

After ordination, my first curacy was in Sunderland. I was just 24, and the North East seemed like another world. The people were lovely – it was just that I found it hard to understand what they were saying! As time went by and I began to settle down, what struck me most was the strong sense of local identity that everyone shared. “I belong Sunderland” was a phrase I often heard. It expressed their rootedness and sense of belonging.

I was reminded of this when I read today’s passage from the letter to the Philippians. Paul too knows where he comes from, where his roots are. “A member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee.” In fact, he’s not only a Jew and a Pharisee, but also a Roman citizen, so he comes from a particularly privileged background.

So what about us? What has helped to form us? What has made me, me; you, you? We’ve just emerged from the Scottish referendum, which has led many English people to ask just what it is that constitutes Englishness and English identity, but of course nationality is just one among all sorts of other influences that give us our identity – our family backgrounds, our particular interests, our work, the different communities that we belong to, as well of course as our own unique personalities and personal stories.

So here we all are this-morning, each of us with a huge hinterland of history. Given how important all these influences are, what Paul goes on to say to the Philippians is quite extraordinary. He tells them that he doesn’t give a fig for the usual things that we reckon are important for our sense of identity and meaning. As far as he is concerned, all his great advantages – his Jewish faith, his Roman allegiance – are so much rubbish. What matters more than anything else, he says, is his relationship with Jesus. Listen again to what he writes: “Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him”.

When I read these words, and thought about what they implied, I found myself asking whether I could say the same. Do I believe that my relationship with Jesus comes before everything else that gives me a sense of self and identity? What about my background, my family, my work, my interests, my possessions, my hobbies? Where do they come in? Of course I hope I can say that I put Christ before anything or anyone else. But whether that is actually true in practice is something else entirely. What I would like to be the case, and what I actually practice, are different things.

For my own part, I don't actually believe that Paul really thinks that all the things that have helped to make him the person he is are totally unimportant. It's just that he wants Jesus to be first and foremost. Everything will find its' true place within him when Christ is all in all. That, surely, is what we would all like for ourselves.

Following Christ is not about superimposing Christian faith onto our everyday life. It's not some sort of add-on to our Englishness, or whatever. It's about a fundamental inner reorientation so that Christ becomes the centre around which our personalities are formed. It's about trusting the process of inner transformation that began when we were baptised and has continued ever since. A conversion of life away from putting ourselves at the centre towards what Paul calls the "righteousness from God based on faith". He himself began this reorientation on the Damascus Road when his whole life was turned upside down. For us the journey may have begun in a sudden moment of revelation, or in a gradual turning around that can only be discerned by looking back and tracing the hidden path of grace through our lives. But for us all it's a journey that takes us out of our comfort zones, away from the support structures of status, money, class, nationality, that humanly-speaking we tend to rely on, into a new world of freedom. To use St Paul's language again: "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead".

Here are three signs that may give you a sense of how you are progressing on this journey:

Firstly you will be learning to experience your life as a gift. Gifts are given to us by those who care for us as a sign of their love. What counts is the generosity of those

who are doing the giving. As you grow in Christ, I suggest, you will begin to recognize that the things that happen to you day by day are, in fact, gifts from God, - signs of his grace and generosity, given to you quite undeserved, but inviting your response. Once you begin to see life like this, you will be filled with gratitude, with thankfulness. Life will increasingly be a matter of responding as generously and as lovingly as you can to the gifts that are showering upon you day by day. You will be becoming a thankful person.

That, of course, is very different from thinking that life is about getting things, earning things, deserving things, acquiring things. If it really is about responding to gifts, then there is no room for demanding rights, or measuring accounts. We become more and more free.

Another characteristic that will, I suggest, be growing within you as you learn to know Christ as Lord is a sense of forgiven-ness. We will have been freed from guilt. J.V. Taylor puts it like this: "Once we have grasped that God loves us for ourselves as we are and has accepted us because of Jesus and not because we have become good, two things are bound to follow. First, we begin to welcome the gift of love in all the various forms in which it comes to us. And secondly, we begin to become basically accepting people, accepting others as they are, accepting life as it comes, accepting the pain which must inevitable invade anyone who is really open to joy and beauty. This is an attitude of great vulnerability. Such a Christian will be hurt and will make mistakes, but will be prepared to risk all to let love for the Lord and love for others demand everything that he has". That's what Paul means when he speaks of sharing Christ's sufferings.

So life as gift, and knowing yourself forgiven. A third indication that Christ is beginning to be central in your life, is embracing an attitude of service towards others. At the Last Supper we are told that Jesus took a towel and washed the disciple's feet. "If I, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet", he said, "you should wash one another's feet". Serving other people is a sign of how God is towards us. It is a reflection of his very nature. So by growing in a spirit of service towards others, we are beginning to reflect the very nature of Christ. A spirit of service, you notice, does not look for compensation or reward. It's not about earning promotion or achieving

goals. It's determined by the needs of those before us and requires that we learn to sit where they sit, and see with their eyes, and try to meet their needs unconditionally. That's the way the Church should exercise her ministry and mission. A spirit of service is a sign of the Kingdom.

Paul was quite clear about it. Christ is not yet fully at the centre of his life. "Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own: but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on". It's the same with us. None of us has fully embraced our Christian identity. Christ has made us his own and we belong to him as a result, but we have still fully to appropriate our Christian inheritance. It's a lifetime's journey, but as long as we are beginning to recognize how much God is giving us and are responding in thankfulness; as long as we are growing in a sense of God's acceptance and forgiveness of us; and as long as we are gradually developing an attitude of service towards others, then we can draw comfort that God is continuing to lead us forward by his grace. Like St Paul, we are pressing "on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus"