Sunday 22 June 2025 - The Roots of Inclusion – Ian Wallis

'The most radical human experiment ever conceived – eeklèsia, *church'. Writing to the young church at Galatia, barely twenty years after Jesus' death, Paul wanted them to understand that we are all children of God through grace. As Ian Wallis explains, this is the only identity that counts in the kingdom of God, and it is one that is lived out in our relations with God and with one another.*

Readings:

Galatians 3:23–29; Luke 8:26–39

Sermon: The Roots of Inclusion

If I was to ask you to roll up next week with your key identity documents – those papers or other signifiers that define who you are or what you are about, I wonder what you would present? Birth Certificate? Passport? Driving Licence? DBS? Marriage or Civil Partnership Certificate? Decree Absolute? Membership of a Trade Union or Political Party? ILR Residence Permit? Social Media Accounts? NI or NHS Numbers? Universal Credit ID? Bus Pass? Football Shirt? Subscription to the Guardian? Tattoos? Gender Reassignment Papers? Bank statement? CV? Health Record? P45?

So many possibilities, yet I suspect that if we were able to pose the same question to the apostle Paul and pushed him to present just one document, the most important one, it would be his Baptism Certificate (assuming they issued them back then). And if you are wondering why, it is because for him baptism celebrates and confers the only identity that ultimately matters, namely 'Christian': a follower of Christ and participant in the most radical human experiment ever conceived – *ekklêsia*, church.

Now that's a bold claim and, clearly, there's a lot to unpack here, so let's make a start. Our point of departure is this morning's first reading from Paul's letter to the Christian communities in Galatia, modern day Turkey. Although scholars can't agree precisely when or where Paul founded churches in the region, what is common to all theories is that Galatia formed part of the Roman Empire and reflected significant cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity with class, socio-economic status and educational ability supplying further identity-markers and potential sources of tension and division.

No doubt, if we had inquired after the identity of inhabitants of Galatia at that time, most responses would have been complex and nuanced – not least, because in addition to inherited or acquired identities such as family, marital status, citizenship, ethnicity, religious affiliation, employment and the like, there were also enforced identities, notably subject of Rome and, for some, slave.

In all probability, Paul's missionary activity in Galatia commenced in the early 50s when, as was his practice, he would visit centres of population and, through practising his trade as a worker with leather, as well as (as we would say today) networking through synagogues and prior acquaintances, he would share the good news of Jesus Christ. Those who responded positively were baptized after which they would meet together regularly with other Christians for worship, teaching and mutual support. These were charismatic communities where Christ was experienced as a dynamic spiritual presence, transforming lives.

At some point, presumably when the apostle judged that a sustainable Christian community had come into being (these will have been small congregations of 20 or 30), Paul would move

on to another city and start all over again – and it's probably no exaggeration to surmise that without his tireless missionary endeavours we may well not be here today – such was his influence.

But that's not the end of the story with respect to those young Christian communities Paul established in Galatia – communities that reflected the diversities and multiple identities of the region. It appears that once the apostle had moved on, other missionaries moved in proclaiming what Paul refers to as *heteron euangelion* – a different gospel.

Piecing together the clues contained in the letter he sends in response to these developments, Jewish Christian missionaries had turned up insisting that Christian identity is a subset of Jewish identity and, as a result, in order to become a follower of Jesus you must also become a practising Jew. This is how he frames it:

> *I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. (1.6–7)*
>
> *Listen! I, Paul, am telling you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you … For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love. (5.2–6)*

We must remember that this crisis in Christian identity occurs long before the church had been institutionalised or regulated by councils and creeds or administered by professional clergy. Rather, what we gain an insight into in Galatians is Christian theology in the crucible with the apostle forging out in real time what constitutes Christian identity and, in particular, whether or not it includes Jewish identity.

And as we discover within this pioneering epistle (our Galatians), composed barely twenty years after Jesus' death and resurrection, Paul realises that Christian identity is not prescribed by Jewishness or any other identity for matter, but rather by faith-full-ness – by faith.

According to Paul, it is faith, and faith alone, that defines Christian identity – sharing in the faith of Christ and belonging to a community that gathers in his name – a community born out of grace and genuinely ecumenical and universal in its reach because in Christ God invites all people into relationship and through faith, everyone is able to respond. Paul expresses it profoundly and memorably in those words we heard earlier.

> *… for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (3.26–28)*

Let's be clear, in claiming that Jewish identity is not a prerequisite to Christian identity, Paul is not being anti-Semitic. Far from it, he was and remained a practising Jew, as far as we know, until the end of his life – long after his baptism. He was proud of his Jewish heritage, but he also recognised that it wasn't essential to being a Christian – it wasn't a vital ingredient.

And, within the letter, he shares with us a little of his thinking. You may recall Paul claiming that everyone who belongs to Christ is 'Abraham's offspring'. But surely, you will be asking yourselves, Wasn't Abraham a Jew?

Well, according to Paul, 'yes' and 'no' or, more accurately, 'no' and then 'yes'. As he explains a little earlier in Galatians, before Abraham entered into covenant with God that was sealed by male circumcision on the eighth day, prefiguring the birth of Jewish identity (Genesis 17), he had already entered into covenant with God that was sealed by faith – a covenant that would

bring blessing to all people through Abraham's seed or offspring (Genesis 15). And, according to Paul, Jesus Christ is that seed.

> *Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring; it does not say, "And to offsprings," as of many; but it says, "And to your offspring," that is, to one person, who is Christ. (Gal 3.6)]*

What Paul is claiming here is that there is an identity even more fundamental and defining than Jew or Gentile or any humanly-conceived identity for that matter, namely that we are all children of God through grace – an identity we embrace and inhabit through faith where faith is essentially relational, rather than propositional – it's about a trusting openness to God and living in the light of God's gracious and reconciling presence.

And if we want to discover what that looks like, then, as far as Paul in concerned, we need look no further than Jesus Christ who not only embodies such trusting openness, divine graciousness and reconciliation, but also makes the same quality of human being accessible to all who care to look.

Without question, this is revolutionary stuff and we could fruitfully spend a good deal of time exploring its significance for us. Instead, let me leave you with one implication of this vision of Christian identity – one that is close to the heart of this church: inclusion.

If Christian identity is born of divine graciousness, one that is owned and inhabited through faith, then no one, apart from Christ, can claim a privileged position within a community that is constituted out of that identity.

That is to say, there is no 'in-group' that has the power or authority to include or exclude anyone, because no one has a right to Christian identity or to belong to Christian community. Both are expressions of divine hospitality extended graciously and gratuitously in Christ to one and all – which, for example, throws a rather different light on recent debates within the established church about human sexuality where the hegemony of heterosexuality continues to hold sway, although thankfully not at St Mark's.

Within Paul's vision of Christian community, there is no hegemony of heterosexuality because sexuality, of whatever orientation and expression, is not an identifier that matters when it comes to belonging to church, where sharing in the faith of Jesus Christ is key and even that is not a qualification that secures entry, but a response that enables participation.

What is more, within such Christian community, other identities along with the distinctions and power-relations they imply hold no sway either. That meant, for instance, in Paul's day, that church communities included not only husbands and wives, parents and children, teachers and pupils, strangers and friends, natives and foreigners, but also devout Jews and dissolute Gentiles, slaves and their owners, wealthy employers and their impoverished employees, law-abiding citizens and convicted felons – all learning to love one another as sisters and brothers: profoundly different, yet of equal worth; gloriously diverse, yet of equal value.

This is the radical human experiment to which I referred to at the outset – unprecedented in the ancient world, as now. Can you imagine the impact that must have had on those early Christians? How it must have transformed their own sense of personal identity and worth, as well as how they related to one another both within and, perhaps more importantly, outside of church life.

Well, despite 2,000 years' worth of attempts to deradicalize and domesticate, to institutionalise and regulate Paul's vision, it remains our inheritance and our vocation, supplying the motivation and contours of a genuinely inclusive church – one able to welcome and embrace not only those who are like us or whom we like or, on a good day, can tolerate, but also those

whom we struggle to relate to or to understand, who challenge our prejudices and disturb our complacencies.

Manifestly, this radical human experiment is risky, some would say reckless, unrealistic and destined to fail. Jesus called it the kingdom of God.