**Ministerial Meandering**

*Belonging*

Reading a story about a young boy brought up in Rhodesia in the 50’s, and going to boarding school there, brought back vivid memories of my own early childhood, and boarding school in England in the same period. In fact, so similar is the account he gives, I could have written it myself, and only had to change the location and the weather. Cambridge in England was a far cry, climatically, from the tropical seasons of Bulawayo. We were both just 8 years old.

The stark abandonment - as it felt - of seeing my parents drive off down the school drive, having left me and my trunk of belongings at the school entrance on that first day - has never left me. Of course, I wasn’t the only one for whom it was the first day, but it nevertheless felt that way. I knew no-one, and it seemed as though all the other boys knew one another, and were straight into playing games. I was clearly the ‘odd one out’, and stood there, swallowing hard to stop myself from crying; that would never do.

I do not remember the second term being any better, and I fear that was probably the term I ran after my parents’ car down the drive, as it left me with tears running down my face. I think that was also the term I wrote the obligatory weekly letter to my parents, with the plea to come and get me, because I had lost a sock, and was bound to get into trouble for it.

Learning to feel comfortable and accepted at boarding school is something that changes your outlook on life permanently. There is no doubt that it is a ‘sink or swim’ environment - and not everyone ‘swam’. There were those whose parents lived not far from the school who could ‘convert’ into day-boys, but those whose parents lived further afield would suddenly be there no more, and questions as to their whereabouts were not allowed. They just disappeared.

I learned to ‘swim’ because I had to; partly because I knew my parents expected it of me, and partly because I was bloody-minded enough (even at that tender age) to ‘*illigitimum non carborundum’* - not let the bastards grind me down.

But acquiring a sense of belonging to the school came at a price. I developed survival strategies from the endless bullying; I learned how not to make the same mistakes twice - getting caned for the same mistake would be the height of stupidity! - I learned not to get caught by mastering disappearing skills in the woods around the school grounds. But I no longer felt the same in my family environment. I was now a stranger there. I was quieter, more independent, preferred time on my own - and was probably less affectionate. After all, it didn’t do to show a need for cuddles and hugs at school. I began automatically to call my my father ‘Sir’; he didn’t stop me. I even became dismissive of the scars from the beatings I got, which horrified my mother; they were, after all, only skin deep. A different selection of canes and a riding crop were the usual weapons - the only difference being that the riding crop was usually in the hands of the older boys. Magisterial blind eyes were continually turned.

When parental split-up occurred around my 15th year, my survival was certain, as I was now at my second boarding school, and ‘home’ was such a distant memory, it hardly impacted. What hurt most was finding out that parents are fallible too - and trust for either went out of the window. I had been betrayed.

I’m not even sure I know why I’m writing this to you this week, except to say to those of you who may well have had similar experiences in childhood, ‘Don’t despair - we ***do*** belong - all of us, as children of God, and in the loving arms of Jesus.’ Many of us have also been lucky enough to experience ‘belonging’ as adults when we have made families of our own. If yours has gone now, remember that your eternal family is waiting - not on the other side of the grave (although that too), but here, now, all you have to do is recognize it, and someone will show you to your place at the table.

Philip+