**Lent Talk: ‘Identity and Community’**

**Script for BBC Radio 4 broadcast by the Bishop of Loughborough, 8 April 2020**

A couple of years ago I heard Paul Boeteng speak, passionately and emotively, about the racism he’s experienced as a black man in politics. Despite the shocking and abhorrent stories he shared, Boetang suggested that *identity* is an even bigger issue than race – consuming our imagination and requiring careful attention. Identity, I agree, is a major pre-occupation of our times. Consciously or subconsciously, many people are on a quest to discover and articulate who they are, how they belong and where they fit in. As well as the explosion of identity politics, and the mass movement of displaced people globally - migrants and refugees who search for roots in new and foreign lands, there’s also the small matter of Brexit which has exposed questions about European verse British Identity.

But also, since the affluence and wealth of the latter part of the 20th century, many in the west have come to realise their priorities may have been misplaced and they’re now searching for a more lasting identity – something above and beyond the material and physical to give meaning to their lives, a kind of spiritual identity we might call it.

For myself, I’m fascinated by the concept of identity and how it ties in with my sense of belonging. I guess it’s hardly surprising, given my life story - the rupture from my homeland at the impressionable age of 14 and in somewhat traumatic circumstances. I come originally from Iran but following the events of the Islamic Revolution 40 years ago, found myself in exile in this country where I’ve been ever since. I feel sometimes I was robbed of a proper sense of belonging, destined instead to exist somewhere in nowhere land. But if I’m honest the roots of the dilemma go back to when I was much younger, growing up as a Christian in Iran. The tiny Anglican Church was made up of a mixture of converts, second generation Christians like me, and foreign missionaries. Ours was an odd existence by any standards and in truth we never quite fitted in.

Our context was a missionary church seeking to develop its own identity with an authentically Persian voice within an environment where *national* identity was overwhelmingly regarded as coterminous with *religious* identity. In the west, faith is generally thought of as a personal matter whereas in the East it’s deeply rooted in one’s culture, racial ties and heritage - faith strikes at the very core of one’s social identity. In Iran, to be Persian was to be Muslim, and specifically Shi’a Muslim. To not be so was regarded as a kind of betrayal of your nationality, raising all kinds of questions about your identity, who you were and how you fitted in. For the church the challenge was how to be both authentically Christian *and* fully Persian. For me, especially in my adult life as I’ve reflected on my own past and how it’s shaped me there’s been a quest to discover who I am and how I fit in.

So whether growing up in Iran or finding my place in this country there’s a sense in which I’ve always been a stranger and interloper; living with the ever present anxiety of just not quite fitting in. The challenge has been to not get stuck in that place which is neither one thing nor another – not to sit on the boundaries, a self-pitying outsider. But to transform my experience of being on the margins from something that defines me negatively, into a positive place full of richness, meaning and hope.

Some years ago I read a novel by Anne Tyler called *Digging to America*. It had a powerful, almost life-changing impact on me. The book is about two families in America each of whom adopt a baby girl from Korea. The extended families meet at the airport as the two girls are delivered into their care and the remainder of the book is about how their lives intertwine. Very little happens by way of a plot but underlying the narrative are questions about identity, displacement and belonging. The nationality of the girls is relevant but more crucially one of the families are immigrants, as it happens, from Iran. There’s this extraordinary encounter between American and Iranian identities trying to incorporate aspects of Korean culture into their lives.

Tyler poignantly narrates how a Persian family in exile is struggling to belong in a foreign country. As the story unfolds we see the Iranian grandmother Maryam struggling - wanting to be accepted as a regular American but at the same time resisting it. She feels Americans will never understand her, that their interest in her is patronising and of course deep down she’s anxious to remain true to her own culture and roots. She’s frightened of assimilation that’ll result in loss of identity as an Iranian. But in her struggle she’s sinking ever deeper into a lonely place – a kind of vacuum where she’s utterly displaced and doesn’t belong anywhere.

A moment of epiphany is when Maryam finally realises *she herself* is blocking the path to belonging. She’s hardened her heart towards her host nation and its people. Dwelling on that which is different, she’s used their alien ways to judge them, undermining the common humanity that binds them together by dwelling on her own otherness. She finally realises she cannot remain encased in her own heritage, which is already displaced from its geographical roots and therefore something different to what it once was. Instead, she must move into the future by embracing a new way of belonging. She must be generous to others and willing to receive from those who want to be generous to her. She finally recognises her choice either to remain trapped in self-absorption or reach out in friendship so that those who are different can travel together, learning about each other and themselves in the process.

Maryam will of course always be different and probably continue struggling with questions of identity. But the point is she escapes an additional *self-imposed* burden that keeps her on the outside by seeing goodness in the motives of others and recognising her need of their friendship. In other words, *you have to want to belong*. It won’t happen on its own. You have to give birth to it; work at it, create it through an act of will.

And what was true for Maryam is true for me and I believe for many people, to some extent or another. However much it appears we belong and fit in perfectly, and though we play the game pretending we do, in reality many of us feel we’re different, for a whole variety of reasons. Very few have a sense of belonging completely. The question is, do we wallow in that, judge others and position ourselves on the boundaries: find reasons why we’re different and don’t fit in - why the rules don’t apply to us? Or can we make peace with our past, and all the complexity within us, accept these as part of who we are and find new ways of belonging, dwelling not on what divides us from others but on those common albeit fragile threads of humanity which bring us together.

This week is Holy Week, when Christians travel with Jesus as he journeys towards the cross. In a couple of days on Good Friday millions around the world will take time to dwell with him through the suffering of crucifixion, to reflect on their own pain and hurt in the light of the cross and to listen afresh to Jesus’ final words, commonly known as the seven last words. The third was a cry to his mother Mary and the disciple whom he loved, commonly thought to be John. To Mary Jesus says, “here is your son”, and to John “here is your mother”. In his agony and utter isolation - the point at which his identity is in the balance, his humanity and divinity struggling to assert themselves, Jesus releases Mary and John from the tight hold of that which has been familiar and safe. In an extraordinary act of generosity Jesus loosens the bonds of their familial ties, lightens the weight of their histories and eases the stranglehold of the stories that’s brought each of them to this place. He gives permission for a new future and points them towards a new way of belonging, which is less about their own pre-occupations and more about the potential of new relationships discovered through him - less concerned with tradition and history and individuality; more concerned with exploration, connectedness and community.

In my late twenties and early thirties, my husband and I experienced many years of infertility. After extensive treatment, two miscarriages and much heartache we were granted the gift of children. I remember well when my first child was finally born, it felt like the whole world was rejoicing with me - I’d been blessed with this incredible gift - my prayers and longings fulfilled. I confess, it was years before I began to understand that it wasn’t really about me at all. That though my joy was (and remains) deep, the children aren’t primarily here for my fulfilment, but to live their own lives, discover their purpose, grow and move and find their being in the God who loves and desires good things for them. I may’ve given birth to them, and for good and ill I’ll play a part in their evolving stories. But ultimately each must discover their own identity and place of belonging as separate from me.

Of course our roots are important and our families shape us and give us a sense of place in the world. But the point is that we don’t need to be constrained by the boundaries within which life seeks to encase us. For in these words of Jesus from the cross there is encouragement to look wider and higher and deeper than those things which tie us to narrow ways of belonging. According to the Christian story, whoever you are, wherever you come from, there is a common identity that binds us all as children of God, each uniquely made in the divine image and loved as part of the glorious diversity of creation.

At Christ’s death on the cross, everything that constrains humanity is thrown into question. Power is made manifest through weakness, authority is demonstrated through sacrifice and death becomes the moment of glory. And therein lies the possibility, for those who choose, to rediscover themselves. As Jesus recognises the pain of Mary and John, so all suffering and pain is recognised and there is freedom to become a new creation. Our stories are important but they need not define us.

This mysterious complexity is what my sisters and I have tried to capture on our parents’ grave stone where they’re buried far from their home land, in a patch of ground fittingly called Paradise on the South Eastern side of Winchester Cathedral. On one side of the grave are carved words in English, *Dust of the high planes of Persia in the earth of an English Shire*,and on the other side in Persian are words from St. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, “So then you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and members of God's household”.