

Belonging

I guess by the time you read this, it will be about the time of the EU referendum. Don't worry; I'm not going to go on about that. Readers of the church parish magazine will know that I can see good arguments on both sides and that, nevertheless, I am hoping for a particular result.

One of the issues is the question of identity, of where we feel we belong. On the EU, I found myself writing, "You may think of yourself as English, British or European or all three. Maybe you think of yourself as a citizen of the world. Ask me my race and I shall say 'human'. Ask me my ethnicity and, if I answer at all, I shall say 'white English'. Much more significantly than any secular categorisations of nationality or ethnicity, I belong to *a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people and tongues* - the Church of God. Christian is my essential identity."

But before we get that far, where do you think you belong? Obviously, you belong to your family. So, presumably, they belong to you. My favourite sentence in the whole of the marriage service is "all that I am I give to you." It's what the groom says to the bride and the bride says to the groom at the giving of the rings. When you think about it, it says everything that you actually need to say at a wedding. You give yourself unreservedly to the other person and that really is what love is all about. So you belong to one another. Saying "all that I am I give you" to your husband or wife is like praying "Thy Will be done" to God. It just about says all you need to say.

You might also talk about "my parents" or "my children" ("our children"!). In families we belong and that is important, both to be responsible for other people and to have other people whom we can rely on to be responsible for us.

Such ties matter more than anything, but there are other kinds of belonging. As a boy, I belonged to the Cubs and then the Scouts. Over the years, I've belonged to various clubs and societies. I expect you have too. Belonging makes you part of an organisation that cares about you (if it's a decent organisation) and creates a responsibility on your part to be a loyal member of that organisation. I expect your parents told you that, if you belong to the Cubs, you go every week, not just when you feel like it, and you join in the activities and games that other members want to play, not just the ones you enjoy. And so I got a lot out of being a cub and played my humble part in making the 8th Gillingham Scout Group an effective community.

In some company, we feel we belong. On walks along the North Downs Way, my friend, my dog and I have walked into many pubs where we're instantly welcome. I can also think of a pub in South East London, where I was met at the door with the words, "You wouldn't like it in here, Vicar," and another in Notting Hill, where I was told to finish my pint and leave. Some places we feel we belong and some we don't. Do people feel welcome in the different communities we're part of? Do we really want them to feel welcome or are we happier in our own little cliques at work or school or even church?

There is a tension here. We like to belong to close communities. Our family, for example, will almost always mean more to us than any other body we might belong to. We know who belongs and who doesn't – though even families have black sheep and we may have to decide at what point blood ceases to be thicker than water.

Close communities only too easily become closed communities. We sometimes keep close to our friends by closing ourselves off from outsiders. That really won't do, however. We're all part of the human family. We just have to be open to one another. But how can we be open to everybody without losing our own identity and our sense of belonging? Can we have close communities which are not closed communities? Well, we all have to try.

When we had the children's service on Thursdays at St John's, we often used to sing the chorus *I am glad I belong to Jesus*. That's great fun as you divide into two parts, one singing the verse and the other singing the chorus, and each group tries to out sing the other – in volume if not in tunefulness. But what a thought *I am glad I belong to Jesus*. Belonging really matters to us as human beings and the best belonging of all is to belong to the Son of God. If we have faith in Him, we belong to Him and He belongs to us. That is the closest belonging there is and it is open to everyone who approaches in faith. Let me close with some words of St Paul: *Therefore let no man glory in men. For all things are yours: Whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas¹, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are yours; And ye are Christ's; and Christ is God's.* (1 Corinthians 3²¹⁻²³). Roger.

¹ Ministers of God who had served the Corinthian Church