

Gifts to all people

Three years ago we bought a new car. A Renault Kadjar. Bright red.

Now, when you buy a new car, what's the first thing you do? Do you sit down for an hour or two and read through the instruction manual, to make sure you know every little detail about it before you take it out on the road? Or do you get straightaway behind the wheel and take it out for a drive, enjoying all the things the car can do and not worrying about the details, at least for the time being? I suspect that most of us give the second answer. Which is exactly what I do. Which is why when I then stopped to fill up for fuel for the first time, I didn't have a clue how to release the fuel cover. Standing on the forecourt of the garage, pushing the little panel behind which sat the elusive fuel cap, I felt a little silly, particularly when someone then queued behind me and looked puzzled and then impatient as to why I wasn't filling up. There was nothing else to do. I had to get out the instruction manual, look up 'fuel' to discover that there was a little lever behind the steering wheel which releases the fuel cover. Easy when you know how! And I'm sure a car is no different than any other piece of machinery. Things sometimes go wrong. And they often go wrong quicker if you don't read the instructions. But most people will at least keep the instruction book handy and refer to it from time to time to see how the machine was meant to behave, what the key instructions were, and what needs to be done to ensure that it remains at maximum efficiency.

In our reading today from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, the early church in Ephesus, Paul takes them back to the key instructions on living the Christian life. He reminds them how they began and what it was all about. There are three things that emerge as basic: the meaning of their call to follow Jesus; the grace which has equipped each of them to play their part in serving him; and the unity they already have, but which they must make every effort to guard.

Now, the Christians that made up the church in Ephesus had come from all different walks of life. They'd grown up praying in different ways to different gods. A few years ago we were lucky enough to visit Ephesus whilst on holiday in Turkey and, as we walked around the ancient ruins of the city, we saw that there were lots of temples to various gods, the most notable of which was the Temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, just on the outskirts of the city. There's not much left of it now, just one column. And, in Paul's day, there were certain rules for entering the temples of different gods, especially if you wanted to go to ceremonies. The temples were seen as the houses of the gods and so it was

important to enter them properly. You might have to wear white clothes to come to worship, or have your hair loose rather than braided. You might be told to enter barefoot and not to wear any gold jewellery. But you could visit lots of different gods, one after another. You weren't part of a group with the other worshippers. There was no loyalty to just one god.

This was why the Christian faith was very different. So when Paul speaks of a call, or calling that they have received, right at the start of our passage, he's referring to the basic 'calling' of the gospel, summoning people to believe in Jesus as the risen Lord and King and to promise to follow him, and only him, for the rest of their lives.

And it's this calling – this commitment to follow Jesus – that binds them together as Christians, and why unity is so important. They are, after all, '*members of the same body*', says Paul, and '*sharers in the same spirit*'. They possess the same hope. Above all, they have the same Lord, the same faith, the same baptism, and the same God – the true God, who stands over all other gods and goddesses. Because they came from such different traditions – some were Jews, some were gentiles having worshipped a variety of gods, *unity* was absolutely key. And they wouldn't be in unity with each other if they didn't stand guard over what they believed. There would be all sorts of things that would attack and threaten that unity. But these threats *had* to be resisted, or they wouldn't survive very long as a church. And, it always meant going back to the basics of what they believed. Because, if you got the basics right – loving the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind, and loving your neighbour as yourself - everything else would fall into place.

Paul talks about five foundation stones that will make this unity possible: humility (by which he means not thinking of ourselves as better than those sitting around us); gentleness or meekness (being prepared to ask what will promote and build up my brother and sister's faith); patience (not wanting everything now but being prepared to work with God's timing); bearing with others (accepting people around us as they are, not judging them and not trying to make them fit with our way of doing things; and love (treating one another as God loves us.)

He then goes on to spell out how everyone called by Christ has a role, through grace, in building the body of Christ on earth. In Ephesus, in the small church gatherings of 25 or so, meeting together in someone's house, these gifts would be needed. In Paul's community, everyone equips or helps everyone else. Lots of different gifts, but the same Jesus, the same Lord, who is personally present, by

the Spirit, and living in each of them. To keep that in mind is to maintain unity. And this is how, above all, Christians are to live up to the calling they have received.

The obvious question we ask ourselves is ... has *that much* changed in the 2000 years between these early church communities in Ephesus and the church of today? The church is *still* a community of imperfect human beings, from all walks of life, who have to learn to get along. Why does Paul urge the communities in Ephesus to live together in unity? His emphasis on this would suggest that *this* was something that they struggled with. And it's something the church *still* struggles with. Just look at religious division in recent history, and consider all that divides us from people of different faiths – and even from other Christians. And, here at All Saints', each of us has our *own* traditions, our *individual* needs and preferences that we bring into the church community. If there's a choice in something, you can guarantee that some will prefer the one, whilst the rest will prefer the other, be that what we sit on, what we sing, what we say, what we wear, and so on.

We can ask ourselves what has historically been contentious within *this* church community. It's clear that the movement of pews has, over the generations, and very recently, been a key area of conflict resulting in several consistory court hearings. There was obvious conflict that led to Bridget's curacy ending prematurely, and Kylie choosing to move less than a year later. In the replies I've received following the vision day – the action sheets that have been completed so far – several of you have spoken of these conflicts and of the negative effect they had on church relationships. A few have said that the church cannot move forward unless the conflict is resolved. As unity is of such importance to Paul, in overseeing those early church communities, and knowing the struggles they faced, what does *he* say about conflict that might be of help to us today? What does our instruction manual – the Bible – have to teach us?

At the end of chapter 4 of Ephesians, Paul says that we're to '*get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger*', we're to be '*kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as in Christ, God forgave you.*' In John 13 and Romans 12, we're repeatedly instructed to '*love one another*'; in Romans 15 and Hebrews 12, to '*live in peace and harmony with one another*'; in 2 Corinthians 13, to '*settle our differences among ourselves*'; in 1 Corinthians 13, to be '*patient, kind and tender-hearted towards one another*'; and from our passage today, '*to bear one another's burdens*'.

From what you've said, and remember *this predates me*, the conflict was to do with individual preferences and differences in personality more so than it was to

do with sin, per se. In such cases, scripture challenges us to check our own motives. Philippians 2 urges us to *'do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the other.'* In Philippians 4, Paul pleads for Euodia and Syntyche – two women who had clearly fallen out big-time - *'to be of the same mind in the Lord'* and for others to help them. In Romans 12, we're told to humble ourselves *'to truly listen to one another, striving for peace within the body'*.

So, how do we move on? How do we achieve the peace within the body, the unity that we know is crucial if we're to grow together as a church family? In many respects, the answer is very much what I preached last week, and I don't think that it's co-incidental that these passages from Ephesians have appeared in the Lectionary just when, we as a church, have committed to seek better God's will. We need to remain true to our calling as disciples of Christ, just as Paul says at the start of today's reading. To fix our eyes on him. To know Jesus *deep* within the very core of our beings and know his love for us. And for *all* we do to be energised by our faith, that calling as disciples of Christ, first and foremost.

But, it may be, that we also consider, in the autumn, holding a service of healing and reconciliation, where, as a church, we commit to forgiving one another for past hurts, to settle our differences and move on. I'll be taking further advice on this from the churchwardens and will also be keen to know what you, the church family, thinks. A service where we ask forgiveness for the past, but where we also pledge to live in harmony and peace going forward, and to commit to a *different* way of responding to conflict, one that doesn't repeat the mistakes of the past and lead to further division. Because, unless we are working to develop, maintain, and defend unity, and to overcome, demolish and put behind us the disunity we find ourselves in, we can scarcely claim to be following Christ's teaching. And that's what we're called to do. *'Walk with me',* Jesus says, *'work with me – watch how I do it.'* Hopefully, that's something we can all commit to, from which amazing things can happen as we move forward as a united, confident people of God. Amen.