

**S57 St David's Day 1.3.2011**  
**Jesus College Oxford**  
**Ezekiel 2.1-7 and Galatians 3.23-29**

Noswaith dda. Mae'n adderchog i fynd i'r eich Coleg am y dydd hwn. Dwi'n hoffi siarad yn Saesneg achos dim ond tipyn bach Cymraeg gyda fi. Mae ddrwg gen i.

For those of you like me who have little Welsh, I was apologising to the Welsh speakers why I can only preach tonight in English.

It's a huge honour to be here today, here on the west side of Turl Street. For like your Chaplain I had the dubious pleasure of spending my undergraduate career on the *far side* of this little road and – dare I say it – not in the College down the bottom of the street, but – alas – in the one directly opposite. At night in room 2.2 above the porter's lodge I would hear gentle chanting by Jesus men speculating in triplicate on the pastimes of Exonians. And by day I was fed with legends of the glory years of intercollegiate rivalry – back in the 1970s before the calming influence of women ended the Turl Street battles of flour and fire extinguishers. Halcyon days no doubt. One such story – uncorroborated by Wikipedia or reliable independent evidence - tells how a group of Jesus students snuck into Exeter and applied significant quantities of glue to the benches in Exeter dining hall, the end result of which was many ripped trousers. As revenge, the tale continues, the unseated Exonians broke into the Jesus bike shed, removed all the saddles and waved them above their heads while they sang 'Stand up, Stand up for Jesus'.

Self-identity is so often forged in opposition to the identity of someone else. Whether the identity sought and the identity rejected is real or imagined, what is often determinative is that it distinguishes the individual from another. This truth at the level of collegiate rivalry is experienced to a deeper, stronger, and more disturbing extent in politics and wider society. Twenty-five years ago western identity was shaped by aversion to Communist threat. Better dead than red and all that. With the Soviet Union gone, the mass media now define our culture against the perceived alternative of militant Islam. The self-understanding of the western world has shifted, but the method by which it forms that self-understanding has not – our self-identity remains forged in opposition to the identity of someone else.

Too much of modern Welsh identity – to focus on the context of today's festival – is sadly similar, not founded in the culture, topography and story of our western part of the British Isles, but in what it means to be *not English*.

- We see this in some popular sentiment expressed during football and rugby matches.
- I see this at a microscopic level in the Church in Wales. The Church in Wales was an integral part of the Church of England until April Fools Day in 1920 when it was cut off against its will. However, since that time, the identity of the Church in Wales has too frequently been characterised by a desire to do on its own what could be better done in partnership with the Church of England. Sometimes we

answer questions about worship, clergy training and deployment, political lobbying, and so on within our own little bubble.

- The same is true within Higher Education. Within Bangor University I hear complaints from staff who are being forced by politics to cooperate with academic colleagues five hours away in Swansea and Cardiff and to ignore their more natural geographical partners in Liverpool and Manchester, a short distance down the A55.
- And the same is true in politics, where a similar discourse lies behind some of the campaigning for this Thursday's referendum about whether further powers should be devolved to the Welsh Assembly in Cardiff Bay.

All these factors – brought about by defining the Welsh in terms of what they are not – combine into a self-perception which tragically obscures those bases for Welsh identity which are unique and positive: the artistic, geographical, and linguistic differences that genuinely set Wales apart in its own right.

This is an issue into which Christianity might speak. For the Christian identity is not defined in negative opposition to another but in positive relation to Christ. This is the heart of the message that Saint Paul taught the early believers in Galatia nearly two thousand years ago. Although the Galatian church was made up of Jews and Gentiles, these distinctions did not matter to Paul. Those *oppositional* features which had characterised both ethnic groups for centuries were to be abandoned, because, Paul says, 'in Christ Jesus you are *all* children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 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*' (Gal 3.26-28). All of you are one in Christ Jesus. *The Christian identity in Christ is not defined in negative contrast to another but in positive comparison to Jesus.* All who have faith in Christ are engrafted into Christ and through the infusion of his grace grow to become more like him. This is a message of profound simplicity that breaks down barriers of suspicion and mistrust, and uproots the quirks of history, be they minor squabbles within families or major wars between nations.

For all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

So we have two means of establishing identity, one based on negative contrasts and one based on positive comparison. And into this story of good and bad models of identity falls the man of the moment, one Dewi Sant, Saint David. On the one hand, most of the stories of David stem from an apocryphal life by a chap called Rhigyfarch produced in the late eleventh century. This and later *Lives* exist to promote the territorial claims of St David's diocese against the diocese of Llandaff and the ecclesiastical independence of Wales against the assumptions of the Normans further east. In other words, the image of the high medieval St David was defined by oppositional conflict.

So much for the eleventh century legend. But what of the sixth century man? We know virtually nothing about the historical figure of David other than the places which still bear his name. These include the infamous Llanddewibrefi, where I presume David was once the only saint in the village. In the age of the *real* St David, Wales as we now know it did not exist, nor did those oppositional battles exposed in David's later hagiographers.

What did exist were a number of celtic principalities on both sides of the Irish Sea and with connections further afield to places like Brittany. Power ebbed and flowed and territories shifted, but running across these lands alongside similar languages and shared trade was a commitment by men like David to a single faith: the belief that all could be one in Christ Jesus. Of the man we know virtually nothing. Of the message, we should hope that he shared the agenda of Paul, that all could be one in Christ Jesus.

I should add a footnote. Christians' identity in Jesus Christ is their *primary* identity. It is the badge and honour we own above all others. This, as I have indicated, is a potentially unsurpassed basis for unity. But it is potentially also a cause of great friction if our *positive* identity in Christ becomes *oppositionally* set against the claims of others. At the time when this College was founded, Roman Catholics were being expelled from a College on the far side of Turl Street because their expression of identity in Jesus Christ was deemed incompatible with the nation of Elizabeth I. The Christian's identity is potentially the same as that of the religious terrorist because allegiance to their beliefs could, theoretically, override allegiance to the state in which they are situate. Our identity in Jesus Christ can be costly and controversial; we need to take it up and assert it only after cautious and considerate reflection.

This challenge considered, better the identity in Christ with which we must struggle than to be bereft of identity in a society which has no over-riding metaphors or which is possessed of identities which are only oppositional. And if David knew this truth a millennium and a half ago, it is no less appropriate to celebrate this Welshman's memory in Oxford than it is for former worshippers in Exeter to lead worship in here Jesus.

O blest communion, fellowship divine!  
we feebly struggle, they in glory shine;  
*yet all are one in thee, for all are thine.* Alleluia. Amen.