Precious, loved, affirmed. Isaiah 43:1-7 January 9 2022.

*In an interview after her success at the Olympics, Nicola McDermott, the silver medallist in the high jump was asked about when her faith became a significant part of her life and responded:*

“I think as a teenager, I was always an outcast, and I got welcomed into a faith community that loved me.And I just remember encountering God’s love, and it changed the way I thought of myself – as a misfit, why I was so tall and stuff – and it gave me passion and purpose to use it. In 2017 was my big moment when it flicked the switch, and I decided to pursue God over sport – whatever comes from sport is a bonus, but I am already complete and perfect and loved as a person regardless of it. That just allowed me to soar over every high jump bar and not to be scared anymore because I am loved, and that is the most important thing.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

The cry of human hearts

There is something about our humanity that calls out for affirmation of who we are. Raising children shows us how we need to receive positive feedback to thrive. Even for Jesus in the incarnation we have God affirming him as *“the son whom He loves” “with whom He is pleased”.[[2]](#footnote-2)* From the story of creation we hear that humankind was created in the image of God. There is an inherent dignity, value and purpose to our existence. There is a relatedness to God which we are encouraged to embrace.

The children of Israel developed as a people from their special relationship with God. This formed them. This defined their identity. In this passage from Isaiah we see God speaking to the Israelites and affirming who they are and how their identity is grounded in who God is to them. It is an emphasis which is based on God’s grace towards them.

Secure because God is actively with them

It is an emphasis on *“whose they are”.* Who defines them, who created them, who has always been there for them, who has always loved them? Israel has undergone the pain of the exile, the doubts and fears, the questions about, where is God in the midst of all of this oppression. This passage points out that their identity is not lost, God has not forsaken them.

God has in fact embraced them both in the reality of their frailty and brokenness, and with an understanding of the potential that is within them. In referring to both Jacob and Israel the passage points to both the grace of God towards Jacob in his struggles and the special transformative work of God in enabling Jacob, to become Israel. God has always been with them, in struggles and in triumphs. Likewise God is with us in times of weakness failure and struggle as well as in times of encouragement, joy and excitement. God sets individuals on new paths, and God also works in the communities of people to renew, revitalise, to create a new thing amongst them. God knows them, understands them and continually loves them.

Affirmed because God has chosen to love them

God affirms them as being precious, honoured and loved by God! Wow! The language is similar to that which lovers may use of each other. They see more in their partner than other people may ever have seen. God of course is not beguiled by a flurry of romantic emotions, God loves us despite knowing us completely, even the most hidden dark corners of our beings. In accepting our brokenness we can also accept God’s loving grace and God’s affirmation of who we are, the potential within each of us and God’s commitment to be with us equipping us in life.

God embraces humanity through relationship. Isaiah reminds the people that this is *“your God”* *“the Holy One of Israel”* *“your Saviour”.* The Holy One of Israel evokes memories of Mt Sinai and the *“otherness”* of God, the awe inspiring holiness of God, and the term *“Saviour”* may evoke recollections of the exodus and their experiences of the relentless saving power of God. The Hebrew word used, *Mosia,* depicts one who steps in when one is unable to help themselves.[[3]](#footnote-3) Our identity and security are founded in who God is rather than who we are.

Throughout history God has called them to be the people of God and recognised the potential planted within humankind. God also dealt with the frailty, brokenness and weakness of humankind.

God initiates redeeming us. God calls and God redeems.

God acts in limitless grace. *“This will not be because of anything they have done. It is not said that they have become more perceptive or more obedient”[[4]](#footnote-4)* God is lavishing grace upon the people. The passage emphasises that no cost is too high for God to rescue humankind. The people of God had often been blind and insensitive to God in their daily lives, yet God remains loving and gracious.

This is an experience in time and a continuing and repeated reality in life. God offers limitless grace. God steps into history in a new way, in Jesus. In this process God is perfectly revealed to humanity in ways that enable people to understand that this God will support them through whatever they face in the future. God is saying to the people*, ‘This is what I am like and I will be with you’.* God is constantly taking the initiative in enabling us to see that God really is with us.

Worship provides us with a structured opportunity to remind ourselves and one another of who we are and whose we are. We celebrate together the faithfulness of God over time, we rejoice that we are redeemed not because of anything we have done but because of Jesus death and resurrection for us and the all pervading love and grace of God.

The spiritual disciplines we take with us into our daily living reaffirm that God is always with us and always reaching out in love towards us.

Sometimes we struggle to accept *who we are* and *whose we are,* so perhaps the words of Henri Nouwen may help us.

Henri’s experience is not likely to perfectly match our own yet I think his words have a universal relevance and point to one of the ways in which we can seek to live out of the identity we have through God’s work within us. He said: “Personally, as my struggle reveals, I don’t often “feel” like a beloved child of God. But I know that that is my primal identity and I know that I must choose it above and beyond my hesitations. Strong emotions, self-rejection, and even self-hatred may justifiably toss us about, but we are free to respond as we will. We are not what others, or even we ourselves, think about ourselves. We are not what we do. We are not what we have. We are a full members of the human family, having been known before we were conceived and moulded in our mother’s wombs. In times when we feel bad about ourselves, we can try to choose to remain true to the truth of who we really are. We can look in the mirror each day and claim our true identity. We can act ahead of our feelings and trust that one day our feelings will match our convictions. We can choose now and continue to choose this incredible truth. As a spiritual practice we can claim and reclaim our primal identity as beloved daughters or sons of a personal Creator.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

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1. Eternity News, August 8, 2021 accessed through https://www.eternitynews.com.au/good-news/nicola-mcdermott-the-medal-is-silver-but-the-speech-is-gold/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Luke 3:22 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah Chapters 40-66,* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1998) 139-140 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah Chapters 40-66,* 136 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Henri Nouwen society accessed through https://henrinouwen.org/meditation/you-are-beloved/ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)