

Lord, I pray that my words would be your words; my thoughts your thoughts; and my heart would beat with your love. Come Holy Spirit, and open our hearts now, in Jesus' name. Amen.

There was a church where the preacher and the Director of Music didn't get along. As time went by, the disagreements began to spill over. The first week the preacher preached on commitment and how we should all dedicate ourselves to the service of God; the Director of Music led out with 'I Shall Not Be Moved'.

The second week the preacher preached on tithing and how we should all give gladly to the work of the Lord; the Director of Music played 'Jesus Paid It All'. Don't get ideas, please!

The third week the preacher preached on gossiping and how we should all watch our tongues and the Director of Music played 'I Love To Tell the Story'.

Well, finally it all got a bit too much, and the preacher decided to resign. The next week he informed the church that it was Jesus who had led him there and it was Jesus that was taking him away, and the Director of Music played the song 'What A Friend We Have In Jesus'.

Thankfully I think I'm okay with the staff in the music department at the moment, but we will know according to what Graham plays at the end of this sermon!

We all know what conflict is like in our own personal lives, in the world, and also in the church. I would even dare to suggest that we are a conflict driven culture, if TV is anything to go by. But does conflict have a place in the church? We know it exists, but is that the mark of our failure as Christians to live in perfect harmony, or one of the by-products of change and growth? And given that it's Climate Sunday, how does this relate to the environment? Well I'm going to give it my best shot to explain.

Jesus spent time teaching his disciples about a healthy response to disagreement. In doing this, he was acknowledging that disagreements would be part of the future of the church. In all Jesus' teaching he was always concentrating in the moment but also on the future. It's why his words continue to have such great relevance to us today.

The model Jesus offers is counter-cultural: it's about being open with our disagreements, and courageous in expressing our hurts with the person that has hurt us. That is not easy, because our instinct is to take our problems to other people first; to have a good moan, or even walk away and disconnect from the relationship entirely.

But like most of Jesus' teaching this sits within a larger framework of life-giving theology, which centres on unconditional love: divine nature of God's being and love for us and God's reconciling actions. Through his son Jesus Christ it is about being part of God's family.

We are all made in the image of God, unique and diverse, and all of us are cherished by our heavenly father. The church should be a place of diversity: it is the only way we can truly reflect the trinitarian nature of God, of difference and variety because, simply put, God made us this way. That rich diversity, our God-given differences, also means that we cannot possibly always agree, because we do not fully understand or know each other. Our lives are complex; our stories are intricate and long. What makes each one of us tick is different, so of course there will be misunderstandings and there will be disagreements. The early church had to learn how to adapt to differences of opinions and disagreements. You've only got to read the Acts of the Apostles and Saint Paul's missionary journeys, which often started with a disagreement and had at least one or two along the way. The disciples quickly realised, if they were to succeed in sharing the love of God with the whole world, they would

have to embrace diversity and difference as they encountered strange lands and peoples, and the challenges and tensions that would create.

When we are trying to overcome disagreements, we need to look for common ground on which to build our relationships. For us, our common ground is Jesus Christ; the same Jesus that held the disciples together, even though they struggled with different interpretations of who, and how to share the good news. They were unified through their love and faithfulness to Jesus. Disagreement, I believe, is a healthy by-product of a church that is in the business of responding to the work of the Holy Spirit, guiding us forward, helping us to make room for new and different people, to keep joining the church and expanding it. We should not be embarrassed about those tensions, but we do need to find better ways of addressing them. Jesus' teaching is about taking time to listen to each other's issues: not in a defensive way, but in prayer and humility, with a deep commitment to making this family of difference work together through our common ground which is Jesus. To take time to learn about each other; to welcome change and allow God's love to shape us. We are not just family: we are God's family, and he has invested everything in us through his son Jesus Christ.

But how does this impact the climate? There have been many reflections during, and after, lockdown that people have made. One inescapable reflection was the refocusing of how we live together and how we connect with those who are isolated.

Many of you have told me that you found new rhythms of life. You learned to cherish smaller things in your day. You enjoyed meal times together; you prayed more; you read the bible more; you went for walks and cycle rides together; and delighted in hearing the bird song, as nature once again was given space to breathe. And we all enjoyed the cleaner air in our lungs. Our climate changed, both in our homes, and outside. There was, for a brief moment, healing for many.

The lens by which we saw each other, and creation, changed. Jesus is not just our common ground which holds our differences together, but also the lens by which we view the world and interact with it. At the heart of our trinitarian God is love: love for each other; a love which extends and embraces all creation.

The more we allow Jesus to shape our hearts, and minds, the more we will learn to cherish our brothers and sisters in Christ, and our home, planet earth. The scars inflicted on creation are the result of our own irresponsible and insensitive actions. But the call to follow Christ is to take responsibility for our actions and our relationships; to act in ways that brings healing to our relationships with each other, but also with planet earth: to face up to those responsibilities and to love the world that our heavenly father has created.

We have an opportunity: to model healthy relationships, healthy difference and disagreement, that brings hope and healing. Relationships that deeply care for one another and the next generations who are affected by the choices we make today; in how we use this amazing creation.

So let us celebrate our diversity, unified through Christ's love, and work together to bring healing and hope to this world. Amen.