

## ***Belonging and being Church: what's Catholicism all about?***

*(Presentation for Root & Branch Synod, 10<sup>th</sup> September 2021)*

I'd like to begin my meditation by looking at what a friend of mine has dubbed "the pathology of belonging". Over the last few years, we have all seen it terrifyingly at work. You have probably watched, as I have, video interviews from the US of people who are dying of COVID, having not been vaccinated and having refused to wear masks. A strikingly repeated confession at the end is not that they were personally unconvinced of the existence of the virus, or the efficacy of the vaccine, but that they felt that to go along with the recommendations was to betray their tribe. A mixture of religious and political orthodoxy had congealed around these issues, turning them into questions of belonging. And once belonging congeals, then truth goes out the window. These people would indeed have to have been very brave to be able to wear masks, to stand outside the lies concerning the virus, the vaccines, the farcical medical suggestions, the stolen election, and so on, because to do so would put their belonging at risk.

Exactly the same pathology was at work with former white supremacist gang members, interviewed about their previous affiliations. It turns out that many of them didn't really believe any of the white supremacist guff tattooed all over their bodies: what hooked them was the sense of belonging which gang membership gave them.

And belonging typically matters more than life or death, because belonging gives us who we are to be. Our approval depends on our belonging. It is the hardest thing in the world to receive your approval, and thus your sense of belonging from "Your Father who is in Heaven" rather than from those who can give you a quick fix of approval, the junk food of congealed religious and political belonging that I refer to as the violent sacred.

Though I say this from abroad, I rather think that you have seen the same with Brexit: what was offered was a pabulum of congealed religious and political belonging, the same peculiar mixture of cultural Protestantism and sense of empire that has long fuelled English self-righteousness. The sense of belonging that comes along with that has always been stronger than truth. For contrary to what our individualism and our rationalism suppose, it is our relationality that determines our rationality, not the other way round. It is not that we understand first and then decide to belong. Rather, our form of belonging determines what we understand to be true. Whether facts are "fake news" or not depends not on logic, but on whether they share your belonging.

A second element of the pathology of belonging is that it always depends on an “over against”. The weaker our sense of identity, and the stronger our need for approval, the more loudly will we sing the tribal song, and need to point to the other we are not, and are not like. Those over against whom we are. Some sort of more or less evil other who is there, and just out of reach. So, the “EUSSR”, or migrants, or Muslims, or the “deplorables” or “gammons”, the “woke” or “the rainbow plague” or “gender ideology”. The sense of shared grievance against such an “other” is a vital part of belonging, because it enables us to suppress any differences among ourselves, and so to feel much more united.

This element of “over against” can, curiously, lead to a certain stasis and internal peace for the belongers in the group if there is enough push back from the “wicked other”, a “wicked other” that is prepared to play the role of our enemy twin, as some of us remember from the Cold War. Both groups are complicit in keeping their internal peace and belonging alive by means of the other. Though very really does a stasis of this sort last for long.

However, if the wicked other is either too strong or too weak, and my group belonging is frustrated by being unable to get any traction from its evil other, then the anger and hatred that goes into maintaining the belonging will turn back onto my group which will start finding “enemies within”. Historian Rodney Stark has shown how massacres of Jewish people by Christian peoples were extremely rare until after the Muslim conquests from the ninth century onwards. It was then that such massacres started occurring on both sides of the divide, Muslim as well as Christian. As neither side was able to advance with relation to its “big” enemy, Jewish communities became proxy victims of frustrated belonging.

But what happens when we lack either a plausible, but suitably distant, big wicked other, or a plausible and identifiable “enemy within”? Well, we are left flailing around at more and more imaginary enemies, and perhaps especially against those who are busy suggesting that those enemies aren’t really enemies. How much of the anger now hurled at “woke” is less to do with annoyance at the endlessly pedantic demands for self-righteous verbal intricacy which some people do indeed make, and more to do with an accelerated loss of belonging as “useful” proxy enemies (against whom “we meant no real harm”) are withdrawn from circulation. To lose an enemy twin may be regarded as a misfortune. To lose your proxy victims as well looks like something far more catastrophic than mere carelessness. For without them, who are you?

Gay people, trans people, black people and even locally dwelling Muslim people are gradually, and far too slowly, being taken out of circulation as proxy victims. The growing awareness that it is wrong to scapegoat such people, and that the scapegoating is structured by lies has the effect of making it more and more difficult

to recreate belonging by the usual twin methods of the wicked big other, and the smaller internal proxy victim.

One of the results of lost belonging is, as I hope is obvious, a recrudescence of attempts to link “the right to hate” with “religious freedom”. And along with that, an attempt to recreate strong religious identity by casting religious groups as persecuted. Victimary politics and victimary religion are the same thing. Whatever the formal name of the religion or anti-religion involved: Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, communist, secularist and so on. And however explicit the religious element: MAGA is much more explicitly religious than BREXIT, but the way in which the violent sacred compensates a sense of lost belonging is very similar in both cases.

And of course, in all our countries our religious leaders, whatever the religion, are usually the ones who agree to receive a strong identity from those of their faithful who really need belonging. That, rather than what one would hope: that such leaders, as people of prayer, would be those most free from the need to belong, least tempted by getting a quick shot of identity from the local confluence of nationalism and fear. Nevertheless, the chance of becoming a symbol of that belonging, and so being given an identity, however poisonous its fruit, is usually too strong a brew for us weak-souled clerics to pass up.

Personally, I think this is one of the reasons Pope Francis is so hated or feared by so many in our Church. He refuses to be a symbol of “strong belonging” when so many want just that. He knows that all forms of strong worldly belonging, especially those of clerical and liturgical identitarianism, are dangerous mirages, and that the Catholic faith is something entirely different.

It’s that difference that I would like to explore with you today by asking what it was that Jesus was doing in coming among us, teaching us, setting up witnesses to what he said and did, and then going up to his death? Well, I’d like to suggest that he was producing an anthropological earthquake: a complete shake-up in what it means to be human. And that means a complete shake up with relation to how humans belong.

Here is what St John has to say on the matter:

So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, “What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.” But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.” He did not say this of himself, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus intended shortly to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God<sup>1</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> Jn 11:47-52 (my translation of v 51)

Caiaphas reacts as one will who wishes to shore up belonging. You bring everyone together over against someone by telling lies about them. Those who accept the lies about the evil of the other then share in the righteous belonging that comes with expelling the proxy victim. What is stunning in John's Gospel is not the absolute clarity and completely political nature of Caiaphas' calculation, but the next verse. For in that verse, starting "He did not say this of himself..." John shows that the divine plan would look for all the world exactly like what Caiaphas was recommending, while in fact being its reverse. Caiaphas was describing it precisely without having the remotest idea of the truth that he was revealing. Jesus would undergo the mechanism which shores up belonging in order to undo its power forever and make possible a new sort of belonging such as had never been known before.

Catholicity, the possibility of all the dispersed children of God being gathered into one, was born in this undergoing and this undoing.

At its simplest, it looks like this: those who are frightened of losing belonging will tend to create unity around someone "whose fault it is" and then throw them out. Their shared complicity in that violence, and the fact that it has in fact bound them together into unanimity will give them a strong sense of belonging. For a short time, at least. Though they may need to keep it going by ratcheting up the tribal song and finding other victims to reassure them of their righteousness in their belonging.

This is undone completely if it turns out that the one violently thrown out, blamed, and killed, was in fact entirely innocent. So that all the bluster of belonging was a lie. The undoing is even more devastating if the one violently thrown out had not only known it was going to happen, explained how and why it was going to happen, but had deliberately gone through with it.

More devastating still if it turns out that "deliberately going through with it" wasn't an act of masochism, part of some death wish. Nor even a conviction that "I'm going to make them look evil for what they've done to me", setting them up for some kind of accusation. Even more extraordinary than that: the deliberate going through with it was an act of love. It was saying "I know you are desperate for belonging, for approval, for being, and I know that this is the way you are inclined to get it. So, I'm going through with this not to hold it against you, not to hold up an accusatory mirror to shame you, but to give you a chance to quit this dehumanizing game.

The mirror that will be raised up by my crucifixion, held before your eyes by my resurrection, will be that of my longing for you to have a richer sort of belonging. Any of you who are enabled to let go of the ways in which you are complicit in violent belonging will be empowered by me to begin to create a way of belonging

where your weakness, your being of no account, is the starting point of your glory, rather than something to be shamefully covered over.

In as far as you are able to let go of the ways in which you are addicted to strong belonging, and so need to reinforce it violently, in as far as you will allow me to forgive you, which is what empowers your letting go, to that extent you will receive me. And receiving me, you will receive the Father who sent me, and will find that you have become a daughter or son of God. One who is possessed of definitive and gentle being. Are you prepared to be as weak as I in order to share my strength?"

I hope that it is clear from this that Catholic belonging, the sort of belonging that is capable of creating and sharing catholicity, is our living of this dynamic process of gradually losing our forms of strong belonging – what a previous age would have called our idols – and instead receiving a vastly stronger weak belonging. And please remember, you need to be vastly stronger than the strong of this world in order voluntarily to be weak in their midst. Weak with the strength that only prayer and the Spirit can give.

What does this process look like? Our first model is Abraham, who left the house of his parents and their idols in order to walk into an uncertain future, losing security the whole time, and often enough playing fast and loose along the way, since he found it as difficult as any of us to lose security. But all this was to trust in a promise: to be given who he was to become from a source in an uncertain future who was grasping him, holding him in being. It was that ability to lose belonging which enabled him to come to be held, and to become a source of belonging for others.

And then we have Moses and the people of Israel, who left a co-dependent battered-spouse relationship of servility with Egypt in order to dare to become a new sort of people. A people who would be “my son”, without any certainty of geographical belonging, and only a legally structured way of life as parameters for what they were to become.

And when the author of 2 Colossians tells us “As you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, walk in him” the walking, the “peripateia” (from which we get “peripatetic”) is of a similar sort. A life that is a losing of idols, a leaving behind of violent and painful forms of security that seem to us the best that we’ve got, in order to dare to be given who we are to be.

In as far as I understand the now considerable literature concerning what synodality is, and is to be, it is very much linked to this walking together on the way of dispossession.

And what does this mean in more everyday terms for people like us? One of the things that Pope Francis has boosted is an historical shift from Tridentine

Catholicism which is only just beginning to yield to the vision of Vatican II. Because it is one thing to belong to a body that defines itself over and against the Reformation, and then gradually, over against the enlightenment and modernity. That gives you strong belonging, a wicked other, suitable proxy victims as enemies within, but takes you away from the real. In that model the hierarchy are more important in shoring up belonging than in helping the faithful to walk in Christ amidst the constant changes in the world. The so-called teaching of the hierarchy isn't really teaching at all. It is an exercise in holding onto a theoretical objectivity without ever letting those walking in Christ learn to describe what we are discovering about the world in which we walk so that all of us may learn to walk in a richer sense of reality and objectivity.

I think we can fairly say that that sort of belonging, dependent on a belief that the hierarchy has a Cartesian-ly clear access to the mind of Christ, while the rest of us are a body too passionate to learn other than by voluntarist obedience, has gone. Even if some pine, pathetically, for it to return. Instead, we are having to learn together to discover the mind of Christ, which involves a much more unsure form of belonging. It means learning from and alongside each other as we witness to each other how walking with Christ transforms our lives.

So, for instance, here am I, a long-term exile and expatriate from my country of birth, currently an immigrant in Spain, one of those lifelong citizens of nowhere the lovely Mrs May told you about. And I am talking to you, members of a local Church in which I was never able to find belonging. Talking as I have no right to do, and which you might very reasonably consider a valueless input, because of our lack of shared belonging.

But part of our challenge is to learn from each other what it might mean to lose the idols of our nationality, the myths about who we are that are reinforced by self-flattering accounts of our history. And I don't only mean the Imperial gibberish so beloved of your current Lords and Masters. I mean also the comforting delusions of minority status with relation to the state religion by law established, a minority status sanctified by a whiff of recusant persecution, one which can lead to a learned helplessness that passes as holy.

But not only such "big" forms of belonging. What about other more local forms of belonging? Parishes, schools, charitable groups, families. Is my clinging to the way I belong a way of protecting myself against some other? A determination to prove something? Or is it rather a place in which I find myself walking in Christ, undergoing the way of dispossession as I lose my idols of strong belonging and find myself being brought into being alongside others who are being brought into being as I am? All this in such a way that we are being opened up to a much bigger world, a much greater reality, than we could have dared to imagine.

As a priest, I ought perhaps to refer to that particular idol of strong belonging which the Holy Father refers to by the name “clericalism”. Males given a fake identity by a certain sort of belonging. One which depends on a potentially hostile or dangerous “other” – the laity. One which precludes the input of women, lest they sense the frightened and underdeveloped little boys shielded from reality by a hastily erected magisterial persona; and one which is dependent on shared dishonesty about homosexuality.

As the great clerical abuse cover-up scandal has shown: the products of this strong belonging more often than not cannot be trusted as partners in learning truthfulness of life. And so, the whole way in which we interact with, form, teach, and learn from those charged with being signs of Christ’s self-giving in our midst is in flux. As it should be. If the making available of signs which empower our walking is the task of the ordained ministry, then it needs to be done by those who have become strong enough to live weak belonging in our midst. Neither maleness nor enforced bachelorhood are pre-conditions for such lived weak belonging, or for celebrating the signs which so come alive when such weak belonging is lived well.

For the weak belonging is not an end in itself. The problem with strong belonging is that it makes us impervious to grace. We are too busy clinging to an idol to allow ourselves to be possessed by the living God. As we find ourselves undergoing dispossession, becoming vulnerable to the other, what we receive is not a stronger belonging, as though God was “bigger” sort of power. What we find instead is that we are held in our weakness, possessed by the Spirit that was in Christ, and so enabled to become creators of belonging for others. A belonging which we do not necessarily feel ourselves.

This for me is one of the wonders of the Catholic faith, and something to which I hope we will attend along the synodal way: that in letting go of belonging, in becoming those who are going out of being, we are empowered to reach out to others, and above all those who are precarious in whatever way, because we see ourselves in them, and them in ourselves. It is this creative work out of weakness, creating neighbourliness, the creation of belonging for those who have no belonging by those who are losing belonging, that makes us Church, sign of a kingdom that is coming upon us from just beyond our reach.

James Alison  
Madrid/Mexico City/Cuernavaca, September 2021