

That they might be one

Just over thirty years ago my wife and I went to Oxford to bring our son home from an Iron Maiden concert in what was then known as the New Theatre. We stood in a neighbouring street as the concert came to an end. The air was throbbing with the sound (dare I call it noise?) of Iron Maiden closing their set. And then the audience poured out onto the street; 2000 or so young rebels asserting their individuality by all wearing almost identical clothing: denim jeans and leather or denim jackets adorned with World Tour nineteen-eighty-whatever badges for all the major bands.

The urge to be different; the need to be alike. The desire to stand out from the crowd; the longing to belong.

We live in a world where people of different communities find ways of identifying one another – you are one of us. But there is an implication: you can recognize someone who is not 'one of us'.

Let me give you an example. Some Methodists are anxious about attending Anglican worship because they are unfamiliar with the routines: when do you stand, when do you sit, when do you kneel. what page are we on? Sixty years ago a Methodist could enter any Methodist Church and find a familiar hymn book. Now we need to advise our preachers which version of which hymn book they are likely to find in use at each church. A sense of commonality, of shared culture, has dwindled. Sad, perhaps, but true.

In 2001 I was visiting Saudi Arabia, representing the University at a student recruitment fair. A Saudi mother came with her son to talk about a university place. We had a good conversation. Then I extended a hand to her in greeting. Not done! Saudi Islamic culture would discourage such direct contact between women and men.

In our relations with our neighbours of a different religion food laws and practices can present challenges: Hindus would avoid beef; Jews and Muslims would avoid pork. Muslims would shun alcohol. How do you put on a party for such diverse guests? What is appropriate/acceptable to offer them?

This issues arises in the New Testament letters, where there is evident concern about the source and history of particular food items. Paul's answer was that we should always be sensitive to the consciences of others.

A week or two ago we were enmeshed in controversy about alleged anti-semitism in a political party. It produced such a kerfuffle! We are not quite sure who to believe; there are so many party advantages to be sought and won – or lost – by telling the story in this way or that. How do we mark out this territory, between the inflammatory giving of offence and the inflammatory taking of offence? The truth, whatever that may be, lies somewhere, to be sure: but where? How will we know it when we see it?

There is an alarming rise in the power wielded through the notion of 'the unsayable' – what you may not say in polite society. Where, for example, is the dividing line between opposing the policies of the State of Israel, on the one hand, and Anti-Semitism on the other? Truth is not considered to be an adequate defence.

Somewhere in this verbal no man's land there is another concept – wisdom. Wisdom in telling the truth. But sometimes the truth is bitter and hard to receive. On some occasions and for some people bluntness may be the best way to impart a difficult lesson; rather more often it requires empathy, patience and skill.

In John's Gospel chapter 17 we find a great Prayer of Jesus: not 'the Lord's Prayer' used every Sunday – Jesus instructional model – but an expression in prayer form of his, and God's, mission. Referring to his present and future followers, Jesus prays *That they may be one*. The complexities of identity – belonging and not belonging – in our modern world seem to emphasise the scale of this prayer. But we cherish this prayer of Jesus however challenging it may seem.