

Trinity 1 2014

**Sermon preached at Puy de Serre on 22nd June
by Revd Caroline Sackley**

This is musing rather than a fully fledged intellectual argument, I'm asking you to question yourselves as well.

Many years ago meeting someone from Northern Ireland it was surprising for me to listen to him explore how different his identity was in England than at home. No one asked him or made assumptions about whether he was Catholic or Protestant, it just wasn't important, his name was, the fact that he was a student was and the course he was taking, but not his denomination. In Ireland his identity had been completely formed by which denomination he was even if he never went to church.

People watchers say they can spot who is British in France before they hear them speak, how much is our identity as Christians that obvious? Jesus' challenge to his followers is that they should live out a new identity, unlike that of the normal Jewish identity that is based tightly upon kinship.

Our loyalties these days tend not to be tribal, sometimes even not familial, but where do they lie? For many these days it is easy to be self-centred, accumulating wealth, prestige, trying to fill our lives with material things and new experiences, always having something else new to buy or to try.

The result of Jesus' self-giving in death was the new resurrection life, and the result of us giving up our natural self-centredness is a new sense of life in which we are freer to be ourselves.

This is not easy and can be painful, 'taking up our cross' and losing our life for his sake' gives us the indication of the difficulties of choosing a life in God rather than the ordinary, everyday one that the majority have. Paul writes of dying and being freed from sin, being raised from the dead to walk in the newness of life.

The God of love and peace says he comes 'not to bring peace but a sword'. How are we to interpret this? It reminds me of some of the Old Testament passages which are full of God's wrath and destruction and which are often skipped over these days. But God's anger was directed towards his disobedient children, whom he loved, children that he wanted the best for that he helped and rescued.

Christ is coming with a sword because being a Christian will mean cutting off from worldly values and goals, because it may be divisive, it may be hard and the reward is not immediate but after we die. There will be a battle to save souls for God and the harder Christians labour to do this the more the devil tries to counteract this. That reading from Matthew sounds quite apocalyptic in tone and content, possibly preparing us?

So how are we identified as Christians? Not by having an easy life that's for sure. Jesus says that we will be known as his followers by the love we show for one another. So we will be unselfish, but surely that's not all?

Certainly these days it won't be because we wear a cross, they've become fashion statements. Perhaps the beatific smile, the serenity or the halo? Perhaps we should ask ourselves if people know we are Christians by the way we live our lives?

Being obedient to God is another difficult thing to explain, "I'm doing this because God told me to" can get some peculiar looks. We need to be mission orientated but it's not all about good works, Jesus reminds us that.

If being a Christian is about a personal relationship with God our Father does that change our identity? We are about to celebrate Holy Communion, about to become one with each other because we share one bread, one with Christ because we eat and drink his body and blood. Such solemn things, such holy things. Meeting God at his table, meeting him anywhere in fact will change us, if our lives are focussed on him, our identity will be bound up with him. Will it be obvious to others? It means on one hand that we have left our human 'tribe' and become one of God's and hopefully some of our behaviour at least will be changed. On the other hand we won't suddenly sprout wings.

These readings don't let us escape the paradox, the tension in our faith, we are forced to confront it; it is through death that you find life. Jesus wants his followers to know and understand the implications of commitment. A commitment that will change them and their identity, a commitment that at times will be painful and difficult. But a commitment that will be worth it, as an athlete puts up with the pain of training and competing which will be all forgotten when the trophy is brought home, so will it be for us in the love of God when our race is over.