Sunday 22 February 2026 – Christian Identity

This is the first Sunday in Lent. The Lent Study Groups this year focus on the theme of Social Justice. Janet Morley tackles the theme of the first week's Lent course: identity.

Readings:

Philippians 3: 4-9. Mark 3: 31-35

Sermon: Christian Identity – Janet Morley

'For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.'

A few days ago on Ash Wednesday, many of us may have taken part in the traditional liturgy which acts as the entry to the period of Lent. This includes coming forward to have our foreheads marked with ash mixed with anointing oil, and be told 'Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return.' It's powerful, and in many ways a really odd thing to do. Why would we want to be reminded, in a quite physical and grubby way, that we are going to die one day and our bodies will become dust and ashes? Isn't that just gloomy and morbid? Well, it's about rather more than that. There are echoes here of the story of creation in Genesis, when God first formed the earth creature the bible calls Adam, out of the dust of ground. And the mark on our foreheads is made in the shape of the cross, recalling Christ's sacrifice and our own baptism. We came into being through the love of God, and we are marked as belonging to the body of Christ. So we are saying, in the light of eternity, this is the identity that is our true self; this is our grounding; this is who we are and who we choose to be, never mind what other identity or identities we embrace.

Our readings today are both radical and lead us similarly to this profound place. Let's take Jesus first. Our gospel story depicts his relationship with his birth family. Now the gospel of Mark (which is the earliest account we have) doesn't feature any stories of Jesus' nativity. There has been no mention of Mary and her acceptance of her vocation, nor of any other family members. We've heard about John the baptizer, from whom Jesus accepted baptism, but no mention that they were cousins – just that Jesus' prominence starts immediately following John's arrest, as if he is taking over from the ministry of John. Jesus calls disciples and then engages in a dramatic sequence of healings and exorcisms. He gets into instant battles with the Pharisees for apparently claiming the authority to forgive sins. Jesus' disciples start breaking Sabbath rules but he defends this on the basis that it is new wineskins for new wine and he personally is lord of the Sabbath. Not surprisingly, Jesus' family is shown to be alarmed at his outrageous and very public behaviour and think he is 'beside himself'. Other people are quite a bit ruder and proclaim that he is possessed by Beelzebub, and in the name of the prince of demons he casts out demons. If you were the mother of such a son you could be forgiven for being very worried about him and wondering when he was going to settle down to a proper job. So his mother and brothers (some authorities also include sisters, but no one mentions a father) make a concerted effort to fetch him home in the middle of one of his gatherings. On being informed that they are outside looking for him, Jesus simply looks round at his fans and says 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, my sister, and mother.' Family friendly this gospel is not.

What about St Paul, Christianity's most famous and provocative convert, and the person who did the most to shape the early church and its theology? Writing to the church at Philippi, he is tackling those who claimed that converts to the Christian path had to accept circumcision first – that is, the way to a Christian identity had to be via accepting a Jewish identity first. Paul

opposes this, even though he himself is absolutely grounded in his Jewish identity. He lists all the aspects of this that should give him cause for pride: circumcision as an infant, membership of the Hebrew tribe of Benjamin, his status as a Pharisee under the law, his zeal for God's precious and beloved law, his personal righteousness. Yet all this he counts as loss for the sake of Christ. Now we should note that Paul is not here confessing his sins or a previous way of life for which he is ashamed. This is not a classic evangelical come-to-Jesus conversion story we may be familiar with in some parts of our contemporary church. He is listing what he genuinely has reasons for pride and confidence in. For us that would be like listing not our failures and shortcomings, but our backgrounds, our education, our achievements, our professional or parenting skills, our political commitments and our religious devotion. Yes, those things. And what does he say of these, as sources of confidence, in comparison with gaining Christ? He says 'I regard them as rubbish'. Now the way modern translations render that word, you may be missing quite how rude Paul is being here. The King James bible, which often is much more blunt than modern translations, straightforwardly and correctly renders it 'dung'. Please excuse my language in church, but it is St Paul's. He's saying these things are a load of crap. So first Jesus, then Paul, using rhetoric about the claims of the gospel that is extreme to the point of shocking and offensive. Does our Christian identity really require us to dump our biological families and despise our professions and every other identity that matters to us?

Exactly how literally should we take this teaching? Well, in Christian history there have been examples of inspiring saints who gave up everything for the way of Christ. But there have also been some dreadful examples of malignant literalism, giving rise to separatist cults that have damaged children, split people from their families, and coerced them. Without ruling out the possibility that being a Christian may well ask of us some significant life choices, we need to tread carefully to find the path of wisdom. First, every child deserves to be supported to develop their own identity and feel pride in it; to deny this is to abuse a child. Of course, that identity is grown in a context – their family, their wider culture and language, and its belief systems, implicit and explicit. As a child, whatever surrounds you feels normal until you find that distinctions are made in society, including about identities that are 'given.' For some, who fit the norm, they may never notice that they have that privilege, and that this is what is smoothing their path through life. But for others, because of their class status, skin colour, sex or gender identity, sexual orientation, neurodiversity or other physical or social marker, they discover that it is much harder to be proud of who they are, and that opportunities and respect are denied them. It is one thing to address those who have had every encouragement to be confident in their identity, and to counsel them against pride, and quite another to challenge those who have had to struggle to feel any pride in themselves at all. We should never use scripture to denigrate those struggles.

As adults there are particular identities we choose to take on, as the opportunities arise: partnerships, friendships, work roles, parenthood. And indeed, mature religious commitment. Even if we have been surrounded by a Christian upbringing, we have to wrestle with our faith and either actually choose it for ourselves or decide not to. And the importance and form of that faith and practice may well change and develop over the course of our lives, indeed, if that doesn't happen, I would want to know why not. For many of us, our Christian identity interacts profoundly with the other identities we hold, as it must. For myself, raised in a very churchy family, I had a lot of hard work to do in my 20s and 30s as my growing feminism began to argue with a church culture that was even more patriarchal than it is now. I had to re-read the bible and work out what it meant to grasp than I too was made in the image of God; I found this ended up deepening my discipleship but several of my friends departed the church.

These days, we find ourselves practising or exploring our Christian identity in a contemporary context where the meaning of such a faith is highly contested, and in some respects politically quite sinister. Perhaps somewhat to our surprise, in a society where Christianity has been very marginal to the secular mindset for some generations, it has now been seized on by elements of the far right, some of whom, like UKIP, now march beneath actual wooden crosses. Influenced by the US, which has always retained far more active religious allegiance as a matter of course, and in particular its surging white Christian nationalism that underpins many of the current administration's policies, some here have grasped Christian identity as a crusading weapon to redefine Britishness. Hostility to immigration, especially by those who espouse Islam, is a hallmark of this approach. Stephen Yaxley-Lennon, who goes by the name of Tommy Robinson (presumably because he deems that name to convey the identity of an ordinary British bloke more convincingly than something double-barrelled), apparently found Christ in prison and has immediately and belligerently put his new Christian identity into the public domain. Meanwhile castigating the rest of us for being too weak to stand up for what we believe in, as British citizens and as Christians, against 'civilisational erasure'. This latter phrase actually appears in the US' recent national security strategy, to explain their support for a range of European far right parties, whom they characterize as the only real patriots in their respective countries. 'Civilisational erasure' is a new phrase with an old-fashioned meaning which would have been well recognised and embraced by the Ku Klux Klan. It conveys the 'great replacement theory' – the belief that white people are in danger of being displaced, outnumbered, or even erased by other – of course 'inferior' races. No wonder that the London diocese is specifically asking its clergy to preach against racism.

And so we see how fatally easy it is to claim a Christian identity and then assume that God is on the side of whatever politics we personally espouse. This should give us pause when we too may conflate the two identities, even when our politics is very different. Do we indeed try to use our Christianity to justify demonising certain groups? Or do we allow it to challenge us to love our enemies or question our own motivations? It seems to me that Christian identity ought to be, not something that normally requires us to jettison all the other appropriate identities that we are given, or take on freely in life, but a grounding, a touchstone against which we should measure how we inhabit those identities, how we choose them and indeed how and when we may need to relinquish them. For, as life goes on, it increasingly strikes me that we are going to have to learn relinquishment. We should not cling to identities that have been meaningful but need to evolve and change. We should not convince ourselves that a particular identity is the real us for all time. As a parent, you have to step back from that total involvement and vigilance that for decades was your actual job. If you don't stop trying to monitor or 'bring up' your adult children, you'll lose their friendship. You may have everything demanded of you while caring for a loved one who is dependent on you, but when they die, your identity as a carer suddenly ends. You may lose wife, husband, partner or significant friend, and so what becomes of that part of your identity that was formed in relation to them? Your career may absorb you and be a source of great pride. So what does it mean to retire, and watch aspects of your previous work be taken on by others or indeed undone? You may have once revelled in your identity as a strong and healthy person with independent agency in the world. But now you may find yourself rather frail, or confused, dealing with pain, or increasingly reliant on the support of others.

Of course, there are also unexpected blessings and new perspectives that come from this process of paring back. We may have the chance to revisit parts of ourselves we left behind in childhood. There may be new young lives to delight in, whom we are touched by, but are not responsible for. We may become more prayerful, or politically active in a new way. Perhaps we may have time to read, and reflect, and notice the beauty of the passing seasons. Even grief

may open up new vistas of the heart, and enlarge our compassion. But what we cannot do is just cling to who we used to be, and refuse to change.

Well, how we navigate these waters may depend on how far we have nurtured and inhabited our Christian identity as the touchstone of our lives. The one we have returned to take a deep dive into each Lent, the identity that doesn't just bolster our prejudices but which helps us stay open and honest and loving, the identity that across our lives asks us to learn, and unlearn, and change and grow into the stature of Christ himself. In a while we are going to sing Charles Wesley's great hymn Love Divine, which speaks of this mystery of relinquishing all and yet being truly found, 'changed from glory into glory'. In the last verse, he presents us with the image of 'casting our crowns before him.' Our crowns, I think, are those good and necessary identities that we have taken on, or earned, or been given and faithfully carried in our lives. They are precious and important and a source of pride. And yet, even these must be 'cast' and laid down before him. Where will that leave us? Yes, lost. But in a good way that we should not fear. 'Lost in wonder, love and praise.'