

CCV Gal 3:28

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your side, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

As many of you know, I live most of the time in Innsbruck, in the Tirol, four or five hours west of here. There are lots of ways in which the Tirol has a rather distinct culture, but one that I've noticed is the accent.

Fairly soon after moving there, I lost a suitcase on a train and reported it to the police. The kind local policeman listened to my report and then said:

“Kommen Sie DienSTOCK”.

I couldn't quite work out what he meant so he repeated himself.

“Kommen Sie DienSTOCK”.

I was still at a loss. I thought this “STOCK” must be Stock as in the story of a building, like the zweiter Stock or dritter Stock. Did he want me to come to a particular floor of the building? But I didn't know any German number called “Dien.”

But he repeated:

“Kommen Sie Dienstock.”

Eventually, the answer clicked. “DienSTOCK” is Tirolisch for Dienstag. He wanted me to come on Tuesday. I can't remember all the details after that, but I got the suitcase back, so I either found it myself or came back on Tuesday.

This is just a tiny, trivial example of how building relationships across cultures can be very hard work. Language is only one aspect of the challenge. In some ways it's one of the easier aspects, because it's so obvious. It represents all kinds of more subtle ways in which we find it hard to communicate. It isn't always easy to understand people who are different to you, whatever way the differences express themselves.

Of course, we're a very diverse community in Christ Church. We come from many different parts of the world. We speak many different languages. We have a whole variety of different opinions including on some controversial and important topics. Yet, for the most part, we manage to get on OK. Indeed, it's a wonderful gift, for which we should be very thankful, that we enjoy so much unity in our diversity.

If we want to deepen and strengthen that unity, the epistle reading today has both encouragement and challenge. It contains the famous slogan: “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” This passage takes the three fundamental divisions, the three fundamental identities of ancient culture and says, it seems, that in Christ, they no longer exist.

What makes us who we are? What are some of the most fundamental aspects of our make-up? Well, I think that at least you could say that your gender, your family or cultural background, and your job, are all pretty important. I’m not saying that those three things determine our personalities or that they should constrain our choices or that the way other people see those categories should control us. I’m rather saying that however we interpret and apply those categories, they are probably important. If you take two people, and they’re different genders, different cultures and doing completely different jobs, they might have a lot in common, but I think many of us would still say they’re rather different people. So these three things are important.

Yet, Paul says they’re unimportant. Paul says there is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. In other words, none of these other identities matter anymore, if you’re a Christian. If you belong to Jesus, then your identity is in Jesus, the fact that you’re a child of God through Jesus, the fact that your baptism has almost literally covered you with Jesus, that is more important than any other aspect of you. If you follow Jesus, then nothing should be more important to you than following Jesus. If that’s true, then nothing will stop you getting on very well with anyone else who follows Jesus. The more we follow Jesus, the easier it will be either to forget those other aspects of identity, or if they’re good and we might not want to forget them, we’ll learn to inhabit them in ways that bless God and others.

I am a male, English academic. But more important than any of those things is that I am a Christian. That means that as I think about what it means for me to be male, what it means for me to be English and what it means for me to work for the university, the most important way to answer those questions has got to be what is a Christian man, what is a Christian English person, what is a Christian academic. The answers to those questions won’t always be easy, but they have to start by recognising that the Christian part is always the most important part of the answer. What does it mean to be a Christian man or a Christian woman, are both huge and important questions that I can’t begin to answer now, but the answer must begin by recognising that the Christian part is most important.

I think this challenges politicians and thinkers of the right who say that our nations and cultures are sources of social cohesion, or that our maleness or femaleness is utterly determinative for other choices we make. No, according to Paul, being in Christ is more important.

But I think this also challenges politicians and thinkers of the left who say that simply the idea of multiculturalism is enough to make all our differences easy to negotiate. Of course, as Christians, we're called to love our neighbours whoever they are and, in that sense, Christians should of course support and welcome diversity; but love of diversity for its own sake rarely creates healthy diversity. What creates healthy diversity is love of Jesus.

So, I think Paul challenges us all this week to reflect on what aspects of our identity are important to us. It might well include our gender, our culture or our work. But if, over and above those, it includes the Lord Jesus, we will find it easier to build relationships across those barriers and we will better understand and know and flourish who and where we are in those identities.

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.