

**Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> May 2024**  
**Trinity Sunday**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**OT: Isaiah 6.1-8**

**NT: Romans 8.12-17**

**Gp: John 3.1-17**

Within our congregation, we have people at every stage of the process of applying for visas or citizenship. There are Deputy Lieutenants of Merseyside, who preside at ceremonies where citizenship is granted, and we have people who are in Liverpool or in the UK for a short time, or for a long time. Earlier this year one of the clergy at St Nick's, Fr Yazid, received his citizenship. Now, being Fr Yazid, whom we all love dearly, when he sat his citizenship test he spoke to the invigilator afterwards to point out all the mistakes in the questions. I don't think you are meant to do that! But they still let him pass, and he is now the proud owner of a UK passport. He may have been the only person at his citizenship ceremony who had a better knowledge of British history and culture than the examiners, but being presented with the documents of citizenship put everyone on a level playing field. No one is 'more British' than anyone else – it is an absurd concept which is only promoted by racists.

Identity is not a relative concept, because each of us is the person we are. You cannot be more or less than what you are. Having a particular passport is not really about identity, because it does not change who you are, but it is a badge which you can wear. I do not think that citizenship of any nation state does not confer any existential identity, but not everyone would agree with me. The influential nineteenth century theologian F.D. Maurice related the Kingdom of Christ to the other units to which we belong: nation, neighbourhood, family. This idea is the product of monoculture and makes belonging rather than believing the gateway to identity. Now, belonging is a significant part of our Christian identity, and sometimes belonging is the forerunner of believing, but Christian identity is rooted somewhere else.

In the early centuries of Christianity the need to create identity was paramount. This was partly because of the competing doctrines of those who called themselves Christians, and partly because of the need to define Christianity as distinct from the religions which influenced its development: this was not so much about Jewish roots, which is the preoccupation of some of the biblical writers, but more about

neoplatonism and Manichaeism. The formula was revised continually, resulting in the two creeds which we commonly use. The Apostles' Creed is the concise statement of faith at baptism, and the Nicene Creed is the longer statement of the faith of our community, which is why it is used during the Sunday Eucharist. These creeds are the passport of Christian identity. The most significant feature of the Nicene Creed, and the longest section within it, is the description of the Person of Jesus Christ, truly human and truly divine: two natures to describe one Person. And even if the details are for the connoisseur, the assent to the details can be common to us all. After all, not everyone gets 100% in their citizenship test. And just to make sure the Trinitarian nature of the Creeds was the passport to Christian identity, the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE, which refined and endorsed the Nicene Creed from just over a century earlier, also made the following statement: "Those who dare either to compose another Creed, or propound, or teach, or deliver another Symbol to those who wish to turn to the knowledge of the truth... if they are bishops or clerics, the bishops shall be expelled from the episcopate, the clerics from the clergy; if they are monks or laymen, they shall be anathematized."

So, Trinity Sunday, which we are marking today, is not just another feast day of many, but it is a celebration of our identity as Christians. What it does not regulate is Christian behaviour, and yet this is so often confused with Christian identity. It is not uncommon to hear people trying to give identity to Christians by behaviour. You know the sort of thing: 'She must be a real Christian because...' but in fact this does not work: Jesus' injunction to love your neighbour as yourself is a consequence of Christianity, not a cause. And, as is obvious, positive behaviours are not exclusive to Christianity. What then, is the relationship between identity and behaviours? As most of you know, the public statement I made in March about social doctrines within the Church made national headlines: although some of the social media comments on what I said would definitely not qualify as exhibiting Christian behaviour, I was careful not to confuse behaviours with identity. Although I would quite happily anathematize those who reinforce prejudice and discrimination within the Church, I do not condemn their Christianity if they assent to the creeds.

This is important, because it is the guard against Christianity becoming either subjective or relativist. We can condemn behaviours and we can disagree over them; it is also likely that some behaviours are wrong and very much unGodly. But this does not change someone's identity as a Christian. At the

same time, salvation is not bound up with whether or not you hold a Christian passport. To be a Christian has to be more than saying the trinitarian formula of the Creed: it is not about behaviour but about our understanding of that identity. Listen to a line from our Gospel reading today. Jesus says, “What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” This is similar to St Paul’s line from our second reading, when he said, “If you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” So rather than just saying the Creeds, we have to have a relationship with the Trinity, which our readings relate to being born of the Spirit. In other words, we are part of the life of the Trinity, living our trinitarian faith.

One would like to think that being born of the Spirit and living in the Trinity would therefore mean that our behaviours would emanate from this. Perhaps for the most part they do, but context and circumstance gives means that, as I said earlier, each of us is the person we are. Our predecessors in this Church were undeniably Christian, and yet derived their wealth from the trade in enslaved Africans; those who promote oppressive behaviour within the Church of England today may well be credal Christians, but they understand the world differently from me. I cannot say that they are any more or less Christian than I am, because Christianity is not a relative concept, but I can still name the behaviours which I believe sit at odds with Jesus’ injunction to love our neighbours.

So, the trinitarian creeds are a passport: they give us our identity, but they do not reduce our individuality and uniqueness. We are who we are, and we shall be judged on who we are. In subscribing to the creeds, we are not told how to behave, but each of us takes on the reputational mantle of Christianity... so wear it well!

**Fr Crispin Pailing**