

A United Church

Ezekiel 37:1-16; Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16

In the first chapter of his book, *The Great Divorce*, CS Lewis depicts the town of Hell, a dark and desolate place where it is always raining. The narrator wanders through the streets before discovering a populated bus stop, and he joins the queue. Just in front of him, a woman suddenly snaps at her husband and after an argument they both stomp off. Next, two men insult each other and get into a fight, and one falls away. Others try to cheat their way forward resulting in more violence and a woman being thrown out of the queue. When the bus eventually comes the queue is quite short and the those left berate the driver for his sunny disposition, and then they "fight like hens to get on board.. even though there was plenty of room for [them] all". There most people cannot get on with most other people! Discord and disunity reigns.

Paul had a quite different vision for the Church. In the section of his letter to the church at Ephesus (and probably to others in the region) which Sue has just read, he urges the believers to live in a manner worthy of their calling: and picks out four virtues which they are to live out

humility - humbleness

gentleness – meekness

patience – forbearance

and love – agape love – which encompasses forgiving love.

These virtues overlap the fruit of the Spirit that Paul lists in Galatians, which our Young Church upstairs are working through this Autumn. To go aside – today I am informed they are looking at Joy, and I'm sure you have come across the acrostic or mnemonic for priorities: JOY – Jesus Others Yourself.

and these four virtues that Paul mentions are the very embodiment of putting self last and out of these, says Paul, comes a fifth virtue or fruit, if you wish: Peace.

And the result is that with peace they – the believers – are joined together through the Spirit

Or to put it another way, The Bond of Peace is the glue that will hold them together.

Paul emphasises unity, this coming together, as all-important. Believers are urged to love each other by making 'every effort' to keep together in unity, thus phrasing suggests that disunity would be an ongoing problem. This isn't surprising as this theme of oneness is so countercultural.

For Paul – the church had become multicultural and was no longer purely Jewish in makeup. Even in the early days the book of Acts how the apostles had to handle tensions between Greek and Hebrew Jews and the distribution of food to widows, no doubt a situation complicated by cultural and language barriers! The growing church reflected the melting pot that was the Roman Empire: Gentiles, Jews, to start with then there would be slaves and slave-owners, women and men, old and young, rich and poor, different languages, cultures, social status, class, the list goes on and on – you get the message.

And such a mix of people is vulnerable to all kinds of divisive factors: pride, arrogance, contempt, gossip, bitterness, malice – you get the message again.

That a body of people of different ethnicities, class or background are gathered together in unity in Christ is quite remarkable. In this context Paul calls for a united church – one Body as he puts it. And this oneness unleashes his poetic nature –

One Body,
 One Spirit
 One Hope
 One Lord
 One Faith
 One Baptism
 and one God, who is Father to all.

This oneness has of course a model for the church:

A model of Unity

Right from the beginning of Scripture, we are told that God is one God, yet a community of three persons in perfect, relational love - Father, Son and Spirit in perfect unity.

To emphasise this, Paul earlier in this letter to the Ephesians (2:18) uses the Trinitarian verse: "For through [Christ], we have access to the Father by one Spirit."

Jesus (in John 17) prays for believers that they may one, just as the Father and the Son are one. Jesus goes on to pray that they may be brought to complete unity, to let the world know that Jesus was sent into the world by the Father. So this unity of believers has a purpose, in that it reflects Jesus' character and his mission.

So seeing how Christians love one another points to the Lord, whose extraordinary love and sacrifice at the cross makes reconciliation and unity possible.

United but Different: unity = diversity

A week ago Jane and I went on a relatively long cycle ride, (not as long as Steve's sponsored ride for MAF which ends today) and made sure we were able to cope with punctures and repairs that might involve dismantling the bikes. As a result, I had to take whole handful of screwdrivers, because I'm sure you've noticed that screws and bolts come in so many different sizes and types. Each screwdriver is best suited for a specific screw or bolt and just as each screw or bolt is suited to a specific task. No one tool can meet all the needs. And it's not just screwdrivers, I haven't mentioned Allen keys, hammers, saws or all the other tools that we have. Different and diverse tools, but all needed.

Unfortunately, we did have a puncture, we had the tools but not the time to mend it. There must be another lesson in that!

So, united, yet different!

Differences in a church should not only be expected, it is healthy. There is unity of belief but diversity of gifting. In verse 7 Paul writes that each believer is given gifts of grace.

I don't really have to remind you of how Paul draws on the image of one body and many parts in 1 Corinthians 12 and elsewhere. He returns to it whenever he wants to illustrate the interdependence of believers within the church, or the unity that underlies all our differences.

In verse 11 Paul lists different types of leadership, and although all the ministries he lists within the church require different gifts they are all dedicated to one purpose – the building up of the one universal Church.

Only when we accept this unity in diversity, Paul tells us, do we really grow up as a church. Only by working together can the people in the church be fruitful for God, letting each person play their unique part.

In practice

So much for the theory. So much for the situation in the first century. Fast forward to the 21st century. What lessons are there for us? in this church, in this city? in this world?

Let's think about the **local church**

I'm not here to pass any judgement. I ask only that we think about how we work together as a whole congregation not just the core, not the faithful few but the whole including the fringe, the ragged edges.

On a good day, yes we can see the concept of one body at work, but we must take care not to become complacent. On our not so good days, we can be guilty of bad attitudes, perhaps suspecting the worst of one another, perhaps failing to build bridges where they are desperately needed, perhaps staying comfortable with those we know, perhaps gossip – surely not!

Can I remind you of the Charles Schultz cartoon that Sue shared with us a few weeks ago in which one of the Peanuts characters (Linus van Pelt) says: I love mankind, it's people I can't stand.

If everyone were the same, many jobs would not get done! We need each other, and the very things that we find frustrating in others may be the very reasons why they are so good at doing those tasks we hate!

God is not calling us to be like those we admire but to be the person he wants us to be, playing our part in the life of the church.

We have to get real and accept these differences – we couldn't be united without them

In St. Andrew's we have a pressing need to recognise our oneness as we go forward in this time without a minister, and it was good that folk gathered together for a time of prayer and sharing on Friday evening. It is a time to re-recognise the gifts we have and to play our

parts in building up the body at St. Andrew's remembering, as Philip reminded us there: minister or no minister it is Christ who is our Head.

Paul actually uses some interesting language in this passage "*I urge you to live*" is translated by others as "*I urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling...*". We are after all on a journey, growing little by little towards that mature body with Christ at its head until ultimately Christ's coming brings the Church to complete maturity.

The wider Church

If it is a challenge to apply Paul's concept of the One Body to a local active church that we know, it opens a whole new can of worms when we apply it to the Christian Church beyond. For traditions, cultures and theological emphases can be so different.

The story is told – as they say – that John Wesley had a dream in which he was first transported to the gates of Hell. He asked, "Are there any Presbyterians here?" "Yes," was the reply. "Any Roman Catholics?" "Yes." "Any Congregationalists?" "Yes." He hesitated, then said, "Not any Methodists, I hope!" To his dismay the answer was "Yes."

Suddenly in his dream he stood at the gate of Heaven. Once again he asked, "Are there any Presbyterians here?" "No," was the reply. "Any Roman Catholics?" "No." "Any Congregationalists?" "No." Then he asked the question which most interested him: "Are there any Methodists here?" He was shocked to receive the same stern reply, "No!"

"Well then," he asked in surprise, "please tell me who IS in Heaven?"

"Christians!" was the jubilant answer.

From that dream Wesley, changed his view about church division, and determined that unity was essential to the church's success in her mission.

Out there the man in the street or the woman on the proverbial Clapham Omnibus don't get why there are so many different churches.

Paul wouldn't get it either. To him there is one Church, end of.

We have different ways of worshipping, different opinions on evangelism and spiritual gifts and the sacraments. We wear different clothes and, occasionally, funny hats! We use different jargon.

What are we to think of division? Some today agree with Wesley: division is one of our greatest sins. We must unify at any cost. Others believe any effort toward unity necessarily involves compromise; therefore, we must avoid it.

To me this seems a very top-down view. I feel that we should look to the grass roots. And there we see Christians from all sorts of denominations and theological standpoints working together.

In this city you might care to draw up a list: Street Pastors, Healing on the Streets, the Foodbank, the Credit Union (known as Connecting Canterbury).

Last Thursday evening I was at a Christians Together in Canterbury meeting where we heard of the work being done for the refugees camped out in Calais, and of the welcome bags and visits made to families moving into the Howe Green estate at the former barracks.

How good it is in such situations, when asked *Which church are you from?* to be able to respond *From all the churches*. Such a reply surprises, and possibly confuses, many who hear it. Would that one day it doesn't evoke surprise. But we really should not be resting on laurels, how many of these activities that I've mentioned were running 5 years ago? Times are exciting, look out for what the church in Canterbury will be doing by the next 5! Will you be a part of it?

So if you feel a bit disillusioned or depressed about the state of the church, perhaps a bit like those exiles in Babylon who said to Ezekiel that their hope had gone, take note! God is in the business of restoring and building up his people as they come together part by part, and He will put his Spirit in them and they will really live for Him!

Action stations

So what are we going to do about it?

I could list a number of suggestions, but really you can do the thinking –

live out those four virtues that we met earlier:

be humble, be gentle, be patient, love each other

and:

meet regularly

join a Lifegroup

engage in dialogue – get to know each other better

do something together

join a stewarding group

greet everyone

open the doors to all

volunteer - don't wait to be asked

smile

and pray (use the church directory if you have one and pray through the names on a regular basis - Sue prepared a list of members and groups of St. Andrew's a while back just for this purpose)

and then go out from here:

go out and hug an Anglican, or an Orthodox Greek!

and find where God is working and go and join in and do something that scares you just a bit!

And why? Here are some words from the then new Archbishop of Canterbury in 2013:

We are to be one, visibly one, so that the world may believe.

We are to be one so that the gospel we preach is not denied by the way we live in separation.

We are to be one because we are more effective together than apart.

We are to be one – one people worshipping one God Father, Son and Holy Spirit, eating and drinking around the one table of the Lord, for that is Jesus's prayer for his disciples, then and for us now."

18th September 2016