

# Soul Spark: Session 3



## Who am I?

How do I understand myself? What helps me understand myself? These are questions worth pondering and looking at the clues within ourselves to our inner answers to these questions. Some of the strongest clues we have can be when we find ourselves feeling affronted, worthless, unappreciated... For often the root of these feelings is the damage done to the security we have in seeing ourselves in a particular way. When someone doesn't take our advice, and we find our pride has taken a knock, we are in touch with an aspect of how we like to be seen – as someone offer wise and valuable advice! When we find our job security is under threat and it arouses feelings of worthlessness, the security of our identity as being a valuable worker is shaken.

Scripture reminds us in many ways that our true identity is as children of God. A significant aspect of the spiritual journey is the process of growing in this sense of identity and the diminishing of those senses of identity that are less secure.

The question 'how would I introduce myself to a new group of people?' gives us further clues to how we like to see our identity. We might want to describe where we live, our marital status, our work, our interests, our achievements. Alternatively we might describe how we are feeling about being where we are or about a particular issue. Noticing what we might say may well point to where we see our identity lying.

A useful model for understanding our identity is described by Margaret Silf in the *Landmarks*<sup>1</sup>. She describes three concentric circles. The outer circle – 'Where am I?' is those things that are the givens and practical aspects of our life – where we live, who we live with, what we do, where we have been in our life journey. Often these are the easiest things to share with others about ourselves because they are concrete facts. The next circle in is the 'How am I?' area which is about our thoughts and feelings about ourselves and about situations. For some these can be shared easily, for others this is less easily shared for the sense of revealing more inner stuff and therefore being more vulnerable. The innermost circle 'Who am I?' reminds us of the deepest sense of who we are, that is beneath the facts, feelings and attitudes of our life.

'I am a unique manifestation of the love of God' said Donald Nicholl<sup>2</sup> introducing himself to a group. This wonderfully expresses the awareness of 'Who am I?' If only we believed, trusted and felt this! We experience much in life that undermines our personhood, that our entrusting our identity in status, wealth, job etc is a way of seeking to restore our sense of who we are. Thus the treasure of who we are – as beloved children of God is held in earthen vessels. Being reminded of the presence of treasure is important. A rather grumpy

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Silf, *Landmarks* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1998); chapter 1 explores this model of our understanding of ourselves.

<sup>2</sup> Donald Nicholl, was Rector of Tantur, the ecumenical institute near Jerusalem. A historian and spiritual writer he once introduced himself to a group in this way! And why not?!

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old nun was invited to pray 'Lord, help me accept the truth about myself; no matter how beautiful it is!' Zachaeus finds his treasure in his encounter with Jesus who had somehow seen the treasure within his earthen vessel. The story of Rabbi Zusya from the Hasidic tradition offers another reminder of the importance of who we are.

When Rabbi Zusya arrived in heaven, as the legend goes, he was anxious about the degree of his holiness. He wondered whether God was going to reprimand him. He imagined God angrily cross-questioning him about his way of life, 'Tell me, why did you not become like Moses or Solomon or David?'

When God approached the rabbi, however, the question was altogether different. 'Tell me,' asked God quietly, 'why did you not become Rabbi Zusya?'

The affirmation of God's love for us, as glorious manifestations of love, or as earthen vessels with treasure within offers the most important springboard for spiritual growth. It is no coincidence that the Gospels show Jesus' ministry beginning with the profound affirmation of who he is at his baptism, or that the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius begin with engaging in prayer with this profound reality. This is core to what Ignatius calls the Principle and Foundation – the point from which Spiritual Growth and discernment can begin.

However it can be difficult to discern the treasure within among the inner tangle of drives, compulsions, longings and dreams, hopes and fears. The key is to start with the longings and daydreams. Daring to trust that they may reveal treasure can be difficult, but is important. As Therese Daly puts it

'In this journey of self discovery, as I come to be in touch with my deepest longings, and open myself to God, to others and the world, two deepest longings meet: mine and God's. To my surprise and joy, I discover that these longings are in fact identical.'

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<sup>3</sup> This story from the Rabbinic tradition is quoted in Trevor Hudson, *Christ Following – Ten Signposts to Spirituality* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1996). See the web resources for the full text.

<sup>4</sup> Therese Daly, *Deepest Longings* (Spectrum Australia, 1990)