

MAY 2016

Dear Friends,

'Who Do You Think You Are?'

In the popular TV series, 'Who Do You Think You Are?' celebrities are helped to trace their ancestry and in the process they often discover all manner of secrets and surprises from their past. It can be fascinating to watch and strangely therapeutic for those involved. Ancestral roots can play an important part in shaping our sense of identity.

Knowing our family background – those who brought us into being, lived with us, cared for us and nurtured us in our formative years – can of course be even more crucial, so when therefore the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, discovered a few weeks ago that his biological father was not Gavin Welby but Winston Churchill's last private secretary, the late Sir Anthony Montague Browne, whom he hardly knew, it would have been perfectly understandable if on receiving the news he had experienced a profound sense of shock. You or I may well have found it completely devastating. But Justin Welby displayed remarkable calm and courage and it is interesting to reflect upon the reasons for this:

First, he speaks of his identity as a Christian being rooted in the unchanging love of God as his heavenly Father, whom he has come to know through Jesus. God created him and God cares for him.

"I know that I find who I am in Jesus Christ," he tells us, "not in genetics, and my identity in him never changes."

If we know ourselves to be God's beloved children, that can be an enormous source of strength in facing the trials and tribulations of life. Justin Welby in fact showed himself utterly open and honest about the darker aspects of his family history. It was he who, in conjunction with the Montague Browns, initiated the DNA test to determine who was his biological father.

Welby, I suspect, experienced God's redemptive healing. He did not have an easy childhood. "My early life was messy," he observes. His parents were alcoholics and they were incapable of providing him with a stable family life. All of us know how an unstable family upbringing can scar an individual for life and deeply affect his or her ability to grow and mature as an adult. But Justin did not become bitter and twisted, or turn in on himself to wallow in self-pity, because God had freed him to look beyond himself to the needs of others and to use his own personal experience of suffering to empathise more effectively with them.

"To find that one's father is other than imagined", he says, "is not unusual". Indeed, it is "typical" of many people,

"My role as Archbishop makes me constantly aware of the real and genuine pain and suffering of many around the world, which should be the main focus of our prayers."

I am reminded of Jesus, when he stood amongst his disciples showing them the nail marks on his hands and feet, reminders that he too had suffered and could identify with whatever difficulties they were facing (Jn.20:20 cf Heb.4:15).

"Who do you think you are?" is one of the most important questions we can ask ourselves; "I am a child of God" is one of the most important answers we can give.

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