

## **Views from the Pews: Who do you think you are?**

When a young person first enters our Youth Court system, the professionals involved conduct a careful risk assessment. They ask; are drugs, alcohol, family violence, mental ill-health, or intellectual misdevelopment present? Quite often. But almost always there is also an identity problem. This is a cross-cultural phenomenon, driven by loss of connection with elders, by smaller and fragmented families, geographical dislocation, and loss of community self-knowledge.

A poor or even non-existent sense of identity is a principal driver of mental illness and of crime. Those with no identity have nothing to lose. This is something society needs to face up to. Everyone needs a whakapapa. It's no wonder the TV series of the same name is so popular. Celebrities get to explore their ancestry, and - so we are led to believe - are strengthened by the experience. We find it easy to empathise with them.

St Matthew is described in my Bible as 'A Pious Jew'. It is he who heroically sets out to 'sell' Jesus to his fellow Jews as the man who - yes - is the Messiah that they had been expecting for so long. Matthew devotes 17 verses to Jesus' whakapapa, starting at the very beginning of Chapter One. Matthew would have shone at any powhiri - he was the master of identity, able to pinpoint who Jesus was, with careful reference to past teaching about a Messiah - the Emmanuel - the 'God is with us' signal.

Without our ancestors, we are nobody. We are incomplete. It is not unreasonable to ask if that accounts for the significance of Anzac Day, not just as a day of thanksgiving and remembrance, but as a day for reconnection with past generations whose deeds give modern life greater meaning. Identity is a recurring theme in Scripture, so as Christians we can feel confident in finding out who we really are.

We can learn a lot from Pacific Island cultures whose old people remain part of their family units throughout their lives. Their tombs are often constructed in the garden of their home. Their children and grandchildren, who grow up watching their ancestors live, grow old and die, never have to wonder who they are.

Our congregation grows ever more diverse. We all have different stories to tell, particularly about those of our forebears who made us who we are. We do well to remember, they are all with us on our journey.

*Richard Swarbrick*