

# worship notes



from the United Reformed Church

Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> July  
Being In Christ  
The Revd  
Andy Braunston

## Note

We depart from the Lectionary today and think a little about who we are. Many of us don't have to think too hard about who we are as we're perceived as being normal; others of us are aware of the various identities we have that make us a little different – and of course in today's society simply being a Christian makes us a little different too. We think of identities we claim, and which are imposed upon us but, most of all, we think of the single most important identity we have – that of being a disciple of Jesus. Our readings today are not the ones set for the Lectionary – we're taking a little detour – but each make us think about identity. The pampered younger son who wants his inheritance and squanders it – known to posterity as the “prodigal son” – the term means one who wastes money. The Psalmist who is fixated with his own sinfulness – but sees a way out by a realisation that the One who forgives will shelter him giving the memorable line about God being a hiding place. In our reading from 2 Corinthians Paul muses on the new creation that we become, the new identity, that we take on as disciples who are “in Christ”. Let's pray for grace as we listen to the Word – read, proclaimed, and lived.

## Call To Worship

When we were strangers, O God, **You sought and saved us.**

When we wander O Jesus, **You rescue and raise us up.**

When we become more attentive to sin than grace, O Spirit,  
**You take and seal our hearts.**

## Prayers of Approach, Confession and Grace

Our lives, O Most High, flourish in your love;  
You call us from the highways and byways of our world,  
meeting us where we are, loving us in the complexity of our identities,  
and sheltering us in life's storms;  
You are our true security.

We are complex creations, Lord Jesus,  
renewed through sacrament and discipleship,  
a curious mix of the old and the new,  
being ever refined in your love,

eager to follow yet reluctant to change,  
simultaneously aware and unaware of who we are.  
You help us to know ourselves even as You fully know us.

You, O Holy Spirit, call us to change, and grace us with love;  
when we are aware of our sin, You shower love and peace upon us;  
when we struggle to change, You give us the energy we need.  
When we groan under the weight of sin,  
You remind us our debt is cancelled and we can be free.

Forgive us, O God, when we cry to You,  
give us the time we need to grow and change,  
to be aware of who we are and who we can be,  
that our lives may reflect Your life,  
and our love reflect Your love. Amen.

My friends, God is like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child,  
like a father who runs to welcome home the estranged,  
like a rock upon which we can securely stand.  
God is loving and faithful. God forgives you,  
so have the strength to forgive yourselves. Thanks be to God!

## Prayer for Illumination

Holy One, beyond our reach, break open Your word for us.  
Liberating One, beyond our expectations, help us to perceive Your presence.  
Energising One, beyond our wildest imaginings, breath your life into us  
that we may hear, understand and follow. Amen.

## Readings

*St Luke 15: 1 – 3, 11b-32 | 2 Corinthians 5: 11 - 21*

## All Age Activities

There are some excellent resources the URC have produced for youngsters on identity  
here <https://urc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/FACT-February-2024-Week-2.pdf>

## Sermon Notes

Catholic Christians use both a baptismal shawl when a child is baptised and a white pall, or sheet, which is placed over the coffin at a funeral; no other symbols of identity are allowed. Today's readings encourage us to think about identity – our identity as being in Christ and the realisation that this identity is newly constructed. We live in an age where identities matter – and can be contested. English people, for example, can see the words

*English* and *British* as synonyms; Scottish and Welsh people really don't! We each have multiple identities which sometimes fit us like a glove or at other times can be imposed on us, and given meaning, by others.

Our world is very interested in the various identities that we inhabit. What might yours be? Mine include: Husband | Dad to two dogs | White | uncle | Male | Leftie | Gay | Friend | Minister. There were others and some aren't as straightforward as you'd think. Class can be complicated; my grandparents were all working class – a lorry driver, a grave digger, a cleaner, and a housewife. My parents, whilst having working class jobs as a police officer and care assistant, had middle class aspirations. I was the first in my family to attend university. I read a broadsheet and listen to Radio 4 – is that, I wonder, a middle-class lifestyle? Then there's identities bound up with place – regional and national identities within the UK are ever more important. What happened to those who saw themselves as Europeans after Brexit? This identity thing can be rather confusing.

And then each of our identities is imbued with meaning – meanings we place on them ourselves or meanings and interpretations others place upon us. It can still be a bit edgy to introduce one's same sex partner as it involves a risk of judgement or rejection; albeit a much smaller risk these days than it ever was. Those who can't hide their identities may find that prejudice is all encompassing; those whose identities are hidden may find pressure to conform and not reveal more of themselves.

Then I wonder about other identities. Are some identities more important than others? What if we are a mixture of identities – some minority, others more mainstream? What might thinking of ourselves differently do? What if those of us who are white think of ourselves as being white for a bit and what that might mean – we're not used to doing so as in our society we're told to think of being white as being normal.

We see various identities at play in our readings today. Our Gospel reading starts with Jesus' opponents making him sinful due to his association with people they deemed to be sinners. An imposed identity if ever there was one! Of course, to see Jesus like that could marginalise him. Then Jesus plays with some identities in the parable of the two brothers. We still identify the younger son as "prodigal" meaning one who is reckless with money. We see the prodigal identity as if there were no others. Yet the story makes clear his identity as a Jew was important – the horror the crowd would have felt about him living with pigs would have been immense. Perhaps the reckless living meant the identity as a son was forgotten – yet at his lowest moment the son realised this identity was key to his loving relationship with his father. His identity as brother however was rather strained; the older brother speaks to their father about "this son of yours" forgetting his own identity as brother and what that might mean. And then we see the older son as resentful as if that was all there was about him.

Psalms knew themselves to be sinners – as if that is all there was about them; yet by the end of today's Psalm there's the start of a new identity – one who is sheltered and hidden by God. A new identity as one protected by the Almighty who hides the supplicant

from some of the world's horror.

This then brings us to Paul's startling claims in the passage from 2 Corinthians. In a longer passage about reconciliation Paul taught that we are new creations when we are in Christ. The old has passed away; we have been made new. I wonder if Paul was being a bit overoptimistic about the old passing away but Paul asserts being a Christian gives a new identity that transcends all others. Paul – a Jew who became a Christian, a Roman Citizen who was executed by the state, a sexist who championed and worked with women, a latecomer to the apostleship, a zealous persecutor of the Church who became its greatest asset, a man who was both traditional and radical knew something about identities and how they mix and merge.

Life as a Christian is about working out what that new identity in Christ is about. What might we mean when we say we are “in Christ” or that we are a Christian? We don't mean we live as Jesus lived – we're not nomadic preachers with minimal possessions. We're not Jewish. We're not first Century Jews living under an imperial system of oppression. What it means to be a Christian has changed over the ages. What it might have meant to be a Christian in 3<sup>rd</sup> Century Rome in an age of persecution might have been different to being a Christian in post-Soviet Russia where the Orthodox Church enjoys huge prestige. What it means to be a Christian now in the West is different again. So, what might it mean for us?

First, there is something about attitudes and values. Jesus taught us to love, to be truthful, to turn the other cheek, and to see God at work in - and at one with - those on the edge. How good are we at showing those same attitudes and values? Then there's something about God being the reason for those attitudes and values; Jesus didn't just believe in abstract notions of God but saw God's love and dignity in every person he encountered speaking gently to women and the poor and sternly to those who misused power. Jesus' faith in God was made manifest in how he treated others – is ours? For Jesus, God's presence seemed to be, most of the time, tangible; in quelling the storms Jesus knew God to be there, in quiet places on mountains and in busy crowds Jesus seemed to be sure of God's presence. Only on the Cross, after the agony of unjust trial and brutal torture did Jesus seem to think God had abandoned him – and in doing so quoted a Psalm so even in his darkest hour he held fast to God despite a sense of abandonment. How firm do we hold on to God's presence, perceiving it in coast and crowd, in mountain and mayhem.

Being a Christian, however, affects all our various identities; they feed into, merge, refine, and enrich each other – and what it means to be a Christian is also affected by all those other identities. We are, indeed, new creations, but complex, interconnected, and sometimes confusing creations! So, we need to remind ourselves that we have multiple, and ever changing, identities. At the heart of our various identities, however, we are Christians.

## Post Sermon Prayer

Lord Jesus,  
You have many identities we project onto you  
Saviour, Lord, King, and Master,  
Suffering Servant, Table Turner, persecuted Jew.  
Help us as we recognise our own varied identities,  
that they all find their fulfilment in our ultimate identity,  
of being your disciple. Amen.

## Affirmation of Faith

In the competing voices of this world, we strive to listen to the Most High **who runs to welcome us home**. When our bones are worn out by groaning, when we have no words and feel entrapped by failure and sin we find in Jesus our true security **as we are encircled with joyful praise**. The Eternal One, has imprinted the divine image within us and we believe that being Christian is the most life-giving identity we have and shapes, and is shaped by, our various other identities. In the divisions that exist in our world we know the Holy Spirit **calls us be bridgebuilders – ambassadors for Christ**.

## Intercessions

We bring to God our prayers for our world, for the Church,  
for those we love and for ourselves.

Eternal One,  
our world is diverse and delightful  
yet divided and dangerous.  
We rejoice in the differences which make us complex and wonderful  
yet weep over how those differences are weaponised.  
Instead of exploring and enjoying different cultures  
we are tempted to retreat behind barriers of fear  
and watch politicians bludgeon those on the edge  
with words and policies.  
Deliver us from ourselves O God!  
Help us to appreciate the wonder of your creation,  
to explore and know ourselves better,  
and to respect difference.

God, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer**.

Lord Jesus,  
You call us from the highways and byways of our lives,  
loving all that we are,  
rejoicing in our complex identities,

uniting us with You and making us new creations.  
As we are continually renewed,  
help us to use our faith to inform who we are,  
and who we are perceived to be.  
Enable us to reflect on what it means to be Your disciples  
as the unique individuals that we are.  
Deliver us from all that would oppress us O God!  
Help us to build bridges with those who are marginalised,  
to be your ambassadors to those fearful of speaking their truths,  
and signs of Your love to those who are hated.  
God, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Holy Spirit,  
You call us together and empower us to be the Church;  
forgive us when we try to turn the Church into a battlefield,  
when we decide who is or is not worthy of Your grace,  
and when we do not speak up against injustice.  
Bless those who lead the Church –  
elders and ministers, councils and committees,  
that as we discern Your will,  
we may be a sign of love and vitality to a broken world.  
Deliver us from ourselves O God!  
Breathe Your peace on to those who are troubled,  
especially for those for whom we now pray...

*silence*

Speak Your words of wisdom in our hearts,  
that we may know Your will and follow Your way.

*silence*

Accept our prayers, Eternal One, which we make in the power of the Holy Spirit in the  
name of Jesus our saviour who taught us to pray saying, Our Father...

## Holy Communion

We have shared bread and wine many times in our lives, in many places, for many different reasons. The bread that we now break and the wine that we now share, are a sharing in the life of Christ. May our acceptance of it today be a sign of our faith:

- in the ongoing goodness of a God who journeys with us
- in the power of love to remove any barrier within or between us
- and in the mystery of the call given to each of us to make bread and life and beauty available to all

For it is the bread of heaven,  
the bread of the poor  
and the bread of our own lives. So let us pray.

Lord Jesus may we recognise You:

- every time we join someone on a journey
- every time we share a meal
- every time we take bread in our hands

and may this recognition of You call forth such joy in us  
that we might never lose sight of Your goodness.

We pray, O Holy Spirit, that You will come upon us  
and lift us into Jesus' presence in the heavenly places,  
that as we eat these gifts of bread and wine,  
which Mother Earth has given and human hands have made,  
they might be, for us, the communion with the Body and Blood of Christ,  
our saviour and brother: who, before dying, took some bread,  
said the blessing, broke it, gave it to the others and said,

"Take this all of you and eat it.  
This is my body which will be broken for you,  
do this and remember me."

Later on, Jesus took a cup filled with wine,  
said the blessing, gave it to the others and said:

"Take this all of you and drink from it,  
for this is the cup of my blood,  
the blood of the new and everlasting promise of God  
which shall be shed for you and for all,  
do this and remember me."

We remember Jesus now, O Most High,  
as we say together the mystery of our faith.....

**Christ has died! Christ is Risen! Christ will come again!**

Eternal One, we pray that this bread and wine  
will inspire such love in our hearts  
that we may continually keep alive Your memory and promise.  
May this meal provoke such a longing for truth in us  
that we may never be satisfied until the whole Earth

experiences Your justice and Your peace. Amen

So, friends, let us eat and drink as Jesus taught, inviting the stranger to our table, and welcoming the poor. May their absence here serve to remind us of the divisions this meal seeks to heal. May their presence here truly transform us into being the Body of Christ which we share.

Let us share this meal knowing that our lives are forever changed by this and every breaking of bread and sharing of wine.

## Post Communion Prayer

We did not presume to come to this table, Lord Jesus,  
trusting in our own righteousness  
but in Your manifold and great mercy.  
Grant, therefore, good Lord, that in coming to You,  
hungry and thirsty for justice,  
we may be satisfied and filled with your Spirit,  
and ever more dwell in You, and You in us. Amen.

*adapted from  
Devotional Services for Public Worship (1903)  
by John Hunter*

## Blessing

May the One who loved and knew you before the ages began,  
the One who died so that you might be free,  
the One who guides you through the complexity of life,  
love you, liberate you, and guide you,  
that you may love, liberate, and guide others.  
And the blessing of Almighty God,  
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit  
be with you, now and always, Amen.

Hymn Suggestions				
	RS	CH4	StF	MP
Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing	360		494	
Come My Way, My Truth, My Life	352	579		
Just as I am without one plea	364	533	556	
And Can It Be	366	396	345	33
Before the Throne of God Above		466		975
O Lord of Every Shining Constellation		246		
I Come With Joy To Meet My Lord	477	656	588	
In Christ Alone			351	1072



## Other Musical Ideas

Why not start worship with a recording of Labi Siffre's *Something Inside So Strong* – a song about Siffre's experience as a black man watching an uprising in South Africa but with another layer of meaning when he came out as a gay man.

If you are having Communion then the lovely Catholic hymn *Gifts of Bread and Wine* is worth learning. It's easily found online.

This version of Psalm 32, from the Free Church of Scotland, works very well to the hymn tune Repton (Dear Lord and Father of Mankind). I've tweaked the words to make it more inclusive:

### **How Blessed Are Those Who Have Received Forgiveness**

Verses from Psalm 32 Sing Psalms Version

© 2003 Psalmody Committee, The Free Church of Scotland

How blessed are those who have received forgiveness for their sin!

Whose sins are covered from God's face,  
whose debt is cancelled in God's grace;  
there's no deceit in them.

2 When I kept silent, all my bones  
with groaning were worn out.  
Beneath your hand I felt entrapped  
both day and night; my strength was sapped  
as in a summer drought.

3 Then I laid bare my sin to you,  
the guilt that lay within.

I said, "O LORD, I have transgressed" —  
and you forgave when I confessed;  
you pardoned all my sin.

4 You are my hiding-place, O LORD,  
my true security.

You keep me safe in troubled days;  
You circle me with joyful praise  
when you have set me free.