



Ephesians 4.1-16

5th August 2018

Bonded and Held Together

Gracious God, we thank you for your word in scripture and made flesh in the Lord Jesus Christ. Help us now to catch your voice and speak, we pray, to our hearts and minds. In Jesus' name. Amen.

I used to have a book on my shelves about people problems in the church with the intriguing title: Building with Bananas!

Now I love the Church and the truth is it's basically been part of my life from my earliest days – and I love bananas too!

The book, in a not too serious way, just made the point that we in the Church are far from perfect. We come in all shapes and sizes, our minds are open and closed with everything in between. And it's to this eclectic, and often eccentric, mix of individuals that has always made up The Body of Christ that the 4th chapter of Ephesians, set in today's lectionary readings, is addressed.

So here are just a few hints about Church Life that have jumped out at me as I've pondered this piece of scripture this week.

The first is the very simple, but challenging, idea that when it comes to Church – I'm not at the centre. It's never just about me – or you!

Up in Paisley there is an enormous Baptist building, alas with a very small congregation, called Coats Memorial Church – architecturally it looks rather like St Giles in Edinburgh so unsurprisingly it has the nickname the 'Baptist Cathedral of Europe'. It has this inscription on its foundation stone: This building is dedicated to the glory of God and in memory of Thomas Coats. One, rather sceptical visitor, remarked after being slightly overawed by the building that maybe the stone should have read: To the glory of Thomas Coats and in memory of God!

It always seems to me a dubious practice to name churches after previous ministers or generous benefactors because it can end up saying more about them than God.

We, you and me, are not at the centre of any congregation. It's never simply 'my' church. Churches are communities of faith gathered around Christ. And it's surely our prayer that as we meet together, pray and worship together, work and serve together – that we see something of Jesus in each other

So the writer of Ephesians says in verse two these very down to earth and practical words: Put up with one another's failings...

That, maybe, would be good advice to print at the top of any church's directory or handbook.

I'm not sure that Paul or Peter always modelled that quality in their own ministries, and we understand that - because we are no different in our own day – yet here it is, a verse from scripture that challenges any tendency we might have to an ego centric understanding of our place in church life: Put up with one another's failings.

You'll know, probably, that lovely symbol in Chinese which stands for man – two strokes meeting at the top, resting as it were on each other – a wonderful visual representation of our mutual dependency upon each other. Both inside and outside of church life we need the support of each other and such an understanding begins with the idea that it's never all about me.

The second, rather down to earth, reflection is just that: A United Church is Hard Work.

Here is what verse 3 says: Spare no effort to make fast with bonds of peace the unity which the Spirit gives.

I was talking with a friend recently who told me they had just stopped going to church because there had been a disagreement that went very deep. Now I understand that. And I understand too that, for all sorts of honourable reasons, sometimes it's the right thing to move churches. Every church has its own sort of DNA and if that's not compatible with you maybe it's best to go to somewhere else that is.

So, I fully appreciated what my friend was saying but this is what struck me - he just looked at me and said: you know, every time I now go into a church and sit at the back I feel as if I'm entering a 'battleground'. That was so sad – a 'battleground'.

We Christians have a habit of falling out with each other and not keeping the 'bonds of peace'. I rather enjoy the joke, of those two people marooned on a desert island who ended up building three churches. When rescued they were asked why and said: that's the church I go to, that's the church he goes to, and the third church is the one that neither of us go to! Behind the humour there lies a sad truth that we Christians divide rather easily.

Baptists, (and that's my tradition) are the 5th largest denomination in the world with over 100 million members, yet only 40 million belong to the Baptist World Alliance. So, over half the Baptist churches in the world belong to smaller independent groups. I've looked up some of these this week and they include: Progressive Baptists, Primitive Baptists, Calvinistic Baptists and two that really made me take a second look: a Baptist group called 'The Old Regulars' and the other had the rather cumbersome title, 'Two Seeds in the Spirit Predestination Baptists' – it doesn't easily trip of the tongue, does it?!

Just maybe we need to take Ephesians 4.3 more seriously: Spare no effort to make fast the bonds of peace...

We know from family life how much patience is needed, how much listening is needed, how

much an 'open door' mindset and the possibility of new beginnings brings us back from a serious split or permanent breakdown.

And it's the same with the church family too. We need that patience and listening and we need, when it comes to relationships with each other, to keep the 'door open' for as long as possible.

We had a very lovely and very wise retired minister in my first church and Ron would sometimes say to me as we talked of a troublesome situation or individual in the congregation: 'OFM, lan'. For him OFM, he told me, stood for 'One Factor More' – he always felt that if he just knew one factor more about someone's situation, perhaps a health worry, a family concern, a piece of history or hurt from the past, if he knew that – just maybe he'd understand why that person was struggling so much to be at peace with others in the congregation. I think that was a wise and loving way of thinking and helped Ron, throughout his ministry, in his attempt to: spare no effort to make fast the bonds of peace.

Well, I said at the beginning that these were just a few very down to earth and simple observations about church life from Ephesians 4. So far, we've reflected on the idea that we should never think of ourselves as being at the centre of church life, that's where Christ belongs – and that the unity of the Body of Christ is something worth working at because, at times, keeping the bonds of peace is hard work.

Lastly this morning I want to talk about the 'body image' of the Church.

We often hear talk of 'body image' in the media and not many of us think we are the right size. I loved that 1980's cartoon of the cheeky cat Garfield standing on the scales saying: I'm not over weight just under tall!

I think the image of the Church here in Ephesians is that of an ever expanding and inclusive body.

The prayer of this chapter isn't for a 'huddled unity' – it isn't a prayer about 'boundaries' and feeling safe in a small and restrictive group. It's a much bigger prayer than that – it's a recognition that the love of God is broad and expansive. This is what verse 5 says: there is one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

It's a picture of God's love filling the world and of God's goodness filling the Church.

Here's how one commentator has put it: It's like Christ is a large body which keeps expanding as it incorporates more and more of reality...

We had an Australian friend who grew up in England and regularly came back. Tony would often say to us: When I get off the plane at Heathrow I feel as if I'm home. When I get off the plane at Adelaide, I feel as if I'm home.

When we see God's love and goodness at work, in any place, amongst any people – there is a wholesomeness that can make us feel like home.

Such a positive relationship with God opens us to all of life.

Seems to me that our understanding of Church needs to be expansive too. We thank God for our local church, we sense God here among us and through us. This week I met up with clergy colleagues for coffee and I sensed God too in their congregations at St Michaels and St John's. On a cold, snowy day in March I went with David and Erna to the URC Synod gathering at Harrow and it was a great joy to listen to speaker after speaker from north London churches through whom something of the presence and joy of Christ flowed. It's great to hear of our Link Missionaries serving in Africa and working with children's groups in Mozambique, of Duncan Dyason serving God amongst the Street Children of South America.

This is a vision of the expansive body of the Church. God's goodness and love finding an expression in a thousand and one places and ways – and we rejoice in that. The God who is 'over all, through all and in all.

At the top of the page in our church bibles, the passage for today's reading is headed: Paul's Prayer. He may have been in prison yet still he has this broad idea of the love of God actively blessing our world. His personal confinement never confined his vision of God.

When I was Yeovil the parish priest just across the road from our church was James Dudley Smith. His father is the hymn writing bishop, Timothy Dudley Smith and one Easter Sunday evening our two congregations came together for a Songs of Praise to sing some of the bishop's songs, introduced by his son. It was a lovely occasion – with both congregations feeling at home together. One of the hymns, by the bishop, we sung that evening had a first verse that could have been based on Ephesians 4 – it goes like this – don't worry, I'm going to say it not sing it!

*Lord of the Church, we pray for our renewing:
Christ over all, our undivided aim;
fire of the Spirit, burn for our enduing,
wind of the Spirit, fan the living flame!
We turn to Christ amid our fear and failings,
unnumbered voices with a single prayer,
the living water for our soul's reviving,
to bring us nearer what a Church should be.*

May it be so, in the name of The Father, Son and Spirit. Amen.