

Where do we belong?

It's said we all need to feel we belong. It's tied up with our identity and wellbeing: we need to feel we belong *somewhere* – it might not be where we are right now – or that there are certain groups of people among whom we feel at home.

Yet, it seems, we're becoming more selective about what we belong to. People can live somewhere without really committing themselves to the local community. People don't join things in the numbers they once did. Perhaps it's the way life is these days: a multiplicity of choice and a complexity of demand. Those with a product or cause to promote know that true belonging produces commitment – so they ask us to belong. *Sign up for our newsletter ...* But we can't commit ourselves so widely: so, if we attempt it at all, we try to belong in a passive way, holding ourselves back for our own survival; ending up, not with belonging, but a collection of affiliations.

Belonging is not always permanent. Places and people change: we may find we no longer belong where we thought we did. I remember a time when I couldn't imagine not belonging to the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds – and I always will, because I took out life membership. I don't regret that; but the RSPB has changed and I've changed: as my wildlife interests have broadened out, it doesn't mean as much to me as it once did.

Jesus says of his apostles that they are *from the world and are in the world*; but *they don't belong to the world* – because they now belong to Jesus: he is the source of their identity and wellbeing. Psalm 1 gives us a picture of being rooted in God: *like a tree planted by streams of water bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither*. Whatever the changes and chances of this mortal life, as the Prayer Book puts it, the tree remains resourced and resilient.

However, *the world* in John, like *the flesh* in Paul, seems to stand for that which rejects God, even though it owes its very existence to him – *the world knew him not*. The Christian cannot be fully at home in that sort of world. And the feeling can be mutual: says Jesus of his apostles, *the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world*.

Yet they remain from the world and in the world. A second century epistle picks up the paradox: *Christians reside in their respective countries, but only as aliens ... they take part in everything as citizens and put up with everything as foreigners ... every foreign land is their home, and every home a foreign land*.

It's no accident or misfortune that the apostles remain as Jesus returns to the Father, for he says, *I have sent them into the world*. The Acts of the Apostles begins with the Ascension. Through our Easter readings from it we have seen followers becoming leaders, fishermen becoming evangelists, and today, one of their number we've not met before being appointed to office. Belonging to Jesus makes a difference.

What's more, Jesus says he has sent them in the same way that the Father sent him into the world. That sending, as we have already heard, in one of the most acclaimed verses of the New Testament, was an act of love: *God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son...* Despite its capacity to reject God, the world remains the object of God's love and commitment – *Let me go there*, says the Son in R.S.Thomas' poem.

So we're not called to distance ourselves from the world, or to form another of those passive affiliations: sent into the world in love, we are committed to it: not because we belong to it, but because we belong to Christ.

Thanks be to God.

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