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**2 Corinthians 13.11-14
Matthew 28.16-20**

## Two last words: Community and Compassion

**Introduction to the theme:**
When Sir Basil Spence was given the commission to build a new Coventry Cathedral, to stand alongside the bombed-out ruin of the old one, he said he found it difficult to know where to begin. It was such an enormous opportunity and task that it felt overwhelming. That is, until he came to a settled mind that, when building a church, an appropriate place to begin, architecturally and theologically speaking, is with the altar or communion table. Spence said that once he’d got that in his mind, this gathering place where the weekly focus would be on the eucharist, symbolising the living presence of Jesus amongst the congregation, once he’d got that in his mind, everything else about the cathedral’s design flowed out from that one, fundamental focus.

Well, I thought that was such a good thought, and an excellent understanding of what a church can be: a community centred around the Lord’s Table.

In a way Paul was addressing a similar issue in the reading we’ll be having in just a moment from 2 Corinthians. We know Paul seems to love writing letters and this one was sent to a church that was at sixes and sevens, an unhappy church that seems to have lost its way.

Chapter 13 of this second letter to Corinth isn’t a starting place, like Sir Basil Spence’s altar, but the finishing place of a letter, yet it’s equally as fundamental an idea for Paul, as that Communion Table was for Spence, both are arguing for God to be at the very epicentre of our life together. When that happens, says Paul, we become a compassionate community because that’s the sort of God we serve.

Perhaps it’s a lesson for every congregation, it’s no good just having a communion table at the centre of our churches, what really matters is honouring, serving, and imitating the God of love and compassion who, we pray, will occupy the central place in our community’s life, the one who, at the communion table, we worship and serve.

**Sermon**
So, what was Paul’s problem with the Corinthians?

Well, where do we begin? Certainly, his relationship with them seems to have broken down and there was a lot of chatter going on, most of it undermining him. So, whereas we can sometimes think of Paul as this giant of the first century church, in reality there were times when he struggled to be heard, and 2 Corinthians is one of those moments for him.

So, how should he end his letter? And make no mistake, Paul has opened up his heart in this epistle. He both names the issues that trouble him about the church at Corinth and he makes numerous appeals to them to think and act differently. But now he has to sign off, these will be his last words to a church that is really in *special measures,* so how should he end?

As he draws this, the most personal letter he writes in the New Testament, and perhaps the most difficult, to a close, he’s aware that his readers are not sure about him anymore. They seem to be taken with other preachers, sort of *super apostles* who have put Paul in the shadows. These preachers seem to have outshone Paul, speak more eloquently and convincingly, maintaining that theirs is a better pedigree to his, even questioning his ethics in going round collecting money for the famine-stricken church in Jerusalem, or his practice of working as a tent maker.

It's as if we have already arrived at an age of celebrity. These *super apostles* are riding high in the popularity ratings, they accuse Paul of being a wimp and declare he has no authority. He’s been wrong footed by preachers he feels are dangerous and whose rhetoric, he believes, has misled the church at Corinth. So, for Paul a lot is at stake as he signs off this, one of the most important letters he ever wrote.

So how does he say goodbye in verse 11? We sometimes skip this verse because the next one has that intriguing suggestion that we should *greet each other with a holy kiss.* JB Philips was so spooked by such an idea when he wrote his paraphrase of the New Testament in the 50’s that he translated it: *give one another a hearty handshake.* Much more English!

Verse 11 has some pre-requisites before the kissing.

First of all, even though he’s all too aware of the personal criticism that surrounds him, Paul says *Friends I wish you all the best…*he uses the word, the rather beautiful word: *Fare-well.*He only wants the very best for the Corinthian church, he’s not holding grudges or giving them the cold shoulder, instead Paul displays great grace towards them and huge generosity of spirit.

But he is a realist here too. So, his second wish in verse 11 is that they *mend their ways, that they find a way to come together in agreement.*Here is honesty and a real attempt, however unpopular, to *speak the truth in love.*Fellowship in the Church isn’t about sweeping things under the carpet. It’s about finding a safe space in which alternative viewpoints can be aired and listened to.

And that’s because Paul wants his friends to find their common mind and rejoice in that and build upon it. He says, in verse 11: *live in peace.*I know it can sound rather odd, if you read it the wrong way, to talk of Common Worship or Common Prayer. Of course, it doesn’t mean worship or prayer that isn’t up to much, ‘common’, it’s not being derogatory. Rather it’s describing the sort of praying and worshipping that binds us together and gives us a common mind and a common sense of ownership about the values, aspirations, and traditions we hold – in common.

We live in a day and age when people are falling out with each other left, right and centre. Social media has spawned such divisions in our society and it’s a tragedy to see how unhappy that has made people.

We in the church need to work really hard at identifying those core values that can hold us together, that we hold in common – so that even when we have minor differences, they can be held in the security of that commonalty based on the worship and prayer that binds us together. That’s Paul’s prayer as he fare-wells his friends at Corinth.

Yet there’s more, because Paul knows that his influence and example, which is on the wain somewhat in Corinth, will never be enough to keep this congregation energised and united.

So, alongside all his encouraging words he has this prayer that *the God of love and peace will be with you.*That’s where we find the source of our unity and energy, in God. Not in 5 Year Plans or updated policies – and these are good and our church has both – but our ultimate source of unity is in God’s love and God’s peace being at the centre of all we do and are.

Paul is, ultimately in 2 Corinthians not commending himself to them, but commending God.

And so, he concludes the letter with a prayer that it’s very appropriate for us to be reminded of on Trinity Sunday, it’s there in verse 14: *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.*
I suspect there are many different reasons why we find ourselves in church this morning. Perhaps we always come, and we couldn’t think of being anywhere else on a Sunday morning. Maybe we are on a rota and felt we had to come! Or perhaps we have a job or role at church and feel that others expect us to come.

Well, of course I’m just grateful and thrilled you are here for whatever reason! But I think what Paul is saying to us this morning is, that when you don’t feel like coming, or even when the church community is going through a rocky phase, the one thing that can keep us together at those moments is God. A belief in God’s love. And a belief in his peace.

And so our prayer becomes may this God of love and peace bind us together and make us into a Community of love and peace.

Many years ago now, in another place and at another time, I was Moderator of a Regional Baptist Association that was having a tough time. It all got so difficult that I remember one day sitting in the regional offices chairing a meeting between some staff members at which ACAS was present – the organisation that seeks to bring about dialogue and reconciliation, often in industrial disputes.

I was thankful that after lots of difficult conversations a way forward was found. And I was particularly thrilled that it was decided that the way to mark the end of those divisions and the start of a more united way forward was at a Communion Service. So, one Tuesday evening, in the centre of the city where the Association had its head office, we hired the local Parish Church and deliberately, carefully and thoughtfully sought to recognise God as the centre of our life together, and nowhere was that expressed more than in the sharing of the peace as those whose relationships had been temporarily fractured sought to have them restored once more by sharing, not a new agenda or memorandum, but the Peace of Christ.

So, we end this sermon as we began it, around a Communion Table, because at the centre of every church’s life needs to be the God of love and peace that we meet every time we take bread and wine.

In the name of the God who made us, the Saviour who gave himself for us and the Spirit who fills us. Amen.

 *Ian Green Amersham 2nd June 2023*