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Dear Reader,

“But who do you say that I am?”

Tomorrow as the Church in Wales celebrates both Racial Justice Sunday and Education Sunday, we recall the moment when at Caesarea Philippi Jesus challenges his closest friends saying, “but who do you say I am?” This week as the Ministry Area launches its first Alpha Course that question still haunts us and those who continue to ask us what we really believe.

I was an ordinand some 20 years ago in Epsom, home of the Derby, where I grew up. As part of my training, I witnessed the marriage of several very young traveller girls and boys who were married in our parish church. I witnessed numerous huge traveller weddings, baptisms and funerals, always attended by hundreds from their tight-knit community. Hymns, if sung, were sung with gusto from memory, for those who celebrated or mourned were mostly illiterate. The cynical vicar would ask me to stand at the door at the end of the services and hold the plate “very tightly just in case it should disappear”. I would return to the vestry with the huge brass plate piled high with £10, £20 and often £50 notes. The vicar had reason to distrust members of the traveller community for his predecessor had visited them and found thousands of pounds worth of stolen tiles destined for the church roof hidden under tarpaulins on their site. The £50 notes spoke to me of both generosity and repentance.

A few years later I was privileged to have a large traveller community in the parish where I was Rector and where we ran a busy Sure Start Children’s Centre in our hall. The manager and I would regularly visit the traveller site to try and build relationships in the hope that we could persuade the mothers to bring their children to our play and learn sessions and perhaps even send their children to school. From time to time I would enquire, with a twinkle in my eye, why on earth so many wheelie bins had gathered on their site; many had gone missing from the village. I was always assured, despite the address clues written on the sides of each bin that “the council had recently delivered them!”

As the years went by, a small number of traveller children attended our church school. As I led collective worship and school Eucharists I could spot these children at a distance by their clothes, their sneering demeanour, their haircuts and their tiny round eyes. I know quite a bit about the coefficient of inbreeding in dogs and suspected the likelihood of these children having a high percentage of homozygous genes (ie two copies of the same allele). Yet I also wondered whether it was nature or nurture that most affected their behaviour in school. So often I would receive a call from a desperate head teacher asking if I might spend an hour with a group of these children to take the pressure of the class teacher and their peers. Their aggression, bad language and lack of respect for young female teachers set them apart as a separate and powerful force of nature within each class and the wider school. However, beneath their tough exteriors and pack mentality these boys and girls knew they shared a kinship code that was thicker than blood. The moral code that ensured the girls would be rigorously guarded by their fathers and elder brothers and married off by 16 initially shocked me but their love for their wider family and strict moral code was instinctive.

In 2013 a traveller family appeared on my doorstep asking to be baptised. They had moved from the traveller site into social housing after their community had turned on them for wishing to send their older girls to school so that they could learn to read and write. As Billy-Joe, with a knife wound visible across his leathery suntanned cheek, leaned on his stick he told me that he had heard about, “Bread and Wine” (the confirmation group that was meeting in our local pub) and he wondered if they could join in. Since there were four children, for their own protection, I offered to

prepare them at home. I believed that our parish church was both inclusive and welcoming but their attendance each Sunday taught me a shocking lesson. Our church filled up each week with lawyers and doctors, nurses and office workers, teachers and shopkeepers, adults and children who all knew, "how to behave in church" They couldn't understand this traveller family who sauntered in late, who initially went out at half-time (during the distribution) for a fag and stood silently gazing at the stained-glass windows whilst the rest of us sang. They couldn't understand why the adults refused to accept the hymn books and orders of service from our welcomers and they wondered whether the notes they placed in our collection plate were fake or had come from another drive shoddily tarmacked or trees felled and dumped up the road. Yet this family taught us all what it is to believe that Jesus is Lord. Firstly, at their baptism when with tears streaming down the parents' cheeks, I poured water over their heads and secondly when along with a large group of candidates they were confirmed in our church. Billy-Joe and his wife and children each told the Bishop in their own inimitable way just how much they wanted to turn from sin and be faithful to Christ and that they believed Jesus to be their "guv".

When I think of this extraordinary traveller family it's easy to think of the well-known parable that begins, "which one of you having 100 sheep and losing one wouldn't go into the wilderness and search until the missing one was found". It's easy to smile and remember the confused look on the face of the Bishop as he confirmed this family of six. Yet these new Christians shamed us with their willingness to be found and their simple yet profound replies to that haunting question "who do you say that I am?" In choosing education for their sons and daughter and choosing to become integrated into society despite being cast out by their own clan they chose a new life where education, faith and discrimination matter.

This Sunday let's pray both for an end to racial discrimination and for the schools in our community in the knowledge that it is education that opens hearts and minds to a new way of looking at the world around us.

Yours in Christ,

Vicki
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Alpha Course in Radyr We are running the Alpha Course at Christ Church beginning **this Thursday 16th September** at 6.30pm in the New Schoolrooms.

Alpha is an 11 week course for people who want to know more about the basics of the Christian faith. As well as eating together each week and watching a short film, this is an opportunity to discuss important questions about God and the meaning of our lives. To find out more about what's involved and register for the course, please send us an email or give us a call. We'd love to hear from you. Please contact Iwan & Amanda Russell-Jones, iwan.russelljones@virginmedia.com, 07905400688