

Togetherness: One God, One Body

At the heart of the Ely 2025 strategy is an expectation that God is at work in our midst. By 2025, Bishop Stephen aims to have raised the 'spiritual temperature' of the diocese, so that each church is a confident people of God, secure in their faith and competent in serving their local community. Indeed, all that we would wish for ourselves.

Spiritual growth is always a gift from God, but we know from the witness of the Bible, the tradition of the church and the experience of the saints that it doesn't happen by accident. For this reason, over the centuries, individual Christians and church groups have often adopted particular patterns for living their faith more deeply. These have often been known as 'Rules' of life, however, our diocese is keen to use the term '*Way of Life*' reflecting that some of the first people who committed themselves to Jesus were originally known as 'followers of the *way*'.

Using the words of the 'Commission' that come at the end of services for adult baptism and for confirmation, the diocese has produced material for individual, small group and whole church use, to draw out what this commission might look like in practice. For us, this is in the form of a sermon series for the next six weeks, and in the provision of study booklets which will be available in September for individual and small group use.

The first topic, that of 'Togetherness – One God, One Body' – sets the scene for the five that follow.

Although the Bible tells stories about many individuals, their lives are woven into a much greater story about the whole people of God, from Israel in the Old Testament to the Church in the New Testament, and stretching forward in the future to the fullness of time when all things in heaven and on earth are united in Christ. The message is clear: a godly life is a shared life. That's why our congregations greet people who have just been baptised with the words: '*There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism. By one Spirit we are all baptised into one body. We welcome you.*' One God. One body. Growing together.

I still get tingles up my spine when I read certain passages of scripture. One passage that is most likely to have that effect on me is Acts 2: 42-47, where we read of the early church: '*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was*

filled with awe ... All the believers were together, and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need ... And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.'

There is something so compelling, so inspiring about that account of life in the early church. What seems to reverberate in my spirit are the words *all, everyone* and *together*. A spiritual vitality simply enveloped that early church and infected everything in it. There is something contagious and exhilarating about being part of a winning team. You only have to cast your mind back to 2003 and England's Rugby World Cup winning squad with Jonny Wilkinson's drop goal in the last few moments of the game, or the final day of the Ryder Cup in 2014 at Gleneagles where, in dramatic fashion, Europe won their third Ryder Cup in a row. Everyone pulling together, and celebrating the individual abilities and success of one other. Great team work.

When I read of the early church I get a vision, a sense of what that's like. Imagine, everyone yielded to the Holy Spirit. Everyone giving liberally. Imagine everyone meeting needs and bearing fruit. Everyone demonstrating enormous grace. And you wonder how it is, when you read research that charts the decline of the church, why people are coming less frequently, and why more are merely attending rather than fully participating. And maybe that's where you are this morning. You come, but you've not yet quite found your place.

There's a view that says that one of the reasons that church participation is down is because the church has largely forgotten the doctrine of *'the priesthood of all believers.'* It's something that Martyn regularly reminds me of when he thinks I'm getting carried away with being a vicar. You might recall the words. They're words that Peter spoke to everyday believers in his first letter to Christians across Asia: *'But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.'*

In the Old Testament, God appointed a few individuals to function as priest to the people of Israel. These people would act as 'go-betweens' with respect to the people and God. They offered formal prayers on behalf of the people, performed religious functions on their behalf, made atonement for sins on their behalf. But when Jesus came, an amazing thing happened. Jesus declared that he was establishing a New Covenant – a new order. A reality we affirm each week as we prepare to receive communion repeating Jesus' words at the Last Supper: *'Drink this all of you; this is my blood of the new covenant.'*

In this new order, when anyone says 'yes' to following Jesus, he or she is immediately adopted into his family. The Holy Spirit takes up residence, and he or she becomes a priest. Under the High Priest, Jesus Christ, the Bible says that every true believer is a priest.

This has fascinating implications, not least as to who might be preaching next week! As priests, every believer has direct access to God. There is no need for a human intermediary. We worship directly to God. We pray directly to God. We confess our sins and receive forgiveness directly from God. We have bold access to God in times of need, wherever we are. This is an amazing spiritual reality.

But there is a second implication. A priest has a function to perform for the people. *You* have a function – a priestly responsibility – to perform for each other. A priest prays for his or her people, encourages his or her people, and grieves and rejoices with his or her people. Because the Old Testament model where the members view the vicar as the priest, with a special relationship with God that no-one else has, is gone. Shock news! I have no greater relationship with God, no special hot-line, no preferential treatment than any of you. We're equal before God, each with our own spiritual gifts and abilities, each making up the body of Christ. Together. One God. One body.

But before you say '*Well, I don't have a spiritual gift. When gifts were being given out, I wasn't even in the queue!*' let's pause for a moment to consider what spiritual gifts actually *are*. They are special God-given abilities that he entrusts to each of his people in order to involve them in the task of building his kingdom. Simply put, God has made you a specialist in some area of ministry. There is no-one here who doesn't have a spiritual gift. The apostle Paul describes spiritual gifts immediately before the passage that David/Sarah read earlier. In both this passage and in a similar passage in Romans, he says there are varieties of gifts, gifts such as wisdom, understanding, simple trust, helping, teaching, encouraging, giving aid to people in distress, leadership, to name but a few. And we see that in this church.

A variety of gifts but the same Holy Spirit. A variety of ministries – ways the gifts can be expressed – but the same Lord. And a variety of effects or results, but the same God. When God gifted you, he took into account your uniqueness – your background, temperament, your likes and passions. Spiritual gifts remind us that the Body - the church – is not a one-person show – it's a team. And we're all part of it.

But there's a more significant way to make a difference than simply sharing your gift. It is sharing *yourself* while sharing your gift.

Consider these words of Paul to the believers in Thessalonica: '*We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but **our lives as well**, because you had become so dear to us.*' So what might it look like to impart not just your gift, but your own life?

There are people in this church with gifts of helping others, who visit people in times of need, such as the loss of a loved one, and say kind things. But there are those who go so much further. Who enter into the pain of what someone is suffering, who come completely alongside and are utterly focused on that person. It's an amazing thing to observe.

There are small group leaders who could simply lead their group through the session, respond to questions, say a prayer and send people on their way. And then there are leaders who impart *themselves* – their failures, their successes, their heartaches and doubts, their own spiritual journeys. They share part of their soul, nurturing the group down the path to growth and to becoming 'family.'

There are sidespeople who could just point new people to a seat. And there are sidespeople who know how to share a little bit of themselves in that first moment of contact, conveying the message: '*You matter. I'm so glad you're here.*' Who remember a new person's name from one week to the next and take care to use it. How powerful it is when someone remembers your name.

There are people who do children's groups. And then are those who give their lives to creating little oases of love for children.

There are musicians who play on a Sunday morning. And then there are those who enter into the music with their whole being, who draw us in and take us somewhere that the music alone could never do.

What do *you* do? Do you just share your gift, or do you share your gift *and* share yourself? Do you fill a serving role, or do you impart your life?

Imagine if all of us decided to really take our priestly giftedness seriously. I think it would shape the entire 'feel' of a Body. A body where everyone has a place, a role to fulfil, that makes full use of their strengths, the gifts that God has given them. And no-one is too old – no-one here is a '*has-been*' – and no-one is too young. Remember how 4yr old Sylvie encouraged us with her

proclamation a couple of weeks ago that God loved her, reminding us that he loves each and every one of us. Each and every one of us. Together. One God. One body. Each playing their part to the glory of God. Just imagine.