24 March 2019: Choral Matins
The Third Sunday of Lent
Deuteronomy 6:4–9, John 17:1a, 11b–19
The Revd Clare Hayns, College Chaplain

‘Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise’.
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In the name of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

‘I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world’ John 17:14

The University of Oxford has recently signed up to the Stand Alone Pledge. This is an initiative to recognise that every year a number of undergraduates are studying who are estranged from their families. These students will have had no contact with their parents for 12 months and will receive no financial, emotional or practical support from them. Statistics show they are three more likely to suspend and drop out.

Last week I was invited in my capacity as welfare coordinator to Christ Church to attend a training day where we heard stories from three students who told us of their experience. They spoke of loneliness, of the ever present fear of where they would live at the end of each term and at the end of finals, and of a sense that they didn’t know where they belonged.

The Stand Alone pledge commits the University (and colleges) to supporting them, financially and emotionally.

Our day together has led me to reflect on belonging.

I thought of my own experience as a young person leaving home where I moved away to study, went back home for a time, and then moved away again. I think of the image of a bird leaving the nest and taking test flights as it learns to fly, coming back to the nest several times before leaving for good.

Belonging is the innate human desire to be part of something larger than us. We don’t want to stand alone in the world. We need others and so we form ourselves into groups. I
am sure all of us here will belong, however loosely to a variety of different clubs, groups and societies. Be they political, sports clubs, companies, families, or religious groups.

They will each have something to define them: common values, a familiar language, goals and interests. These connect us to one another and give us a sense of identity and purpose. They help us to feel less alone in the world.

As we can all think of places we belong I am sure we can also think of moments where we realize we no longer belong. The women in our meeting reminded us that there are times where we find ourselves alone. There are times when our families let us down. Or we realise we don’t share their values any more. There are times when the groups, societies, ideologies, churches that we belonged to no longer sustain us.

This can be a natural and right phase of life. It pushes us on to form new relationships and new groupings as we move through life. Or it can be due to conflict. Whatever the cause, the realisation we don’t belong can be painful. There is a sense of loss and of course the extent will depend on how strongly we identified with the group.

We saw that sense of loss in the statement by Dominic Grieve MP on Tuesday when he spoke in the House of Commons of his distress at feeling shame in a political party he had been part of for 40 years.

The temptation when we feel let down or threatened can be to retreat, to create ever smaller groupings and to surround ourselves with people who think, speak and look like us. This seems to be happening in our political world but also in our church and religious life.

Research Professor Brene Brown calls this ‘the Big Sort’ as we sort one another into ever smaller groups and live within confined feedback loops where their boundaries are kept tight with doses of fear and shame.

We decide who is included and who is not.

Who’s in and who’s out.

So what, or perhaps, who do we belong to?

All of us are here because we share (more or less) a common faith. A few moments ago we recited the creed. If we don’t all agree on all aspects I’m sure we can agree on the commandment we heard again in Deuteronomy:
'The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with your might'. (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

For the Jews belonging was, and is, a fundamental part of faith. The law, circumcision, rituals, food customs, and feasts were all signs of who, and more importantly, whose they were.

They were to remind themselves of this constantly.

‘Keep these words that I am commanding you in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are away… bind them as a sign on your hand…. Write them on the doorposts’ (Deuteronomy 6:6-9)

In our Gospel reading Jesus prays for protection for his disciples just before he knows he will soon leave them.

‘They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world’ John 17:16

Jesus brought with him a radically different way to think about belonging. Jesus’ disciples are to be ‘in the world, but not of the world’. This is not about making a distinction between secular (i.e. worldly and bad) and spiritual (i.e. Godly and good). We had a Christian bookshop near us in London that refused to stock any music involving drums as they were deemed evil.

This is not, in my view, what Jesus means.

He called the disciples out from their worlds and into another kind of world, one that he calls the Kingdom of God. And he reveals what that new world is like through his life and is continuing to reveal it though his Holy Spirit.

• A Kingdom that is defined by faith in the Father, as revealed through Christ;

• A Kingdom where the boundaries are constantly moving further and further out, including more and more;

• A Kingdom where those who belong to it are known by their actions and how they live their lives: with love for God, for one another, for those who are outside, on the edges, the outcast.

• A Kingdom that is in the world, in the midst of the mess and pain, but is not defined or constrained by it.
There is a letter written in the 2nd Century, the epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus which describes how the early Christians lived in the world:

Christians are indistinguishable from other men either by nationality, language or customs. They do not inhabit separate cities of their own, or speak a strange dialect, or follow some outlandish way of life. …… With regard to dress, food and manner of life in general, they follow the customs of whatever city they happen to be living in, whether it is Greek or foreign…And yet there is something extraordinary about their lives… They live in their own countries as though they were only passing through. They play their full role as citizens, but labour under all the disabilities of aliens. Any country can be their homeland, but for them their homeland, wherever it may be, is a foreign country.iv

‘They live in their own countries as though they were only passing through’.

Maya Angelou, the poet and author said:

‘You are only free when you realise you belong no place – you belong every place – no place at all. The price is high. The reward is great’.v

Ultimately, belonging for the Christian believer is not to a particular place, or nation or even church, although we can of course feel at home in one church or cathedral rather than in another.

Fundamentally we belong to no place. But we do belong to someone.

Jesus says in his prayer:

‘They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word’ John 17:9

‘All I have is yours, and all you have is mine’ John 17:10

Our fundamental belonging is to be found in Christ. Everything flows from that truth.

We belong in Christ so we are able to love God with all our heart, soul and mind.

We belong in Christ so we can love our neighbour.

And when we know we belong in Christ then we don’t need to protect ourselves from others. We don’t need to decide who else belongs and who doesn’t.

I’d like to end with a story. A week ago a certain individual armed himself with assault rifles, strapped on a head camera and went on a killing spree in two mosques in New Zealand. The story went round the world and there were a variety of reactions. Horror,
fear, grief. One man the other side of the world got out a marker pen and wrote on a piece of cardboard. He went to stand outside his local mosque and held up a sign. Someone took a picture of him and it went viral. The sign in his hand read:

‘You are my friends. I will stand watch whilst you pray’.

It was held by the smiling, friendly face of Andrew Graystone, a Mancunian Christian. Later he told the media that there was much in the world that distressed him that he could do nothing about. But he could get to know his neighbours. He could stand alongside those who were afraid. And so he did so. As Diognetus would have recognised he inhabits the same City as his neighbours and yet there is something extraordinary about his life.iii

Being in the world but not of the world means we can find our fundamental belonging rooted in Christ, and from that we can go into the world, confident we belong nowhere, and everywhere, and to someone.

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i http://www.thestandalonepledge.org.uk/
iv A letter to Diognetus (Nn. 5-6; Funk, 397-401) http://www.vatican.va/spirit/documents/spirit_20010522_diogneto_en.html
v Maya Angelou, https://www.brainpickings.org/2013/06/14/maya-angelou-bill-moyers-1973/
vi https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-manchester-47595582