

Acts 10: 44-end; 1 John 5: 1-6; John 15: 9-17

Identity and Belonging

Voting

Well I do hope that, if you were allowed to, last Thursday you managed to vote. Whatever we think about politics, national or local, it is still a great privilege to be able to vote. These days, of course, in order to vote, we have to take some form of acceptable photographic ID - a passport, a driving licence, something that proves we are who we say we are, and that we are voting only for those who will be representing the area in which we live. So to vote we need to prove our identity and to where it is that we belong.

Identity and belonging are two important factors to our very nature and remain important principles throughout our entire lives. We all have a name to which we are known throughout our lives (unless we change it); we have an official date of birth, which we can't change – although many try depending on whether we are trying to get into, or out of, something. And we have a sex or gender – which many in society are currently in conflict about, as to whether that can be changed or not. Our identity is important.

As is to where or to what we belong. And we often find it important to make others aware of this – which place we identify as our 'true home'; which Church we attend; which company we work for; and in my opinion something of huge importance: which football club we support! That is essential to establish! Belonging is important.

Identity and belonging go together to form us as human beings.

Early Church

In response to the resurrection of Jesus, gathered communities of people were emerging into a movement we know as the Church. The very word used for Church in the Bible, Ecclesia, literally

means a 'gathering of those summoned'. What marked out the people who belonged to these communities was how they identified themselves with others who believed in the resurrection of Jesus and in the stories that were being told of him by the apostles and those closest to them. It was a distinct identity and one which required commitment, faith and courage; because to identify as a follower of Christ was dangerous – and has been throughout history, and in many parts of the world today.

The Jesus movement, one of the names the Ecclesia or Church was given at the time, was a movement inside the Jewish faith not as separate to it.

And so there was a big debate about who could be 'let in' as it were and we see how this unfolds throughout the book of Acts. The big question was: should those who were not Jews, and who didn't follow certain religious practices be allowed to belong to this Ecclesia and identify as a Jesus follower? Questions about circumcision, acceptable foods and table fellowship were big issues. It was a controversial and difficult debate.

So just what kind of proof was it necessary for the first Century equivalents of the returning officers to see, in order to be allowed to pledge their allegiance?

Well this is the situation that faced the apostle Peter in today's Acts reading. Having been sent by God to the home of Cornelius, a Gentile or non-Jew, but someone who wanted to identify with Christ and become part of the Ecclesia, Peter and his colleagues were "astounded" that the Holy Spirit had cut right through the debate and shown them clearly that *She* would authorise who would be 'let in'. The presence of the Holy Spirit within Cornelius and his family, was the true and undisputable advocate for their identification as followers of Jesus.

Therefore Peter conducted their baptisms - the Church's symbolic action of belonging.

Friends

Perhaps all of this took Peter back to that special time of the Last Supper as told in John's Gospel. In particular, when Jesus explained that the Apostles, and those who would come to believe in their witness and follow their teaching, would be identified as his *friends*.

The word 'friend' goes much deeper than someone who is a mate or a colleague; or someone whose request you've accepted on Facebook, or even a close acquaintance. The meaning of the word friend (*Philos*) describes one who is a companion through life; a partner in all that you do in that life; but ultimately as one with whom you share love. It is a word that speaks not only of identity but of a deep sense of belonging.

To be a friend in this way means that we have an assured and strong relationship with God. It also means that we must want to bear fruit which testifies to that relationship. We become identified by our love, joy, peace, patience compassion, generosity, faithfulness, humility and self-control. This is not easy and we have to work at this.

So if you want to deepen your friendship with Jesus by bearing this fruit, do come along to our Reflective Worship tonight and for the next few months. We will be thinking and learning about how we can do this.

Church

Also, today in this Church we will be welcoming Pauline officially into the Church of England, and this afternoon welcoming Elsie as she is baptized. Both are strong symbols of identity and belonging. Pauline, you described to me how and why you felt you needed to do something, publicly, to feel that sense of belonging here.

You are already loved, accepted and valued here, but today you will affirm before God and everyone else that you have chosen *this* parish as the place in which you believe is where Christ has called you to be; to accept his teaching, discipline and authority, and to commit to joining in its worship and mission.

Through here is where your friendship with Jesus will be deepened and lived out more fully. Through the Holy Spirit, for you and for us all, communion with Christ can be experienced.

Going on

Well, the good news is that if you want to receive Communion or a blessing today, you don't have to show us your passport or driving licence; there is no requirement to prove who you are or where you live. And you won't get turned away for supporting the wrong football team.

We receive freely as people who identify as believing that 'Jesus is the Christ'; as people who feel that sense of belonging to his Ecclesia, those he called out, his Church; and people who are open to the Holy Spirit and want to bear fruit.

But at those very moments today and in the future when you receive the bread, wine or blessing, remember that, astoundingly, wonderfully, and ultimately, you receive it someone who has been chosen to be a friend of Jesus. Amen.

Revd Richard Haynes

6th Sunday of Easter. 5 May 2024