

KNOWING PEOPLE FOR WHO THEY ARE

For most of us, our name is something precious. It is one of the things we say to a person when we first meet them. It is a description that helps people get to know us.

In the New Testament there are two significant examples of name changes. We learn that Peter becomes the new name for Simon the fisher. Paul is the new name for Saul the persecutor. Jesus assigns them their new names. It is as if he saw something in them that they had not yet fully realised. As the stories unfold, we see that both Peter and Saul grow further into their identity. One develops maturity and moves from being impetuous. The other moves from being zealous. There is something significant about the name change. It is an important witness to this development in their lives. Over time, they become great leaders in the early church influencing the shape of the Jesus movement in the first century CE.

Neither Peter or Paul needed to go to a civil registry somewhere and disclose what had happened.

When a person is born NSW, the document that legally communicates their name is their Birth Certificate. It will be used many times in their life as they enrol in school, apply for a driver's licence, or seek to get their first passport. The document also contains other information such as the sex assigned to them at birth by the doctor. Right now, it is possible for a person to legally change their name. It is not possible for a person to legally change the sex assigned to them at birth without going through invasive surgery.

As we reflect on this, we recognise that transpeople offer us a great gift. They remind us that life is about growing into our identity. They show us that it is possible to overcome the huge constraints on being who we are. Their lived experience is growing up with others assuming they have a one identity. Yet, they have a profound sense of a very different identity. Only as they grow older, and learn more about the broad spectrum of humanity, do they discover a way to be fully themselves. This often involves a name change and often, more significantly, a change of gender description. For some, it involves surgery, but not for all.

Transpeople, and their allies, want the law in NSW to change so that their birth certificate will fully reflect who they know themselves to be, even if they do not have gender reassignment surgery. They want this change, so the law affords them the dignity and respect of who they truly are.

Throughout the ages, people have tried to capture the wonder of being human in poetry and song. They used these mediums as a way of promoting dignity and respect. Psalm 139 is not a scientific prescription for human origins. It is a theological reflection on the beauty of life. It is a recognition that every person bears the image of God to others. Jews and Christians derive a commitment to love every human being from scriptures such as this. The author declares that God has known every part of them from the very beginning. God knows their body and their inner self.

For some transpeople, the drive to be known for who they are can be deeply spiritual. As they and people around them affirm their name and gender identity they find a deep sense of rest and peace. They abide more fully in the sense of being fearfully and wonderfully made by the God who knows

them through and through. The wish for all transpeople is that they be esteemed and respected by the community for who they know themselves to be. To be offered equal citizenship with the identity that best describes them.

There will be ongoing debate in Christian circles about whether it is appropriate for people to change their name and gender identity. As a person deeply inspired by the way of Jesus, this profoundly saddens me. It worries me even more when it is weaponised against people who already feel pushed to the margins of society.

I have taken heart from the work in the Church of England. Six years ago, it affirmed that it “welcomes and encourages the unconditional affirmation of trans people, equally with all people, within the body of Christ, and rejoices in the diversity of that body into which all Christians have been baptized by one Spirit.”

Transpeople consistently and continuously bear the image of God to us. In the spirit of Paul writing to the Corinthians, Christians need to know that they should not say to part of the body that they have no need of them.

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