

Wheatley United Reformed Church
Sunday 5 October 2014 (Year A)
Isa. 5.1-7; Psalm 80.7-15; Phil.3.4b-14; Matt. 21.33-46

Every now and again when I give a talk I am asked to supply a potted biography. It's hard to know what to put in and what to leave out in a few lines. Which bits of your life would you select if you had to introduce yourself to an audience? Who we are – the question of our identity; where we feel at home – the question of belonging; and what we think life is for – the question of purpose – are fundamental to our humanity. They may receive different answers at different points in our lives. When I was eighteen I quite reasonably felt that the future stretched out before me in all kinds of potentially exciting ways. I was much more interested in the opportunities that would come my way than in any kind of reflection on how I had got to where I was. But like many of us, the older I get the more fascinated I am by that past.

You've probably noticed that the more global the world becomes the more people are becoming anxious to assert their own particular identity. This tension lies at the root of quite a lot of our problems. We travel the world like no generation has before and find the same multinational chains in every city high street. We have lived through a technological revolution which means that we have a huge amount of information at the touch of a button and can be in touch with people far away in an instant. The world has shrunk to the size of a computer screen, but that doesn't always empower us: decision-makers are beyond our reach; governments can seem distant and impersonal, even though the effects of their policies can hit home hard. We want to have some measure of control over our lives, and we expect those who make decisions which affect them to be held accountable. We long to be recognised as individuals, not as members of the consumer herd, only of interest if we are going to spend. We need to feel that we belong somewhere and that there is some purpose bigger than just ourselves to which we can devote our energies. Who am I? Where do I belong? What am I here for? Big questions; lots of possible answers.

During the weeks that led up to the Scottish independence referendum you could hear some of those concerns coming through, especially in the Yes campaign. It's always harder to defend the status quo than to hold out the hope of radical change.

There was a lot of talk about a fairer Scotland, about taking control of one's own national destiny. The debate engaged with and energised people who were otherwise completely turned off by politics, and it centred on these very issues, of identity, belonging, and purpose. Had I been living in Scotland I expect that my heart would have gone one way and my head another. Yet there can be a darker side to such aspirations: the desire to assert my identity over against yours; the sense of belonging to a nation which requires the breaking of ties with other nations; the assertion that we are going to be fair because you are not. Pride in one's own particular history is one thing; the local needs to be protected and cherished in our global world; but nationalism untamed has wrought endless suffering and destruction, as both World Wars so tragically showed. When tribes and nations pervert religious traditions to justify acts of terror and violence the consequences are always dire. Remember those heartbreaking words in Isaiah: God imagines his beloved people as a vineyard he has planted, only to find that instead of harvesting the good fruits of justice and righteousness there is only bloodshed and the cry of the innocent and downtrodden.

You will have wondered, as I have, why so many young men feel so drawn to violent jihadism that they find their way to Syria and Iraq to become part of a brutal reign of terror. Much of it, surely, has to do with identity and belonging and purpose, in its own twisted way. They want to identify with their brothers in faith, whom they see as threatened by heretical branches of the same faith and by Western powers, the materialistic and hedonistic values of which they reject. They long to be part of some great enterprise which will change the world, in itself a fine aspiration, but not when it involves imposing your vision of society on everyone else, enslaving women and murdering those who disagree with you. I am not at all sure that government policies to combat extremism by tougher and tougher legislation will solve the problem. Good laws help to change attitudes – we have seen that during my lifetime in respect of equality. But the problem lies as much in the heart as in the head, in a diseased sense of identity and purpose, for which the only sure remedy is moral and spiritual. There are groups within British Islam who are trying their hardest to combat extremism from within their own religious traditions, and they certainly need our support.

In Philippians 3 Paul is wrestling with his own issues of identity. He is a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin; circumcised; a Pharisee trained in interpretation of the Law; once an ardent opponent of those modern heretics who were claiming that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah. There's his potted biography. He knew who he was, where he had come from, what his mission in life was. But, he continues, he has come to regard all these advantages as loss because of Christ. All the things we human are so proud of, he continues, count as nothing in comparison to what we have gained in Christ. I wonder. Do we really have to regard everything that is particular to who we are and everything that we value as nothing, abandoning them cheerfully to espouse some vague mystical state? It's not quite what Paul meant. Years ago my mother, who is Jewish, asked me which of two dresses she should wear for a particular occasion. When I pointed at one of them she gave the classic Jewish response: 'What's wrong with the other one, then?' Jewish teaching delights in opposites: God and mammon; loving me and hating your parents. It's a rhetorical device to make us think about our priorities. It doesn't mean we should give up money or abandon our family ties; it asks us to think of them not as ends in themselves but as belonging to a larger purpose.

What exactly is Paul is trying to say? Something like this. All the ways in which we define ourselves take second place to the new identity we acquire when our lives have been transformed by Christ. We don't have to bin them, only let them be redefined in him. This is never easy. Old loyalties to nation, family, group, more deeply rooted in us, want to dominate us. That's how people come to make such terrible mistakes with religion: instead of putting their lives at the service of Christ they adopt him as their tribal god and use his name to force others to conform to what they say his will demands. But for Paul, to be in Christ is to become a new individual in a new community, one which is not based on our own sense of identity, belonging and purpose, but which embraces all kinds of people. Social class is irrelevant; so too the image of ourselves we want to project; so also race; education; gender; sexuality. The barriers they create in human societies have no place in the Christian community because Christ died and is risen for the whole world, not just our little bit of it.

When earlier we read the statement of the nature, faith and order of the United Reformed Church, we touched on these very issues. We have an identity rooted in a particular history, which we acknowledge; but we do not make a fetish of it. We may look back to Calvin or to the Puritans and the turmoil of the seventeenth century - Civil War, the republican experiment under Cromwell, and the persecution which followed before tolerance came. But we are part of the whole story of God's people, constantly refreshed and renewed by the gathered wisdom of the ages, and we look forward to a time when the painful barriers between different Christian confessions, which in the past have caused at least as much terror and bloodshed as we see now in parts of the Middle East and Africa, are consigned to the scrap-yard. The experience of our Reformed identity is especially prominent when we read that in the things that effect obedience to God the Church is not subordinate to the State. Not so controversial in modern Britain; but a sure recipe for persecution even to the death for those who take such a stand against oppressive governments in many parts of the world. But we have also learned in our own time that governments should respect the rights of conscience and belief. Easy enough for us to say here and now; but there are many governments which harass and imprison and execute those who take a peaceful and principled stand against their policies. Our purpose, like that of all Christian communities, is to serve God's will of justice and peace for all humankind.

There's one other element to be highlighted. The elders and ministers we ordain and induct are not a different class of Christian. All baptised people are called to be ministers of Christ; every Christian, to be a sacrament, a living embodiment of Christ. This collective expression of ministry, lay and ordained together, is precious to us. It explains why we believe that each member of the church has the same right and responsibility as any other, ministers included, to take full part in the governance of the local congregation. We are not told what to do or to think; we gather together, in openness to the Spirit's guidance, to listen for the word of God as it speaks through Scripture and in sacramental signs; but, just as importantly, as it reaches us in our local communities and from wherever bloodshed and cries of anguish tell us that human evil is trampling over what is just and right. When we disagree, we try to cultivate patience and forbearing, not to foster division, because Christ has called us to

bring all our differences to him, to build them up into a richer and deeper communion than we could ever know in separation. It stands as a model in this imperfect world for what the kingdom of God is like. It is a high calling, and not one we can achieve by our own efforts. The wonderful thing is that from the moment we respond to the vision, we are given the grace to go beyond what we ever imagined we were capable of. That is the secret of life in Christ; a dynamic, two-way relationship which embraces us where we are and catches us up into all the adventures of love both human and divine.