

5th August 2018

Ephesians 4.1-16

Seeing a man about to fling himself off a tower block, his neighbour ran toward him shouting ‘Stop! Don’t kill yourself. Give me a chance to offer you a message of hope!’

‘What is there to live for?’ muttered the suicidal man.

‘Don’t you believe in God?’

‘Yes I do’

‘what a coincidence – so do I! Are you Jewish or Christian?’

‘Christian’

What a coincidence – so am I. Protestant or Catholic?’

‘Protestant’

What a coincidence so am I. Anglican or non-conformist?’

Anglican’

What a coincidence so am I. Evangelical or Liberal?’

Evangelical’

What a coincidence – so am I. Charismatic or conservative?’

‘Charismatic’

What a coincidence. So, am I. Spirit baptized or Spirit filled?’

Spirit baptized’.

At this point the man looked horrified. Turned purple with outrage and yelled, ‘Die heretic’ and pushed the man over the edge.

As we continue our look at Paul’s letter to the Ephesians we look at the topic of church unity. How do we get on with each other?

Of course, human nature being what it is we don’t’ have to look far for examples of how people don’t get on with each other.

Things have blown up following recent free elections In Zimbabwe and there is dispute over who should be the next President. How can some unity be found here?

This week, truth is a casualty in an investigation being launched by the Charity Commission into the Institute of

Economic Affairs, and its possible influence on Brexit. There is a long running crisis within the Labour party over anti-Semitism. Many are asking if this is truly a turning point for the party and whether any unity is possible.

Paul has outlined in the first three chapters of this letter the power of the gospel and the unity of heaven and earth. The church is a sign that God is bringing all things together under Christ, Paul now turns to teaching how unity in the church is arrived at. After all, for all the highfalutin theology, the church is still a community of fallen human beings who have to learn to get on together.

Paul starts with seven fundamentals of unity (vv.4-6): one body, Spirit, hope, Lord, faith, baptism and God. Notice how Paul mixes up the Godhead with the marks of our faith! He introduces this by urging his readers to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Later he will talk of them being called to peace. This will be a demonstration of walking worthily of the Lord who calls them.

Paul also talks about five foundation stones that will make this unity possible: humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance and love. We will come back to those five foundation stones that make unity possible.

First of all, I want to focus in on the fundamentals of unity.

Christianity requires particular beliefs in order to be a member of its community. It is not open to all. We may sing ‘all are welcome’ and in one aspect that is true, but only superficially. The church is not open to all. And of course, people will throw their hands up in the air and say this is outrageous, this is socially divisive. Human communities should instead be completely inclusive, open to all on the basis of our common humanity. Proponents of this view point out that many urban neighbourhoods contain residents of different races and religions who nonetheless live and work together as a community. All that is required for community life is that each person respects the privacy and rights of others and works for equal access to education, jobs and political decision making for all. Common moral beliefs are not necessary, it is said in a liberal democracy.

Unfortunately, the view just expressed is a vast oversimplification. Liberal democracy is based on an extensive list of assumptions- a preference of individual to community rights, a division between private and public morality, and the sanctity of personal choice. All of these beliefs are foreign to many other cultures – and if you were at my talk on Muslims this week you will see how

many Muslim cultures are the mirror image of western liberal democratic cultures.

A liberal democracy is based then (as is every community) on a shared set of very particular beliefs. Western society is based on shared commitments to reason, rights and justice, even though there is no universally recognized definition of any of these. Every account of justice and reason is embedded in a set of beliefs about the meaning of life that is not shared with everyone else. The idea of a totally inclusive community is, therefore, an illusion. Every human community holds in common some beliefs that necessarily create boundaries, including some people and excluding others from its circle.

Tim Keller in his book, *The Reason for God*ⁱ, suggests an illustration. Imagine he says, that one of the board members of the local Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Community Centre announces, 'I've had a religious experience and now I believe homosexuality is a sin'. As the weeks go by, he persists in making the assertion. Imagine also that a board member of the Alliance against Same Sex Marriage announces, 'I discovered that my son is gay, and I think he has the right

to marry his partner.' No matter how personally gracious and flexible the members of each group are, the day will come when each group will have to say, 'You must step off the board because you don't share a common commitment with us'.

The first of these communities has a reputation for being inclusive and the second for being exclusive, but in practice, both of them operate in almost the same way. Each is based on common beliefs that act as boundaries, including some and excluding others. Neither community is being 'narrow' – they are just being communities.

Any community that did not hold its members accountable for specific beliefs and practices would have no corporate identity and would not really be a community at all. We cannot consider a group exclusive simply because it has standards for its members.

Is there no way to judge whether a community is open and caring rather than narrow and oppressive? Yes, there is. Here is a far better set of tests: which community has beliefs that lead its members to treat people in other communities and its own with love and respect – to serve them and meet their needs (the five foundation stones that Paul mentions in this letter). Which community's beliefs

lead it to demonize and attack those who violate their boundaries rather than treating them with kindness, humility and gentleness? We should criticize Christians when they are condemning and ungracious to unbelievers and other Christians. But we should not criticize churches when they maintain standards for membership in accord with their beliefs. Every community must do the same.

This morning we will receive two members into our own community. The promises you make to become a member of the United Reformed Church are both simple yet profound:

Do you believe and trust in one God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
maker of heaven and earth,
giver of life, redeemer of the world?

I do.

Do you repent of your sins, turn away from evil,
and turn to Christ?

By God's grace, I do.

Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Saviour and Lord?

I do.

Then you promise to play your part in the worship and work of Christ' church.

We don't ask you what you think about the bible, or gay marriage, or the work of the Holy Spirit. We ask the essentials – do you believe in God the trinity and do you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior. That we believe is what defined the first Christians. All the rest is of secondary issues, in which Christians will have differences of opinions but which we don't believe are essential for your belonging to the church or your salvation. Go back to how Paul starts with seven fundamentals of unity (vv.4-6): one body, Spirit, hope, Lord, faith, baptism and God.

Some churches will push it further and say to be a member of this church you need to agree with us on some of those secondary issues – otherwise we will push you off the bridge – die heretic. If you come to my talk on the Jehovah Witnesses in a couple of weeks' time – they are very prescriptive for what their members should believe, and they give them all the answers – its black and white. Maybe some of you would like to be told what to believe and you may be frustrated by the United Reformed Church's tolerance for all sorts of views. It's not true that

you can believe anything to belong to the United Reformed Church – we insist on the essentials. But there is freedom to believe within those essentials.

Paul says later in this chapter *don't be a child, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming.* ¹⁵ *Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.*

An essential element of being a grown up and not a child is that you learn to think for yourself. You employ the brain God gave you. You are not tossed this way and that or deceived. In Philippians 2.13 Paul says work out your faith with fear and trembling – it's a responsibility. Again, a difference between being a child and being an adult – adults take responsibility- children need someone to be responsible for them.

Paul is mature enough to know that Christians will be united on some essentials but have differences on others. Hence his plea to make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. Here he seems to urge them to mount a guard over their unity as one would set a troop of soldiers to guard over a city or treasury. there are all sort of things that can attack and spoil that

unity and these must be resisted whatever they are and wherever they come from.

Last year we potentially have a divisive issue and threat to our unity in the same sex marriage discussion. Honestly, I feared for the unity of the church because I knew we would be split 50:50 on this issue. People believed in different truths and had good valid cases for the positions they held.

Unity thrives where there is truth. We are called to speak the truth in love and to be patient with one another. We can only really begin to speak the truth in love if we have faced the truth about ourselves: 'with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love' (4.2)

Unity that results from a situation where people are too afraid to address concerns or disagreements is not a true unity. Neither is it true community. A unity that comes because some people are marginalized or pushed out of the church is not the way in which church should be built.ⁱⁱ

The church, at macro and micro levels, is rightly a place for us to learn to hold tension in our hearts, to standing in between as bridge or as peace builder with hands

outstretched to opposing groups. In this way we are following the example of Christ whose death demonstrates the cost of reconciliation. It is an act of faith to stand between opposing groups or individuals and to prayerfully imagine a future that is so very different. Leaders in the church must model this in the way that they lead people in times of change, in the ways they lead meetings where emotive views are discussed, and in the way they teach communities to be reconciled to one another – not hiding difference but accommodating it where possible.

The question for all of us is whether we have the maturity to stand in this in between place, the place of our disagreement and separation – between what is and what might be. This is what it means to agree and disagree in love. Are we willing to stay in this gap, to engage in dialogue even when we do not agree?

What do we do with dissenting voices?

It was a test of the unity of this church in last year's discussion on same sex marriage and we are still divided over the issue. But I was impressed by the maturity that people brought to the discussion in a willingness by most people to listen and be open to each other. That is what I hope we will continue to do.

Because if it isn't same sex marriage, it will be the style of worship, or perceived favoritism for different age groups or sections of the church, or arguments over money and how we should spend it; I could go on. People are people and there are issues that will threaten our unity and we need to be mindful of that.

So, Paul also talks about five foundation stones that will make this unity possible:

Humility (by which he means that we do not think of ourselves as better than those sitting around us);

Gentleness or meekness (the controlled strength of a broken-in horse that always asks: 'What will promote unity and build my brother and sister's faith?');

Patience (we want everything now; we are in a tearing rush for the kingdom to come in all its fullness; but God is not in such a hurry, he patiently works in and alongside us, refashioning us into the image of his Son, and he invites us to partner him in that);

Forbearance (this is about accepting people around us as they are, not judging them, not forcing our spirituality and values on them, not making them conform to our way of doing things);

and Love (treating one another as God has treated us).

I am prone to winge and complain as much as any of you. I need to remind myself of the need to maintain unity and have this check list before me to check my attitudes and responses.

Paul then goes on to spell out how everyone called by Christ has a role in building the body of Christ on earth. But you've heard plenty of sermons on that and it's a bit predictable, so I didn't want to focus on it today.

The important link to notice is that everyone receives grace (v.7), and so everyone displays an outworking of that grace, one of the gifts mentioned in verse 11. In Ephesus, in the small workshop communities of 25 or so, gathering to support one another, these gifts will be needed. In Paul's community, everyone equips everyone else. He stresses that this can only happen if everyone plays their part (v.16). This is about both speaking and doing, making a community where everyone gets the chance to flourish and grow. And this happens as people are active in ministry as well as being recipients of ministry. For those of us in churches where clergy do the ministry that the laity receives, there are hard but liberating lessons here for us all.

What I will say, which is very specific to us here at the Tab is that on our eldership we try and specialize roles so for example we put those with administrative gifts in administrative roles and those with pastoral gifts in pastoral roles. In our denomination, as we believe Paul writes here – these various roles such as minister and elders are not about some being more special than others but callings to different roles to equip and support all the people of God for works of service.

We had a meeting of those pastoral elders this week and its just reminder that there are people in the church eldership designated with the task of pastoral care for the church. If you need support, need advice, need help, whatever it may be people are there to care.

As a group of elders we have the responsibility of ensuring the church is built up and does its works of service in the name of Christ. One of the things we are looking at is whether we need to employ someone to be a church administrator to ensure we are well run as an organization, stay compliant with the various rules and regulations we have to meet these days and offer clean safe organized facilities and groups. To do that will take money that we haven't got at the moment. If I speak the truth to you in love it's been a frustration to know that whilst our membership has stayed the same our offerings have

decreased in real terms over the last five years when you factor in inflation. It does take money to run a church and we are not getting enough. So I pray we may discuss this together over the next couple of months. The next church meeting is September 16th but you will also be given questionnaires next month for you to express your views on the church and where its going. Let's speak the truth together to each other in love with a common desire to build this church up.

I have a deep love for this church and I love being the minister of this church and I dearly desire for this church to be built up and effective for Christ's ministry. Using our gifts and offering our gifts and striving to maintain our unity may we all grow up into maturity in Christ as each does their part.

We are one body, one spirit;
one Lord, one faith, one baptism.
Come and worship the living God,
who is over all, through all, in all.
From tender years to maturity,
we come to worship you, O God.
Amen.



[A gathering prayer](#)

Mighty and most holy God,
giver of all good gifts,
we come before you today
as members of your body.
We are joined in praise and worship,
as we learn from you
and share with each other.
Build us up, Lord, we pray,
as we drink in the wonders of your presence.
Amen.



[A prayer of approach](#)

We thank you, Lord God,
that you have brought us safely here.

We pause to think of the gaps
in our congregation this morning.
Those who, for many reasons, may not be with us;
they are still our family, Lord.
As we come to you,
we bring them with us.
Bind us together in your love,
and in the sharing of your gifts.
Amen.

[A prayer of confession](#)

Lord God, your world is full of beautiful gifts,
but sometimes we just do not see.
We are sorry, Lord.
Help us to see with your eyes.

Sometimes we take our gifts for granted,
see them as our own property,
we boast about them
when we should be using them for the benefit of others.
We are sorry, Lord.
Help us to live in your love.

Sometimes we know you are calling us to use a gift,
but we hold back and someone suffers.
We are sorry, Lord.

Help us to be brave in your love.

Sometimes we use our gift
when we should be giving someone else
the chance to use theirs.

We are sorry, Lord.

Help us not to be too proud to step back.

Amen.



[A prayer of praise and thanksgiving](#)

For all that we have in Jesus:

we thank you, God.

For all that we have in each other:

we thank you, God.

For the opportunities we have to share our gifts:

we thank you, God.

For the joy of seeing people grow in their gifts:

we thank you, God.

For our own joy when we know we are serving others:

we thank you, God.

For the camaraderie that working together for you brings:

we thank you, God.

Amen.

Prayer

Transforming God,
from the threads of difference,
make something beautiful;
from our disagreements,
let true peace emerge.

In the absence of consensus,
bring us to a deeper listening.

In the clamour of opposite views,
give us hearts that attend to the truth.

In the yearnings of our souls for clarity of vision,
give us honest eyes to see our confused lives.

May we look on others as you see them –
your works of grace,
still unfinished.

May the failings of others challenge us to grow.

Amen.

Heavenly Father, giver of all good gifts,
we pray for all people who willingly use their time and

gifts
in the service of others.

We pray for all who set up and work in charitable organisations:
bless them as they so freely give of their time and talents.

We pray for people who work together to bring healing,
for all who work in hospitals, homes, the community:
bless them as they bring blessing to others.

We pray for those who dedicate their lives to serving God
in religious orders and communities:
bless them in their gifts of prayer, hospitality and service.

We pray for people with the gift of words,
for teachers, writers and communicators:
bless the seeds that they sow.

We pray for those who don't feel as if they have a gift,
or feel as if it goes unnoticed:
bless them with the knowledge that they matter to you.

We pray for our church as a welcoming community,
constantly being built up by our love for you.

Bless us, Lord.
Amen.

All-age activity

A gathering activity for the whole congregation, or an activity for small groups.

Our hand prints are unique to us – they represent our individuality. Placing them together on the paper is a sign of how we are each part of a larger picture – not losing our individual identity or blending into one another but belonging together to make a big picture of the diversity that should flourish in the body of Christ. If this is done with the whole congregation, take care to include the youngest members who will need some help in making their mark on the paper!

You will need: a large roll of art paper or wallpaper lining paper, paints, materials to clean their hands (wet wipes or similar).

Ask members of the group to place either a hand print or a finger print on the paper. You could use the resulting

picture in procession giving thanks for the church community made up of so many different people with so many different gifts.

OR

Ask everyone to sit very still and quiet for a moment, then ask them to move a finger. How many muscles, ligaments, bones, and other body parts/functions, does it take to move that finger? It takes quite a lot, and they all have to work properly together, or it won't happen. It takes even more – all working properly together – to smile!

Invite people to stand, close their eyes, and then touch their nose with their finger. Some people will find this hard to do. Ask them to do it again, but this time in pairs, with one person – eyes open – giving instructions or guidance to the person who has their eyes shut. If that is too easy, ask people to pat their head while tracing a circular motion on their tummy. Getting everything working well together is not always easy!

What would life be like in this church community, if everyone used only one gift – say, the gift of teaching? Or

what if only one person had a gift of hospitality? Or what if there were no evangelists? Or no leaders of any sort? The body of Christ needs all of its parts to function well together, and we can encourage one another to use and develop our diverse gifts and talents. How can we do that today? Encourage specific and practical answers.

Some of our gifts are particularly useful when we meet together, but what gifts do we have to help each other with the challenges of daily life – both in general, and in following Christ?

Sending out

We go out in your name,
to live a life worthy of the calling you have given to each one of us.

May we be willing to receive, respect and reuse
the wonderful gifts that you entrust to us.

Bless us, good Lord.

Amen.

ⁱ Tim Keller, *The Reason for God*, Hodder, 2008

ⁱⁱ *Diane Craven is an education and spirituality consultant. She is a Reader in the Church of England currently licensed to York Minster where she also*

co-ordinates work with children and young people.

<https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2018/96-july-august-2018-b/proper-13/postscript>