

13th September 2015 This is the last in a series of sermons on the subject of Love God, Love our neighbour, **United to give God the glory.** Towards the end of Jesus' last prayer with his disciples, just before he went off with them to the garden of Gethsemane, he prayed for them, then added "I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one." (John 17.20) – one has the strong impression that he left the most important topic to the last. It's interesting, isn't it, how we seem to be pulled in two opposite directions when it comes to unity. On the one hand, we all want to belong, whether it's to a family, or a club, or a nation. And at the same time we want to keep others out. Not everyone, of course – just those we feel don't quite fill the bill to belong to OUR club. Hamlet famously said To be.... But he might equally well have said "To belong or not to belong – that is (really!) the question" – complete the sentence as you wish. By nature we're both social and anti-social! In playgrounds up and down the land, children are agonising about whether they are part of the "in" set or not. Half want to join, and the other half want them out. And not only the pupils: you can be quite sure that the parents too will be sizing each other up at the school gates...

As Christians we're no better. I sometimes feel that the history of the Church could easily be written in terms of schisms and divisions and sects, and so on and so on, with perhaps a brief appendix on the gospel, such is the energy we put into defining our dogma, and therefore our different sects and denominations. In fact in many

areas of life, although we may define ourselves by our similarities, "I belong to...therefore I am ..." (so to speak!) at the same time, by implication, we're defining ourselves by our differences. And this can refer to class, colour, education, sex, income, hobbies, clothes, nationality – virtually every aspect of our lives. [I googled car clubs – there are 100s in the UK alone. Not just makes, but also models and so on. All great fun and harmless, but it nearly reminded me of the church...]

Some of you will remember the poem by Robert Frost which Sue handed out a fortnight ago "Mending Walls" in which the poet mused on humanity's propensity for building walls even where they aren't really needed. I remember seeing a film in the 60s - a sci-fi comedy (unlikely genre!) in which (rather surprisingly) a joint team of Russians and Americans reached the moon, and as soon as they arrived the Russians began to build a wall. (Berlin Wall era). So it's not hard to establish that unity, or lack of it, is a fundamental part of our lives.

B. Let's look at WHY Jesus prayed that prayer. Why he felt it was so important for us to be at unity with each other.

1. Part of the answer comes twice in the Romans passage - to glorify God (Rom. 15.5-7 – twice) i.e. God wants it. This is really self-evident, but worth repeating. The days alas have gone when one could say with confidence from the pulpit: you'll remember the first question of the Shorter Catechism. Even I, brought up in the depths of the Scottish countryside many years ago, never came into

contact with the catechisms, long or short. But in The Shorter Catechism 1647 the first question is **What is the chief end of man?** And the answer is **Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.** So it's really part of the nature God has given us - we were made to glorify God in our lives – it's good for us. And, we're also social animals, and God means us to do things together, and we function better in a group. At its most basic, if you're going to sing hymns, it's more fun with others. Paul verse 5-6: "spirit of unity, with one heart and mouth." Both these expressions stress the importance of unity.

2. If we're united, we're going to be more effective as Xians. We have to admit that we delight in our differences. We stress them because they give us distinction and actually identify us. BUT of course it can keep us, in our spiritual lives, from concentrating on what really matters – the spread of the gospel.

Opinions may vary on how important sport can be in the formation of character, but it is blindingly obvious that a team which is not united won't win anything at all. Satan must rub his hands with glee when yet another sect breaks away from mainstream Christianity and settles down to form a committee to make out a list of rules and regulations, getting down to the fascinating detail of deciding what to believe and how to set out the boundaries of who belongs to the chosen few, and who does not. You'll remember how the Jews got stuck into this early on, and how Jesus sliced through their pettifogging obscurantism when they tried to

challenge him on some detail of their man-made laws (healing on the Sabbath, gathering corn on the Sabbath, and so on). And yet the original rule-makers had the best of intentions... When one of the Pharisees asked Jesus which was the greatest commandment (Mat22.35) "to test him" as Matthew comments, Jesus gave a v crisp answer: Love God and love your neighbour (where have I heard that before?) and everything else hangs on these two commandments.

Unity is also an important part of our witness. I wonder how many non-believers who are thinking about faith and turning over the implications of Jesus' life, are quickly turned off by the internal squabbles of the church.

A final incentive: Groucho Marx said he'd never want to join a club which wd have him as a member – funny because it's the opposite of what we feel about our clubs, but it struck me that there's a hint of a truth for us Christians lurking in the humour. (we are reminded that we belong to God's kingdom despite our faults, as Sue was saying last week). We should all have been blackballed when we applied for membership, but through God's mercy we are welcomed in. So perhaps we should stop and think before we acquiesce in the formation of rules and regulations which define and limit that membership. These are some of the reasons why unity is so important for us.

C. HOW Do we achieve this unity? This is the tricky bit! It's easy to say "we must be united, etc." but the difficulties arise almost immediately.

It is encouraging to remember that some of the problems change with the passing of time. Clearly - and understandably - the Gentiles were a real difficulty for the early Jewish Christians. This seems a no-brainer to us, with the benefit of hindsight, but for many of them it seemed a contradiction of everything they'd been brought up to believe throughout their history. Eating meat used in pagan sacrifices was another dilemma for them. Not something we worry about now as we sit down to the Sunday joint. What are the modern equivalents? Gender and sex seem to be among the obsessions of the modern age. Whether it's gay marriage, or women bishops. And I don't think there are any easy answers. One problem is that opinions tend to polarise, and the middle ground is left desolate and inhospitable, rather like no-man's land between the trenches. Satan must be delighted at all the column inches the media devote to the church as it ties itself in knots over these issues. However, these particular topics must be left for another sermon, and hopefully...another preacher,,, But are there some pointers here in the verses we are looking at?

1. Peter verse 9 says: You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God. – what marvellous phrases! **Chosen people:** This is how the Jews saw themselves from the very beginning – and they still do! Look how God

preserved them all through the OT, (last weeks' sermon: Deut. 7.6). What other nation, without a country, has preserved its identity for centuries? They have done it against all the odds. If they were special, how much more are we! But there are far MORE of us, and so much more varied. Nevertheless God wants us to be one in our love for each other and for him. And there's a big contrast with the Jews: whereas the Jews killed off or conquered the opposition, we are to invite others in! It's often been said that the church is the only club in existence which exists for the benefit of non-members.

Royal priesthood I take it that by this Peter means privileged people, who represent their god, are intermediaries between God and the rest of humanity. And this is what Jesus accomplished for all of us. He did away with the old priesthood so that all believers are now, in a sense, priests. We have privileges, but also responsibilities. We have direct ACCESS to God through Jesus, but also he RELIES ON US to tell others about him. This is a remarkable concept! In verses 9 and 10 the phrases tumble out in Peter's excitement. I've just read verse 9, here is verse 10. All these phrases describe a miracle! Once we begin to grasp what it means, we should feel excited too, and empowered.

2. Paul also talks about unity in Ephesians 4. Read vv 1-4. **"Forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace."** We have to **make every effort** for unity, we've got to **bear with** each other. Peace must be our **aim**. I

sometimes feel that as a church we are over-fond of a sharp discussion, shooting each other down with well-aimed texts, instead of loving each other and striving for peace. Lowliness and meekness matter too. To return to the sporting analogy, the team which is full of prima donnas, all wanting the limelight, will almost certainly be defeated by the team in which each player plays his or her well-rehearsed part, concerned with the success of the team as a whole, not with individual glory. And if we love each other, all we'll be concerned about is the success of the team, which in the case of the Christian Church, (Team JC, perhaps?) means glorifying God.

3. Loving each other does not come easily. Earlier in the chapter Peter said (verse 1): “rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind.” Then in verse 5: “like living stones you are being built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, (there it is again) offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ”. We clearly need to work hard at loving each other. “Like living stones you are being built into a spiritual house” – think of how a builder fits together bricks, but they all fit easily - then think of how the builder of a dry-stone wall works. I saw one once doing a demo at a country show. Fascinating for about ten minutes! He looks for stones which will fit together, chooses them carefully, then gradually builds up a wall which will stand firm for years and years – often keeping in the sheep, to extend the simile, quite helpfully, I think! And remember God is at work here and he will provide different people with

different skills and ideas to form his spiritual house, it doesn't all depend on us. And when you wonder how on earth you can get along with so-and-so, who is not quite your cup of tea... remember Christ has reached out and accepted and loved every one of us, whoever or whatever we may be. When we are seen to love each other as believers, this love will naturally flow out to non-believers as we are individually and jointly infused with the love of Christ.

We need to be honest with each other, honest with the gospel, and honest with God. And sometimes we will have to say “we disagree on this, but we can still work together”

4. Another basic requirement for unity with others: We need to be at unity in our own selves and in our own relationship with God. This is part of what Peter is getting at in verse 11 (“abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul...”) this is about self-discipline, which will also make unity with others easier. If we love God, our love for others will come naturally.

One or two final points: back in Romans Paul says in verse 7: “Accept one another” RSV says “welcome” The Greek verb = to take someone on to your side, as a helper. It can be used of taking a volunteer into the army, or as a mercenary, or of taking over an adjoining piece of land so that it's part of your own. It isn't just saying hello with a handshake, although it includes that. But Paul then adds “just as Christ has welcomed you” How? He accepted us as we were, but he went further than that: he also became a servant. Why? So that the Gentiles might glorify God for his

mercy. Who are our Gentiles? Technically all unbelievers, but perhaps we all have our own “Gentiles” who can be problematic for us. It certainly doesn’t just mean the non-believing, reasonably affluent middle-class who live in “our” part of the neighbourhood, and shop at the right supermarket. And on a much broader scale, a glance at the world situation today would suggest that one of the most immediate threats to our faith is the rise of militant Islam, which has taken us all by surprise. How to combat this is surely a top priority for Christian leaders and thinkers, and indeed for all of us.

Practicalities: HOW to praise/glorify God. Two final points: one absolutely fundamental, one important, but more personal.

What can we do together, as we struggle towards even a very imperfect unity? For many of us, as we age, maybe not a lot. But one thing we can all do - we all can pray, alone and together. Prayer cells absolutely basic to our ministry. When Gill and I arrived here and were welcomed into your fellowship, we were struck by the warmth of your continuing welcome. I’m quite sure that the cells play a vital role in this. The more we have, the better.

Minor but v practical point, aimed at me above all. How can we praise God better? We’re fortunate here to sing hymns with some intellectual content, to good tunes. I don’t know about you, but I’m very guilty of just singing along thoughtlessly, checking the weather, looking around to see who’s here. I know that I could concentrate more fully on what I’m singing. I imagine most of us

could improve in this respect, and together give God more of the praise that he deserves.

AMEN