

Anniversary of the Dedication of the Monastery Church
(Ephesians 2:19-22 / John 4:19-24)
18.01.2017

Every so often I find it refreshing to read the biblical texts proclaimed at Eucharist in a translation other than that of the lectionary. On occasion I turn to a contemporary paraphrase-translation known as *The Message*. Eugene Peterson's rendering of the Bible in contemporary English may be known to some of you. It presents us with a very simple, clear-cut, *take on things*. Just the other day I read *The Message* version of Ephesians 2 – the text heard at this morning's liturgy. This is how Peterson translates verse 19 of Ephesians 2: *You're no longer strangers or outsiders. You belong here.*

You belong here.

That little turn of phrase sparked off a reflection within me. I was led to give consideration to what it means to really belong; how our belonging to Christ should lead us into a deeper sense of connection with all around us... the world in which we live and all its inhabitants, but especially with our brothers and sisters in the community of faith.

A sense of belonging – as indeed the lack of a sense of belonging – will affect the quality of our lives considerably.

A sense of belonging is vital for our well-being. When we feel we belong we are at peace. We are contented.

If we do not have a sense of belonging, we feel alienated, there is a malaise within us; we suffer from a lack of peace of mind and heart; we are disconnected and, as a result, discontented.

I wonder how many of us can say that we really feel that we belong.

In some respects all of us are inclined to struggle with the issue of belonging – evidently, at certain times and in certain situations more than in others.

It has been said that *belonging is something that is hard-wired into us*. In a book entitled *The Gifts of Imperfection* the author Brené Brown reflects: *A deep sense of love and belonging is an irreducible need of all women, men and children. We are biologically, cognitively, physically and spiritually wired to love, to be loved and to belong. She goes on to say: When these needs are not met we don't function as we are meant to.*

Hard-wired to belong, when we feel cut-off in any way, we simply cannot function properly; the current of life no longer flows freely within us. When we are cut out by individual persons or by a community of people who have been particularly significant for us, when we are made feel that we no longer belong as far as these people are concerned, this constitutes such a brutal shock to our system that what Brené Brown calls our *hard-wiring* gives way. It is as if the fuses blow, creating a short circuit – as a result, the flow of life within us is interrupted, we break down, we fall apart inside.

When others who really count for us, and for whom we once really counted, make it clear that we are no longer part of their lives, we feel heart-broken, our soul aches.

It happens that the hurt with which we are filled can have such an ill-effect upon us that we become unwell – literally, sick. Nursing our hurt, we can become hurtful in regard to others. People who are suffering deeply are inclined to hit out at others due to their distress (even without realising that they are doing so). Men, women and children who have been wounded are likely to wound those around them, by pushing them away, hitting out at them, cutting them off. It is not so much that they are taking revenge as simply reproducing what was done

to them. (... As if that will resolve anything. It won't.)

Another reaction to sentiments of non-belonging – one to which we can so readily give-in, thinking it the safest and least harsh option – is what I'm inclined to call *interior shut-down*. Not wanting to feel the pain being endured deep within – and not wanting to hurt others either – we can opt to numb ourselves... so much so, that we become unfeeling people; people whom others can only perceive as cold, distant, aloof and even uncaring.

These different reactions that I have just described all stem from the fact that the need for love and belonging is so strong in our lives, so deeply inscribed within our being, that it is profoundly destabilising for us, greatly damaging to our well-being, when we feel that we are not really loved, not truly cared for and do not quite belong.

To feel that we do not count for others most often leads us into all kinds of negative *self-talk*. It has us listen to those inner voices that pull us down with self-destructive internalised statements such as *I am not worthy*, which can quickly become *I am worthless*; *I am not good enough*, which can degrade further still into *I am no good at all* and even *I am really bad*; *I don't belong* which, taken to the extreme, can lead us to deduce *I should not be here... I should not exist as a person*.

This kind of inner discourse is very dangerous, it is detrimental to our spiritual, emotional, psychological and physical well-being. It stands in total contradiction with what God's word spoken to us again and again has to say. The Scriptures contain so many reminders that we *count in God's eyes*, are *precious to Him*, are *well-beloved*, and, as Paul's Letter to the Ephesians reminds us, ***we belong!***

This morning's first reading is all about our belonging to Christ and to His Church. Paul who says to the Christian community at Ephesus *you're no longer strangers* goes on to say ***we belong together***.

We belong together!

It is good to be reminded of this today – on the first day of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

It is also good to be reminded that ***we belong together in the world community*** at a time when many native people – including certain political leaders, not just across the Atlantic, but nearer home – are saying to people of other nationalities living in their midst: *You are a foreigner. You don't really belong here. Go home to the place from whence you came. If you weren't born here, don't apply for entry. Stay out. Each person to the land of their birth*.

Here in Northern Ireland we have mutual exclusion on our very doorstep. In Northern Irish society we have people who hold *you don't belong here* attitudes in regard to fellow-citizens who were born in the same land.

How can anyone who says to another *you don't belong here* claim to be Christian and/or an upholder of Christian values?

A true Christian vision leaves no room for discrimination against anyone. A true Christian vision also advocates the exercise of generous hospitality: *Welcome one another as you would welcome Christ*. As Benedictine monks we cannot but be sensitive to that word of the apostle. Benedict makes generous hospitality in regard to all a hallmark of our way of life. We are to welcome each one who comes our way, as we would welcome Christ Himself.

If we adhere to the Great Commandment with its call to love God – we could say, its call to

love God in our neighbours as in our self – then this will be coupled with a genuine sense of our **belonging to each other**.

For a sense of belonging to each other to reign in our hearts, we must first of all – each one of us – find a true sense of **belonging within our self**.

In the words of Brené Brown once again: *A true sense of belonging doesn't require of us to cling to who we are; it requires of us to be who we are.* Of course, *to be who we are* should lead us, in our turn, to allow others to be who they are.

Let us apply that to our growth in Christian unity.

As Christians we belong to each other in the One Body of Christ.

Christian unity depends upon a sense of mutual belonging between the Churches with each one respecting the differences which exist in the others.

If we are to progress at all in the way of the restoration of communion in the Church, if our Churches are to advance on the path of Christian unity, then a real sense of mutual belonging must be cultivated and helped develop within and between all who confess Jesus Christ as Lord. We need to hear and believe that *we belong* to God and to each other. We need to learn ways whereby we allow others to be and to be-long.

The etymology of the word *belong* can help us appreciate just what this requires of us. According to the dictionary of etymology to belong is *to go along with* or *to properly relate to*. The old English root '*gelang*' means *at hand with, together with*. Within this there is a sense of *appreciation, acceptance, association, connection, union, integration...* All this points to *relating to each other in ways that are truly mutually respectful*.

When Paul says that *we belong* and furthermore that *we belong to each other*, he is not saying that we are someone else's property or that someone else is our property. He is saying that we are called to allow others *to be alongside* us and we are called to draw alongside them, with the view to *journeying hand in hand* with them. It is not a matter of others being completely assimilated to us or our being completely assimilated to them. There must be room for difference between people and respect for the keeping of a healthy distance. When we speak of belonging to each other what is being advocated is **not confusion, but communion**. There is a big difference between the two.

There are many examples of how Jesus respected others' differences. Our reading of the gospels shows us how Jesus didn't force people to fit into His categories; He dared to meet them where they were at in life. Jesus associated with many whom the good religious people of His day would have frowned upon and held at a distance – people such as the Samaritan woman we meet in today's gospel passage. **The way Jesus related to the Samaritan woman shows how He made her feel that she belonged.** Jesus explained to this woman that access to God was open to everybody whoever they were, wherever they found themselves. (Access is open to us whoever we are and wherever we are!)

Jesus' readiness to interact with the Samaritan woman, and His conversation with her, should lead us to recognise that there is ***One God who is Father of all; One to whom all belong and in whom all belong to each other.***

Christ's example frees us up to dare to draw alongside every person we meet, whatever their race or religious persuasion, whatever their gender, social class, educational background, political opinion.

St Paul tells us that ***we are all one in Christ***

It is good for us to be reminded of this on a day when we celebrate the anniversary of the Dedication of this monastic church as a *House of Prayer for all Peoples*.

As St Paul reminds us in the extract from Ephesians 2 read this morning – I read once again in *The Message* translation: (Here) *God is building a home. He is using us all in what He is building. He is using you, fitting you brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together. We see it taking shape day after day – a holy temple, built by God, all of us built into it, a temple in which God is quite at home.*

May we who belong to Christ cooperate with Him in the building up of His Holy dwelling place in this monastery – God's House – wherein all are called to find their home.