine Jesus Shine* playing in my head:

As we gaze on your kingly brightness
So our faces display your likeness
Ever changing from glory to glory
Mirrored here may our lives tell your story
Shine on me....

It is in the artist's reflected glory that we hope to become glorified. According to St Paul in his letter to the Philippians (3:20-21), our citizenship is in heaven, and when Jesus returns, he will transform our bodies to be like "the body of his glory". The Christian viewpoint, that we'll come on to in Chapter Three, is a much longer view. The First Letter of St John warns us about trying to define ourselves in the world, rather than in the one who created the world:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; for all that is in the world – the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches – comes not from the Father but from the world. And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever.

1 JOHN 2:15-17

Unless we seek to find our identity in Christ, we are looking to find ourselves in something else. Which, as Wallace has pointed out, is a fairly thankless and fruitless task. If we root our identity in Christ, we don't need to be anxious or fear the

future any more. All we have to do is put Jesus first, and just be in the presence of Christ. This is summed up in the Gospel story of Martha and Mary. While Martha is busy serving her guests, Mary, sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening to him, has, in that instance, “chosen the better part”:

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was too distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

LUKE 10:38-42

Martha is distracted from the presence of Christ because she is too busy *doing* things for him to be still and listen to him. There is a bit of Martha and Mary in all of us, they are the two sides of ourself. We need to be able to choose when to be more like Mary and less like Martha, when to be doing things for Christ and when to be still and listen to him. We are often so busy doing things for God that we forget to stop and listen to what God is saying to us. I am trying to be still more often each day to listen to the God who is present at the centre of my being.

So, when I am asked who I am, my response needs to include my religious identity. I am Catholic by religion. Christian by faith. English by nationality. British by citizenship. European by culture. In my heart, my Catholicism and Christianity very definitely come first. St Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians that our faith will grow stronger as we focus our identity in

Christ. We all have a personal vocation, but discerning this, and our own identity, isn't easy. We can feel a bit like the apostles waiting for the Holy Spirit in the upper room. How many of us have woken up dreading the day ahead? Very few of us feel we have a calling, and so we often don't think about our lives in terms of vocation. But what if the school run, the daily grind, and the colleagues we find difficult, are all actually viewed as something God has willed as part of his plan? Rather than trying to define myself by the opinions and values of others (something Jessie J warns about in her song, *Who We Are*), or by my own feelings and desires, I am trying to let God define me, and tell me who I am. If we want to discern our vocation, the first thing we need to do is stop trying to be something we are not intended to be, and instead of thinking, "What would I prefer", think about the question, "What does God want me to be?". My MS has taught me that I am not in control (there is more about that in Chapter Three!), and that God knows me better than I know myself.

When he took part in Radio 4's *Desert Island Discs*, comedian and actor, Jack Dee, told Kirsty Young that at the age of twenty-one or twenty-two he was seriously considering becoming a priest:

I was becoming increasingly turned in on myself and depressed and had turned to religion as a place to hide away from what I was feeling. I felt massively conflicted in what I was doing in my life. I knew I was going hopelessly wrong.

DESERT ISLAND DISCS, BBC RADIO 4 (11 MAY 2014)

At this point in his life Jack experienced a frustration at not knowing what he was aiming for, where was his life going? He felt as though he was going in the wrong direction. He spent hours sitting in a

church. Interestingly, Kirsty Young asked him when the moment of clarity came: it was when working in a restaurant in Covent Garden, surrounded by drama students, actors and performers. Someone asked him one day what he did performance-wise. "The fact they had assumed I was one of them made me realise I always had been one of them." Jack himself describes the moment he realised he was a comedian as an epiphany. His account of how he found his way into comedy sounds similar to a religious experience, "I had a very strong sense of identity that was always kind of speaking to me" he said. But he didn't hear this until his vocation was revealed to him through his relationship with other actors and performers. While not a religious man, Jack describes himself as a man of faith. It is through our relationships with each other and with God that we begin to see who we really are. It was in recognising Jesus, that Peter discovered who he was. If we root our identity in Christ, and recognise who he is, perhaps we can also discover who we truly are.

Mary Magdalene, the disciples on the road to Emmaus, and Thomas the Twin, all take time to recognise Jesus after the Resurrection. What is interesting about the Resurrection accounts is the number of appearances Jesus makes to his friends. There are fifty days between Easter and Pentecost, during which time the disciples come to recognise their friend and believe in the Resurrection. They watch Jesus ascend to heaven, having just got used to having him around again. And then the Holy Spirit comes and changes everything. The apostles, consumed by confusion and lacking in confidence now that Jesus has gone again, had hidden themselves away. But, after receiving the Spirit they are transformed: clear and confident not only of their vocation, but also in their ability to live this out. The process of identifying Jesus as Christ, risen from the dead and ascended into heaven, has led them to this point.

Though we stumble, we shall not fall headlong, for the Lord holds us by the hand

PSALM 37:24

St Paul's own calling was unmistakable. He literally heard the voice of God:

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus...Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."

ACTS 9:1-6

Saul's own identity is only revealed to him when he enters a relationship with Jesus. Saul, who was also known as Paul, is known only as Paul from Acts 13:9. Saul is left behind. St Paul is a really interesting example when it comes to talking about what makes us who we are, and how our identity is hidden in Christ. In Paul's letter to the Galatians, he makes it clear that he understands that God's purpose for him was decided before he was born:

But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being.

GALATIANS 1:15-16

Paul had always felt a strong call to holiness (we are all called to holiness), which is what prompted him to become a Pharisee, and to follow Mosaic Law in such a very determined way.

Paul describes himself in the Acts of the Apostles as “being zealous for God” (Acts 22:3). It was Paul’s conviction about this calling that led him to persecute Christians whom he saw as a dangerous threat to the Jewish faith. The fact that God allowed early Christians to suffer as a result of Saul’s convictions, raises questions about suffering and where God is during our suffering. Why did God allow Saul to persecute Christians? These are questions we will come to in the next chapter. What I want to note here is that it was the man who persecuted the first Christians, whom God had chosen to lead his Early Church. Paul’s conversion is an example of God’s mercy and love, Saul is forgiven for what he has done. There is another question here, if Paul’s conversion had not been so dramatic, would he have become such a committed Christian? He understood God’s grace and mercy, because of his experience of it. He wrote to Timothy:

I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life.

1 TIMOTHY 1:12-16

St Paul is an example of someone who had a calling, but didn’t understand the exact nature of his calling, until he was on the road to Damascus. He knew he was being called by God, and thought this was as a Jewish Pharisee. In fact, God wanted Paul to lead the Early Church. Our moment of “epiphany”, when we understand who we are and what we are being called to be, may not be as dramatic as that experienced by the apostles

at Pentecost, or St Paul on the road to Damascus. So, how can we be sure we are going in the right direction? What if we, like Saul, have only got it half right? Well, we have the examples of St Peter and St Paul, who recognised Jesus and entered into a relationship with him, and then discovered who they were.

I will never forget going to see Edgar in his Year 2 class assembly about chocolate. He was in role as Willy Wonka for the assembly, as the children explained all that they had learned about the history of chocolate and Fairtrade, and acted out part of Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Edgar was brilliant as Willy Wonka, but that is not why I shall remember the afternoon. I will remember it because of the reaction of one of the mothers on the playground the next day, her daughter had played an Oompa Loompa. She had been horrified to find a dead shrew in the pocket of her daughter's costume, after the little Oompa Loompa had got home. The Oompa Loompa had evidently found the dead shrew under the horse chestnut tree on the way into school on the morning of the assembly, and picked it up. I laughed, and later asked the Oompa Loompa why she had put the shrew in her pocket. She thought she could make it better. Perhaps she will grow up to be a vet. Thomas Aquinas said that the things that we love tell us what we are". God loves us, and love tells us who we are. I'm beginning not to mind the lack of control. I'm quite happy for God to be in charge, since God wants our happiness more than we do. But not being in control doesn't mean we are passive. If we care being called, it is our choice to decide whether or not to answer. Vocation is about conversation and relationship. It can be described as an ongoing conversion experience, which keeps opening our eyes to a new awareness and understanding of God's loving presence. Who we are, are God's children (1 John 3:1). I hope I can give God some of the joy that my own children and the Oompa Loompa in Edgar's class, give me, as I try to understand and become the person I am meant to be.