



Ephesians 4.1-16 p.172

John 6.24-35 p.83

1st August 2021

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.

The other day, at the Manse, I had a visit from one of the Synod officials. It was an encouraging visit as he reviewed both me and you! I say 'you', because for much of the conversation he wanted to know about AFC and the sort of people who make up our congregation. So, even though you didn't know it, you too were being reviewed last month, and I'm pleased to say I think we all passed!

The truth is I've always found it hard to describe congregations in a generic sense because every church is made up of individuals. For sure, congregations often have a particular culture or tradition that we collectively take on board (and I suspect that is what my Synod reviewer was keen to discover) yet scratch below the surface and we all have a personal story and an individual journey.

And that, I think, is a real feather in all our caps. That such a disparate group of people like us, gather together week by week as AFC, is testimony to God at work among us, binding us together in love.

Our reading from Ephesians today focuses on Church Life, and although these words are over two thousand years old they speak with spot on relevance to congregations like ours today.

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

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 of 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.

Our gospel reading this morning describe *Jesus as The Bread of Life*.

Jesus' hearers were often subsistence farmers. They had only barely enough to live on. Our first world problem of having too much food was never theirs. It was a good week if every day there was enough flour in the family cupboard to make the daily bread for the evening meal.

They knew what the Bread of Life meant physically and how central it was to their lives, so here in John's gospel Jesus is given that title. He and his teaching, his character and his work among us has, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, given us life.

So the writer of Ephesians 4 talks of One Lord, One Faith and One Baptism, or describes the Church as *The Body of Christ*. In this way we begin to see how such a diverse group as an average congregation is held together. Where do we find our focus and our energy, who do we turn to for inspiration and identity? Paul says, be *The Body of Christ* as we seek to gather around Jesus and discover God as you read his story and listen to his teaching. And in this way Jesus becomes for us *The Bread of Life*, a central part of our individual and corporate journey of faith.

Well, all of that sounds rather grand and lofty. The tyre really hits the road in verses 2 and 3 when Paul writes: *put up with one another's failings in a spirit of love to spare the bonds of love*.

I rather like that dignified poetic language. Strikes me it contains a great ideal and could be printed at the top of any church's directory or handbook.

Coming to church can be described using all sorts of pictures. Just as Jesus described the Kingdom of God as a feast, a family or a harvest field, we might picture church as a celebration, an hour of calm to gain perspective in a busy week, a big choir in which I sing my heart out or a gathering alongside fellow Seekers after Truth.

Of course, those are the positive pictures.

I remember talking to a college friend who no longer goes to church on a Sunday, or if he does he simply slips into the back pew and leaves before the blessing because he told me the picture he now has of Church is a battleground.

That's heartbreakingly sad and we know it happens too often among us.

I was sent to a Baptist Sunday School, so that particular way of being Church is in my blood. The Baptist tradition is 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?!

Like many traditions, mine has split time and time again. Just maybe we need to take Ephesians 4.3 more seriously: *put up with one another's failings in a spirit of love and spare no effort to spare the bonds of love.*

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

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 just notice that in this Pep Talk to the church at Ephesus Paul urges his fellow disciples to raise their eyes and see, how does he put it in verse 6: *one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*

Now, surely these are words of encouragement.

I remember many years ago going to preach in a different church to my own on one of those Pulpit Exchange Sundays. It was a Sunday evening and a deacon whisked me away to the vestry for a prayer before the service. He apologised that so many were away and the congregation so small, then as he prayed, he lamented that he felt everyone in church that night was so exhausted. Now, before this prayer time I was feeling quite positive, by the end all the energy seemed to have been sucked out of the room.

I understood his concern and I hope the worship of the next hour lifted his spirit, because our spirits do need to be lifted.

That's what verse 6 is all about. In the words of a children's chorus we sometimes used to sing: *Our God is a Great Big God.*

Church life can close in at times. We can become overwhelmed with panic sensing the tide is going out.

At such moments it does us good to sense, along with Paul, that this *one God and Father of us all, is the God who is over all and through all and in all.*

It's a tragedy when we sometimes fail to see God at work.

Martyn Percy, the Dean of Christchurch, Oxford, in his book *The Humble Church*, paints a picture of God's activity in our world as being a huge building site. God is busy and active, God is building, and all that is positive and constructive on this site is his work. Yet, says Martyn Percy, sometimes we look at the small contractor's hut on this huge building site and think that's the only place where God is to be found. Percy is using the contractor's hut as a picture of church, and our tendency in failing to see this God who is *over all and through all and in all.*

A minister friend of mine always impresses me with her world view of the Church. When we are in a group and it's an open prayer time, she'll always pray for a congregation she's read about in the BMS Prayer Guide, be it in Brazil or Angola. She has this really big view of God at work, not just in her village but all over the world. It inspires her and I know it makes her feel part of a bigger picture.

Last month we finished our Church Re-Set Listening and Discussion afternoons. Over 40 organisations and activities connected to AFC reflected on life both in the Pandemic and beyond. Some are closing. Some are thriving. Most are changing.

We are called to purposely look out for God and rejoice wherever we sense his work of compassion and love blessing our world.

This work doesn't start or end with me, you or us. God's work isn't dependant on our boundaries or traditions. God can and does break out of the small contractor's hut to bring life to that whole building site.

What sort of community are we striving to be?

Paul says to us in Ephesians 4: understand that God is at the centre, strive to live together in peace, and rejoice and be sustained by the Big Picture God, who is over all, through all and in all blessing our world with life.

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