

Unity and Community in Christ. Revd David Treharne, Vicar.

Being Christ's Community. COMMUNITY

Two little quotes...

"Most of us who have been around churches for any amount of time know that Christians can get on one another's nerves."

"Satan has always endeavoured to stir up strife among Christians, as one of his chief devices against the gospel."

This Sunday falls in the middle of the week of prayer for Christian Unity, and it is a good poke to our spirits and relationships to remind ourselves of the unity and community Christ came to bring, the unity he prayed for and the unity we are called to live in and promote. This isn't a new message at all but we really need to be reminded of it! It is a sad reality that the church has struggled to be the community God has wanted us to be. The spiritual relational battle is not one we've fought very well!

When St Paul visited the Christians at Corinth around 50–52 AD, barely twenty years after the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, he encountered a badly divided community of believers. He described them in the reading today: "Some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, 'I follow Paul'; another, 'I follow Apollos'; another, 'I follow Cephas'; still another, 'I follow Christ'" (1 Corinthians 1:11–12, NIV). In the face of suspicion, exclusion, recrimination, accusations, and messed up relationships, Paul urged them to unity and agreement.

Fast forward 2,000 years and Christians are still at it... still squabbling, excluding, persecuting and falling out over the slightest differences. People can't overcome their differences and disagree well... so much so you could leave the church over it! It's not the way it should be! Jesus knew what he was doing when he called those first disciples... fishermen. To survive in that profession you had to be able to overcome your differences... your livelihood and even your life depended on successful co-operation with the people in the boat. No room for allowing differences to get in the way of the essential tasks!

I guess it's human nature that we mess up relationships... all our different personalities, expectations, likes and dislikes clashing. But for Christian to just say "it's human nature" for me is a bit of a cop out. It's not God's plan and the purpose of the Cross for Christian community to be like this! And thank the Lord, it's not always like this. We need to be a sign of the Kingdom... a new way of living, not because we're better than anyone else but because we have realised we need God and his grace working within us and between us.

There have been and there are some glorious signs of the Kingdom manifested in Christian communities... e.g. foodbanks, hospitality, community provision, befriending, prayer and pastoral care, debt support, joy and laughter, searching and discovery, seeking justice and bringing reconciliation and transformation.

Reflection

Q1. What strife and disunity are you aware of that involves you that needs to go to the Lord in prayer?

Q2. What part of church life can you give thanks for?

Christ Creating Community. CALL

For Jesus, community is a fundamental part of God's creation and intention for humanity. That's one of the reasons Covid was so so hard. We are created to be in relationship and virtually everyone needs community, even if it is to receive public services rather than relationships!

In the Gospels we read that Jesus goes around ministering to the crowds... teaching, healing and proclaiming the good news of the reign of God. We also read about him calling people. As he calls and as he ministers he is gathering people together around him. Jesus is a catalyst, the catalyst for community... it's around him... and it starts going wrong when it's not around Jesus!

Dietrich Bonhoeffer says,
"Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ."

But Jesus brings into being a particular community around himself... the church. We, the church are God's **called** out people, **called** by name, **called** to be Christ's Body gathered together to be taught by Jesus how to be a disciple and the scattered day to day into the world to do what Jesus has taught us and showed us to do... proclaiming the good news of God in deed and word.

Whilst the world may well disagree, the world needs the church, God's community, to bring, to reflect, to live the light and life, the hope and joy, the good news of God's reign... to exemplify the right way to live well with one another and with our Creator and his Creation.

It can be hard for some of us to commit to church and community, especially if we've been hurt or we're guarded and prefer solitude. But Christian community is God's desire for us and important for our spiritual and human growth and development. (and is meant to be a sign of God's reign in and to the world.)

Our life together, our communal life, our church life is meant to be a sign of God's reign... a beacon of light in darkness, hope in despair, joy in sadness, life in death.

If and when we can get church, community and relationships right it's amazing!

This Parish's vision is to Live Life Together in the Flow of God's love... or as we have put it many times... to do relationship well:

Relationship well with God

Called by name
Responding to God's love
Living day to day in communion with him, being his disciple.
Refined and redefined by Christ Jesus. Our identity in him.

Relationship well with each other

But it's not just a me and God relationship, it's also a we and God.
Joined together with others... in and around Christ Jesus. Refined and redefined by Christ Jesus. Our identity in him.
Working together so that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.
Loving one another... encouraging, praying, supporting, forgiving etc...

Relationship well in and with the wider world he has made.

Being light and salt, hope and good news as we are scattered to our homes, our workplaces and daily lives.
Sharing that which we have received from God in Christ with others.

We all have a part to play in this vision. What is yours?

Reflection

Q1. What aspect of relationship might you be able to work at?

Q2. What might be God's call for you in the church and in the world?

Issues with Identity. CHRIST

If we as Jesus' disciples are going to do relationship well, do community and church well we must know who Jesus is and who we are in him.

I was saying last week that so many things make up our identity and how we see ourselves.

- Gender
- Sex
- Geography, Language, Nationality... I'm Welsh, I'm English, I'm Scottish, I'm Forest, I'm Gloucestershire, I'm Monmouthshire, I'm Chepstow, I'm Sedbury, I'm Tutshill...
- Football team
- Hobbies and interests, likes and dislikes
- Politics
- Work
- Appearance

Many of these things can be an easy source of division and conflict and polarisation of others especially if they are the things that take prime place in defining who we are and our identity.

As God's people, as Christians, we are first and foremost defined in, through and by Christ Jesus. I am a Christian... a follower of Christ. A child of God and a servant of God.

When the church is at its best being Christian, being in Christ, we find not only an individual identity in Christ, but corporate identity in Christ. I am Christian, we are Christian. I am in Christ, we are in Christ. Jesus Christ is my Lord. Jesus Christ is our Lord. The same Spirit of God that has filled me has filled you!

Whatever diversity and considerable differences we find unity in Christ, whatever our gender, sex, nationality, football allegiance, hobbies and interests, work, appearance or location!

Reflection

Q1. Do you identify as Christian first and foremost? And how do you look at others?

Dear friends in Christ, my sisters and brothers, may we each know who Jesus is, who we are (individual) and who WE are (communal), and hear the call afresh to do relationship well and live life together in the flow of God's wonderfully patient and merciful love.