

Back in 1968, when I came to Dublin to study in Trinity, there were a number of cultural differences between Dublin and my native Birmingham that struck me as I began to settle down. The first one was that of what amounted to a ‘mixed marriage’. I recall my land lady in Blackrock saying with some satisfaction that none of her sons were involved in a mixed marriage. In Birmingham a mixed marriage was inter racial. Dublin in 1968 was not the multicultural city that it is today; there were very few people from overseas and for a moment I was left wondering were there whole areas of Dublin of which I was unaware with a large overseas population.

The other one that intrigued me at the time was in the area of people’s names. I got to know two students, who were brother and sister who seemed to have different surnames. There was Owen Mac Egoín and his sister Niamh Nic Egoín. This was resolved when Owen explained to this Sassenach blow in the obvious significance of the Mac and the Nic – son of and daughter of.

It brought home to me that our identity as son or daughter has its origins prior to our birth. I did not choose who was to be my father. From the very moment of my birth I was my father’s son, my mother’s child. That fundamental identity pre-dated everything else that may distinguish me; graduate of Trinity, husband of Rachel, father of Anthony and Benjamin, grandfather, priest in the Church of Ireland, Rector of Mountmellick, of Ahoghill, Rector of Howth. There is an essential “me” that underlines all of these.

I was born the son of Gilbert and Kathleen Brew and that sonship can never be taken away. My family might disown me but that fundamental identity can

never be erased. We share another fundamental identity with all humanity when we declare that we are all made in the image of God. That means that there is an intrinsic dignity to all humanity, irrespective of race, class, creed, gender that challenges attitudes of prejudice at any level. There is something of the divine in each and every one of us. It may be obscured at times by our weakness and failure but it is still there.

John takes this one stage further in the wonderful words of the Prologue of the 4<sup>th</sup> Gospel that we read each year at Christmas.

<sup>12</sup> But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, <sup>13</sup> who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. *John 1:12,13*

‘He gave power to become children of God.’ This affirmation is echoed in our reading from the First Letter of John, as the writer speaks of this fundamental identity we have in Christ.

<sup>2</sup>Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. *1 John 3:2*

As I read this, I recall words of Michael Ramsey, who was Archbishop of Canterbury, when I was a teenager and student. Writing in the context of Baptism, he says

Baptism ... declares that the beginning of a man’s Christianity is not what he feels and experiences but what God in Christ has done for him. .... The life of a Christian is a continual response to the fact of his Baptism; he continually learns that he has died and risen with Christ, and that his life is a part of the life of the one family.

*The Gospel and the Catholic Church. Michael Ramsey pp59,60*

I spoke earlier of my identity as something that pre-dated me. I was born the son of Gilbert and Kathleen Brew, an identity that predated me as graduate of

Trinity, husband of Rachel, father of Anthony and Benjamin, grandfather, priest of the Church of Ireland. If you like all these latter things are built upon, have grown out of that essential sonship that is me.

What Michael Ramsey is reminding us is that the beginning of my Christian life lies not in anything I can do or offer – it has its beginnings in what God has done in Christ. My Christian life is lived in response to that initial gift of God in Christ. So, in the words of our reading from the 1<sup>st</sup> Letter of John:

<sup>2</sup>Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed.

My Christian life is a process of discovering what that means; what it means, in the words of the Baptism Service, to die to sin, what it means to rise to new life in Christ – in and through this complex and strange person that is Kevin Brew.

Moreover as daughters and sons of God, we are called to live out our childhood of God as witnesses in our own generation of the risen Christ. At the end of a service of Baptism I will say to the child:

You have received the light of Christ.  
Walk in this light all the days of your life.  
**Shine as a light in the world  
to the glory of God the Father.**

That is what we are called to do, to shine as a light in this world, in our homes, in our schools and places of work. As a community and as individuals to be living signs of reconciliation in the places of discord, of integrity and truth in the face of falsehood, of love in the places of hate, of hope in places of fear, to be daughters and sons of God, to be Christ in the world of today.