

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY – WEDNESDAY, 4TH SEPTEMBER 2024
PROFESSOR TINA BEATTIE – writer and Catholic theologian

Good morning.

I was recently on a bus chatting to the man next to me. He was black and I'm white. "Aren't you going to ask me where I'm from?" he bantered. "Where are you from?" I asked. "Croydon," he said. "Aren't you going to ask me where I'm from?" I replied. "Where are you from?" he asked. "Zambia," I said, and we both laughed.

I thought of that good-humoured exchange when I read about the British Social Attitudes Survey published this week. Over the last ten years, Britain has become a more inclusive society, with less emphasis on birth and ancestry as hallmarks of Britishness, and less of a sense of national superiority and pride. For some this might be bad news, but for me it was a rare moment of optimism in these dark times.

Like many of my generation, I'm part of a global diaspora. My parents left their working-class homes in postwar Scotland to seek a new life in Northern Rhodesia, now Zambia, where I grew up steeped in the music, myths and poetry of Scotland. My father once jokingly told me that if I had to choose between marrying an Englishman or marrying a Zambian, I should choose the Zambian because, he said, "they're tribal like us". I married an Englishman. Our four children were born in Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Wales. We've lived in England for the past thirty-six years, and we're now in the process of moving to Scotland.

So I have no strong sense of national identity and I feel like an outsider wherever I live. My African roots and my Scottish ancestry play upon my soul with the sweet melancholy that comes from loving both and belonging to neither. The Welsh word "hiraeth" beautifully expresses this. It means a bittersweet nostalgia for a lost homeland that is part memory, part imagination.

The biblical author of the Letter to the Hebrews describes people of faith as "strangers and exiles on the earth". I interpret this as a call to live, to love and to give with a sense of our common humanity that transcends all worldly markers of identity, ownership and exclusion, mindful of the transience of our earthly lives.

When a man from Croydon and a woman from Zambia shared a joke on a bus, we represented a new way of being British, a fragile promise of an inclusive and diverse community learning to flourish and grow out of a history of empire, race and conquest. That, to me, is something to be proud of.