

Identity and Union in Christ

Trinity 4, 19th June 2016

OPENING

I'm sure you'll all agree, it's been a horrifying week, with the massacre in Orlando and the murder of an MP – and this coming week is likely to be difficult in another way, with our nations deep divisions over the EU referendum.

All of these things, provoke profound questions about **identity** – the people we are, and the people want to be.

IDENTITY

Identity is complex.

Even an apparently simple question such as '*Who are you?*' can be answered in many ways. You might answer with:

Your name

Or nationality.

The place where you're from

Or the place where you now live.

Perhaps your ethnicity

Your job

Your religion

Or your relationship to someone else.

All of these things and much more, are ways of saying who you are – although none of them captures us entirely.

We all have multiple identities that we desperately try to hold together; when we are at work we are primarily a colleague and defined by our job; on our way back we are called by our activity as a commuter, but at home we be are primarily a parent or a spouse, described by our relationship to others.

GALATIANS

In Galatians, Saint Paul is talking about these multiple identities we all have, but for him there is only one identity that ultimately matters:

'There is no longer Jew nor Greek

There is no longer slave or free

There is no longer male or female

For you are all one in Christ Jesus.'

He is talking to a Church community that is riven with division – in its ethnic and cultural background, in the social and economic status of its members and between genders. Paul tells them in *no uncertain terms that all these things are irrelevant* – because their primary identity is as Christians – and through this they have an equal dignity and a foundational source of unity that gives coherence and meaning to who they are in their diversity.

So I ask you –

How does your Christian identity unify your many identities?

How does it hold together and make sense of your varying roles and relationships?

When you are at work – are you still, in some way, a Christian?

When you are commuting or shopping on the Barnes High Street – are you a Christian?

When you are at home, with your family and friends – are you a Christian?

It is very easy to compartmentalise our faith – that indeed is what secularists want – for faith to be squeezed into a narrow section of our identity, marginalised into irrelevance.

Accepting this might make our life easier for a time, but ultimately it makes us fragmented individuals whose lives are without purpose or meaning – whereas Christ came to make us whole in Him.

ORLANDO & JO COX

Last Sunday morning, news began to filter back that a man had walked into a nightclub in Orlando and killed around 50 people and wounded at least as many more.

Omar Mateen himself had apparently been a regular at the club, and was in deep conflict with his own sexual, religious and cultural identity.

On Friday, a man walked up to the MP Jo Cox and shot and stabbed her in the street. A man who in his cry of 'Britain First', connected his actions with some kind of national identity, tied to far-right politics.

In these dark stories, where is the Good News that we need so much to hear?

The miracle of the Gospel, is that it always speaks to us, even in the midst of horrors and situations that we could never have imagined in our worst nightmares.

LEGION

In today's Gospel, Jesus goes out to meet a man whose actions have taken him beyond the pale of human society. He is a foreigner who lives in a place of death and of whom everyone is afraid. But our Lord does not dismiss him as mad and bad, instead asks him who he is – 'What is your name?'. And he replies:

'My name is Legion, for we are many'.

He does not know who he is; he has no identity other than the demons of hate, anger and violence that possess. But by entering into relationship with him, Our Lord makes him whole, and he is soon *found 'sitting at his feet, clothed and in his right mind'*.

It is important that we do not compartmentalise Omar Mateen, and James Mair (who gave his name as 'Death to Traitors' to a court) as simply mad and bad – or we may fail to see the demons within ourselves and our world. We may fail to enter into dialogue and ask questions about gun control, far right politics, homophobia and the negative image of politicians which their actions prompt us to explore.

REFERENDUM

With this difficult week behind us, this coming week we face a different challenge, but one which is again about identity.

Who are we as a nation?

Who do we want to be as a nation?

For it seems that we do not know and so are divided about it.

I think it was the author Trollope – Anthony, not Joanna – who said that *‘the Church of England is the only Church in the world that doesn’t interfere with your politics or your religion!’*

I beg to differ!

I never believe in telling you how to vote – there is no single and clear Christian response to the EU Referendum – but there is **your** Christian response. How does your decision connect with your Christian identity? Your faith in dialogue with your views and actions as an integrated person in Christ.

Into this context and today’s Gospel, the Bishop of Southwark has written a pastoral letter that he has asked to be read in every church in this diocese this morning:

My brothers and sisters in Christ

On Thursday 16th June a Member of Parliament was killed on the streets of her constituency in West Yorkshire. Not only is this a tragedy for Jo Cox’s young family but it has united people of good will throughout the nation in sorrow. I commend Jo Cox, her family, friends and constituents to your prayers as well as all who serve in public office and positions of trust and responsibility in our nation.

On Thursday 23rd June, those registered to vote in the referendum on our membership of the European Union will have the opportunity to take part in an historic decision. To do so is a civic duty, an act of commitment to the work of democracy as it has developed over many generations in this country. The right to vote has been hard won and not everyone in the world today has this right.

As Christians we are called to be Christ-centred, which means being outward focussed. This means taking our civic responsibilities seriously and playing our part in building community. It means we should exercise our duty to vote. I would not presume to dictate how you should vote, but I would ask you to consider: how do we want to forge our identity and live with each other? What sort of place should our nation be and how do we wish to foster interdependency and work together for peace and justice between nations?

Lastly, I would plead for one other thing: mutual respect. There are reasonable arguments and people of good will on both sides in this referendum. Either view can be held in good conscience. But the tone of the debate has often failed to reflect this. Whichever way the issue is decided, we must seek unity to follow together the path that the majority chooses. My prayer is that we would strive to speak well of one another, both during the campaign and after. Whatever happens, we will continue to tell the story of our faith in Christ Jesus in whom we are all one, all children of God.

Whichever decision you prayerfully reach, to leave or to remain, I do urge you to go out and vote.

+ Christopher Southwark

After a week of massacre and murder, and with a profoundly difficult week to come for the life of our nation; I would like us all to hold onto the faith that Saint Paul had in the unity of all people in Christ, which I have rewritten for this particular time:

'There is no longer gay nor straight

There is no longer left nor right

There is no longer Brexiters or Remainers

For all of you are one in Christ Jesus.'

Amen.

Fr Stephen Stavrou