

“WHAT KIND OF CHRISTIAN?”

3. CHRIST-ians

2 Corinthians 5:11 – 6:2

The evangelist J John originally said this, I think, but there are only three or four of us in this church of whom it is literally true – *“Without Christ, I’d just be Ian”*. We’re thinking at the moment about what kind of Christians we are to be and how our identity is found in Christ himself – the Christ, whose name we bear. Ever since someone decided to give the disciples a nickname in first century Antioch, the followers of Jesus Christ have been known as Christians. And, as we saw a couple of weeks ago, that is a noun – it’s what we are – not an adjective, to be stuck on to some other identifier, like a Christian artist or Christian banker or Christian student. As Christians, Jesus Christ is where we find our identity.

Now, as we’ve just seen, our name is one way we identify ourselves – although not everyone is very good at remembering names (which sometimes leads to some interesting charades with the forgetful ones) – but it seems that many people find their identity in other things, too. In our contemporary culture some of those things are seen as increasingly important and that is reflected in the language of what has become known as “identity politics”. Some people are very outspoken about how they are to be identified, but all of us probably find ourselves – consciously or otherwise – taking our identity from or investing our identity in some particular aspect of our lives. It has also – as is often the case with these things – been seen in a change in our vocabulary. If you look at people’s entries on Wikipedia, for example, you will read that so-and-so “identifies” as a humanist or a vegetarian or whatever. When I turned up for my vaccination a couple of weeks ago, during the interrogation that we all have to endure in pretty well every context these days, I was actually asked, *“Do you identify as British?”*.

Some of the things that we think identify us are imposed upon us. Many are our own constructs. But we feel under pressure to adopt certain identities, don’t we? There’s the gender we identify as, the ethnic group we fall in to, our age classification – Generation X, Y or Z; Millennial; Silver whatever; middle-aged and so on – and our occupation. That last one is probably the one we use most often in meeting others – we ask “So what do you do?” when meeting someone for the first time. (It’s not considered good form to ask “Well, how old are you then?” or “So what gender do you think you are?”) But, as with so many other things, we then feel under pressure if we don’t measure up to the expectations that come with that – always thinking that we’re somehow failing, for example, if we aren’t meeting targets or pleasing the Boss.

Indeed, if our identity is in something that we have constructed for ourselves or in something that others have imposed on us, that lead to all kinds of wrong expectations, with the subsequent anxiety, mental stress, need to feel accepted and all the rest. Indeed, in a culture that is now pretty well founded on deception and distrust, we can often end up fabricating our identity, which is so easy to do via social media and the like. But the Bible is clear that, if we are following Jesus, we no longer need to look at things from that

perspective. In the passage we have just heard from Paul's *Second Letter to the Corinthians*, the apostle says that, since the world transforming death and resurrection of Jesus, "*from now on we regard no-one from a worldly point of view*". We no longer need to adopt those particular criteria. We don't use the world's standards as ways to identify ourselves or other people.

We have become so accustomed to looking at one another from the perspective of the world's thinking, following the standards of the culture around us, that we look at people in terms of those social constructs which everyone else uses – race, gender and so on – forgetting that, as Paul says in *Galatians 3:28*, "*There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*" We are, first and foremost, all human beings, created in the image and out of the love of God. It's the distorting of that image through the presence of evil in our world that leads us to find other ways of identifying ourselves – the "*regarding one another from a worldly point of view*" of which Paul writes here. That's why we get so hung up about our appearance, our job, our gender, how cool we are, how successful we appear, and so on.

The coming of Jesus, though, put an end to that, gave us a way to move away from those pressures to look good that drive us to find our identity in what are, essentially, superficial things. In *Ephesians 1:13*, Paul tells us that when we hear and respond to the Gospel, we somehow become incorporated in Jesus Christ, we become part of him, we are recognised as part of the "*body of Christ*" – "*And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation*". It's like starting all over again and becoming just as God intended you to be.

That's what Paul is saying here in the passage Alan read to us. This is probably a very familiar verse to many of us – "*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here!*" But it is the heart of the Gospel. The old way of doing things, of seeing things, has gone for those who accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. You're renewed in such a way that you are just as God really wanted you to be in terms of your relationship with him. You are "*in Christ*". You are incorporated into him so that he is now where you find your identity. The English word "*incorporated*" has at its root that old Latin word "*corpus*" (from which we also get "*corpse*") meaning a body. We are, as Paul writes elsewhere on more than one occasion, part of the body of Christ – we are that closely identified with him.

Now, if we are part of Jesus Christ, incorporated in him, fully identified with him, then we are loved by God as he loves his own Son. We can be sure – if we weren't already – that God will watch over us, protect us, provide for us, give us all the worth and value that he can. Jesus has died for us, has gone through death and out the other side for us, prays for us in the throne room of heaven. We are one with him in the Father's love. That, if you like, is the very pinnacle of being, the very heart of our identity. If you are truly part of

Jesus Christ, what other identity could you possibly want? What other identity could even come close to topping that? Just knowing that you are a Christ-ian is enough.

Finding your identity in Christ gives your life meaning and hope and security. It means you don't have to keep striving after the things that the culture around you tells you are the desirables. It means you don't have to keep worrying about how you look to other people. It means you have no need to try and keep up appearances according to the increasingly confusing and contrived standards of the world around. As a Christian you are part of Jesus Christ – he is what matters and he has already shown you that he loves you enough to have died for you.

It can seem difficult, I know, because there are so many pressures on us from the culture in which we live – and the particular little corner of that culture in which we find ourselves most of the time – pressures from our peers, from the media, from social media, from our families, from our employers, from so many directions. Resist being forced into the mould of the world around you (we'll be looking at that in a few weeks' time). Resist the urge to forge a new and unsustainable identity for yourself. Rest in Christ. Know his peace. Enjoy his love. If you haven't already committed yourself to him, then get on and do it now: the passage we've focussed on today ends with that – *"I tell you,"* says Paul, *"now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation"*. There's no time like the present, so turn to Jesus now. Then you can share his identity. You have been renewed through his grace and nothing – no-one – can ever take that away from you.

For reflection and discussion

- 1) In what kinds of things do people look for a sense of identity today? Why do you think that is?
- 2) Where would you say you find your identity? How does that affect your life?
- 3) If you are talking about yourself to others, how far down the list does "Christian" come? Does it depend on who you are talking to?
- 4) What do you understand by being *"in Christ"*? Do you find that comforting or not?
- 5) Since you became a Christian, what has been *"new"* in your life? Do other people notice that?
- 6) Have you learned anything new from this passage? What difference will it make to you?