

GSM 3 March 2013 – Disciples should be **united**

John 17:20-23

²⁰ “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—²³ I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Ephesians 4:1-6

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

[define united – dictionary definition of “made into or caused to act as a single entity; agreed; in harmony”. This is what Jesus wishes for his followers, and what we’re looking at this morning.]

Read the passages

Why are we looking at unity and being united this morning? Well, the answer to that may have something to do with where it appears in John’s gospel and what says about the importance Jesus put on unity in the church. John 17 describes the prayers that Jesus prayed in the moments before his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemene, when the Bible tells us he was under huge stress and turmoil, about to face the physical and spiritual agony of the cross. These are not prayers that we might sometimes pray when our minds begin to wander and before we know it we are thinking about something completely different. No – Jesus would have been focussed like never before. These prayers show what was uppermost on his mind. And when he comes to pray for believers who become Christians through the message of the gospel, what is the first thing he prays for? Not power, not boldness, but **unity**. And if Jesus thought it was that important, then we need to look at it closely and take it seriously.

Unity may not be something that we think about too much, but the need for unity is all around us. It’s a theme in popular culture – most famously in the cry of the Three Musketeers of ‘All for one

and one for all'. It's something that political leaders cherish and long for, because woe betide the party leader who has launched a policy that his party is split on – he gets a very hard time in Parliament. Unity is important in sport – it's crucial in football to keep a solid back line as one defender who fails to move up will play opposition players onside. And in music – it sounds a bit dissonant if half the brass section of the orchestra are playing *The Ride of the Valkyrie* and the other half are playing *The Dambusters March*.

How do we measure up in the church? Well, I'm not aware of any huge pending splits in this church, though there will always be opportunities for us to fall out over important or unimportant things. In the wider church of course there is more often than not lots of different voices that get raised on different issues and it's very rare, I think, that the outside world sees the church as fully united on any particular issue.

Let's look at what Jesus says in John 17 and also what Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians. What we'll see are four things:-

- Why unity is important;
- What unity means;
- How to get unity; and
- The power to get it.

Firstly, why unity is important. Verses 22 and 23 of John 17: "I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. *Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.*" The reason that Jesus wants his followers to be united is because by their unity proves the truth of the gospel – that God sent Jesus and that God is love. So we can say that the outside world will judge the truth of what we say about Jesus, according to this passage, according to how united we are. That's a heavy load isn't it? Be united around the gospel and the world sees its truth. On the other hand, spend all the time falling out and the truth is harder for the world to see. It doesn't look much like love, then – it doesn't look like Jesus's message is an attractive one.

Can anyone tell me what sort of picture this is?



This is a mosaic, found in Pompeii in the ruins of that city. The defining characteristic of a mosaic is that it is formed of lots of little tiles – if you were to look closely at this picture you would see all the little tiles in their place. The craftsman who put it together made sure that each of the little tiles fitted together in their place. The picture only works if the individual tiles are in their individual places. If the craftsman had planned it wrong and half the octopus's head had ended up in the bottom left hand corner, and cut all of the fish in half by placing lots of black tiles in the middle of them, the picture would be distorted. If all the tiles were in a complete jumble you probably wouldn't be able to tell at all what the picture was meant to be. And so with us – the passage tells us that by looking at all of us and how we work together, people see the picture of what we're about. If we're all fighting with each other to be central to the picture then the picture is distorted. It needs all the pieces to be in their place, held in place by the other tiles, for the picture to be clear.

We're not mosaic tiles - we can move around. But we do have a master craftsman who has placed each of us in the situation we're in, and for those of you who regularly attend this church, he has placed you in this church. Just like the mosaic, we each have allotted functions which combine to create the whole, and we should work with each other so that the picture is not distorted or jumbled. When we are working together with a common purpose, with each part playing its role, then we will have unity and the world will see better the truth of our message.

So, that's why unity is important. But what does unity mean in this context? I'm not going to spend too much time of this, because the answer is pretty clear, if a little shocking.

Remember the dictionary definition I gave earlier. “United” means “made into or caused to act as a single entity; agreed; in harmony”. So, to what level are we meant to be agreed, or in harmony? A little or a lot? After all we’re all different people, right, so a bit of discord is bound to happen? Well, to what extent does Jesus say we should be united? Verse 20: “I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹ *that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.*” Verse 22: “I have given them the glory that you gave me, *that they may be one as we are one*”. Now this is barely credible, isn’t it? Jesus wants his followers to be united to the same extent that God the Son and God the Father are united. This is a high standard! When were Jesus and God the Father ever in disagreement with each other? When did one of them put their own ambition or agenda ahead of the other? The answer is *never*. And we are meant to have the same level of unity one with another that Jesus had with God. The same unity of purpose and single-mindedness.

Now that is a challenging notion – that we become as united as Jesus was to God. How on earth can we do it? Well, what I’d like to do is to suggest two ways that the church gets it wrong – two examples, one from church history and one taken from pop music – and an example from my own experience of what happens when the church, or those within it, get it right.

So, firstly, the wrong way to get church unity. Over the years the church has found two false ways of getting unity. The first wrong way is this:-



Burn the heretic. This is a picture of the martyrdom of John Ridley and Hugh Latimer, two Protestants who were executed by burning at the stake by the leaders of the English church, then Roman Catholic for disagreeing with Catholic teaching – and before we start thinking “poor old Protestants”, throughout history it’s just as likely that Catholics have been executed by Protestants as the other way round. But the point is this – one way of ensuring that there is unity in the church is by disposing of those with whom you disagree. So you see the picture of the priest in the foreground holding up the cross as if to say “do you see, I’m in the right and you’re in the wrong, and because you won’t agree with me, you must die.”

Now, fortunately, the days of burning heretics at the stake are long gone in this country, but this sort of attitude still prevails in the church from time to time. Do you disagree with me? Then you need purging from the church. We don’t execute people these days; no, we’re less medieval than that – instead, we conduct whispering campaigns and spread unfounded rumours about them. We rubbish them to our friends in the church. We make it clear that they’re not welcome. We drive them out. But the hatred in our heart is just the same as if we’d surrounded them with wood and put fire to them.

So, yes, you can reach unity by disposing of people that disagree with you, but really does that show the love of God and the truth of the gospel? Answers on a postcard.

What's the other mistake that the church makes in wanting to reach unity? In many ways, it's the opposite to "burn the heretic", and it's exemplified by a song I'll play you now, which was number 1 in 1980 following the death of the singer. It's been popular since then, in part because of its message, and *Rolling Stone* judged it number 3 in the best songs of all time. I'll play you a little bit [*beat the intro with anyone under 25*] and put the lyrics up as they're sung. Most of you will, I'm sure know it straight away.

Imagine there's no heaven
It's easy if you try
No hell below us
Above us only sky
Imagine all the people
Living for today...

Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace...

You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will be as one

What John Lennon says in this song is that there is a way for the *whole world* to be as one, but to do that you have to set aside anything that might divide people. So, to get to the world being as one there is no heaven or hell, nothing after death, so 'live for today', no countries to invade each other, and no religion of any sort. Now of course there's an irony in this – you're not to have any strong convictions, except of course the strong conviction that you're not allowed any strong convictions, which is a strong conviction. Unless you *have* that strong conviction, then, to use the words of the song, you haven't joined us. You're excluded.

So, whilst some in the church might deal with disagreement in the church by trying to burn the heretics, others might do so by sacrificing core beliefs. “You disagree with the controversial bits of the gospel? Well, let’s not let that get in the way. We can drop the bits you don’t like, or we can pretend that we’ve dropped them. You don’t like the idea of judgment? Fine, we’ll only talk about God being love, not about God being just. You don’t like the idea that you’re not good enough? Well, let’s only talk about the more cuddly bits.” Gradually the gospel becomes something other than the gospel – it becomes totally dilute, or false, missing certain bits. It ceases to be the truth and becomes fake – a lie, masquerading as the truth. That may reach unity, but unity around what? Being nice and being seen as good by the world. It tries to overcome opposition by *giving up*.

What according to our readings this morning is the way to reach unity? Look with me at the Ephesians 4 passage. What does it say to those who would burn the heretics? Verses 2 and 3: “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” So don’t rush off to get the kindling when someone disagrees with you. What does it say to those who would deny their beliefs to reach unity? Verse 4 to 6: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all”. Note the claim – only one true faith. Only one way.

So we are called to profess one faith, and stick to it, and deal with those who would disagree with us with humility, gentleness, patience and love, without giving up our faith, which is the only one that leads to God. I’d like to share an example of what this looks like in practice, and I’m going to embarrass Lyndon, which is OK for two reasons – firstly, he’s not here and secondly I imagine he’s far too busy in Auckland to listen to GSM sermons!

So, about ten years ago here I preached on a particular subject – I won’t say what it was, but it was not central to the gospel but at the same time an important subject. Lyndon disagreed with my reading of the Bible passage that I had preached on and so I suggested that we met up over some food to discuss. As we talked and ate, Lyndon didn’t try to batter me into submission with his point of view, nor did he water down his opinion of my error. By the end of the meal I was no closer to agreeing with him on this secondary issue than I was at the start. But it was evident as he talked that his concern was two-fold – for my spiritual well-being and for the spiritual well-being of those to whom I had preached. His zeal was for the gospel and its truth, not just in doctrinal terms but in terms of living out its truths – of grace and humility, and love for me as his brother. By the end of

the meal I was closer to him than at the beginning, and that outcome was very definitely far more his doing than mine. It was one of the most encouraging meals I had ever had – it affirmed the gospel and bound me closer to him as a fellow worker in Christ in a common endeavour. All because he took the risk of disagreeing with me, and from how we went about dealing with me. Man, it's a heady thing to experience something like that from a Christian friend. Looking at this morning's passage it brought that meal to mind because Lyndon wanted to correct a wrong I had preached, and he did his best to do so humbly, gently, patiently and in love. That disagreement was the piece of feedback I have treasured in my preaching more than anyone who has ever agreed with me, because it built me up. It sharpened me. It brought me closer to Jesus.

That's a specific incident in my life. The challenge of this passage is to follow the teaching in all the dealings we have with each other – to deal with each other humbly, gently, patiently and in love, whilst still affirming the true faith, the faith as set down in God's word. What will that look like for you? Maybe that's something for you to work out in your small groups and your friendships.

Let's not kid ourselves. This is hard. It's so much easier to lash out against someone that disagrees with us, isn't it, or to deny the gospel in order not to offend someone rather than take the risk. Being gentle, humble and patient, but unpopular is costly. We've heard a lot in this discipleship series about how we are called to do hard things, and this is another example. Where do we get the power to do it?

It's there in both passages we've looked at this morning. Let's look at the relevant verses. John 17:22: *I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one*". Ephesians 4:4: "There is one body and one Spirit, *just as you were called to one hope when you were called.*" Why are glory and hope mentioned in passages on unity? Because the key to preserving unity is to understand our eternal future. Our future gives us the power to strive for the unity that Jesus prays for for us, in the right way.

If you follow Jesus this morning, then you have a future that is glorious indeed. The Bible teaches that the wrong you have done and thought in the past and the future separates you from God. But the Bible teaches that rather than causing you to be separated from God for all time, God sent his Son Jesus to pay the price for that wrong. By dying on the cross and rising again Jesus showed that the price for your rebellion against God is paid and that the future is to be with God forever. And because God is wholly good and wholly love, your future if you follow Jesus is one that is wholly good and wholly love. Every injury and insult turned to greater glory, every wrong forgotten. Not

because of what you have done, but because of what Jesus has done. A free gift of grace that redeems, fulfils, astonishes and goes above and beyond what we can imagine.

Now think on what makes us want to dismiss others as heretics or water down our beliefs to accommodate those who disagree with us. Isn't it wanting to preserve our status or power in this world? When we are cruel to those who disagree with us, aren't we trying to protect our own power in the here and now? When we dilute what we believe, aren't we fearful of rejection and ridicule? But Jesus says in John 17 that he has given us his glory – the glory that comes from a perfect life of obedience. It's the glory of being accepted and honoured by God. This is the hope that Ephesians 4 speaks of. Now what's more important – our little power games we indulge in when we disagree with others, or that future, which is equally the future of that person over there who follows Jesus but may disagree with us on a point of detail? Our future urges us on to live out the truths of the gospel that we profess and through which we have this certain future. "I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."

I want to end by reading to you the "Evangelical Relationships Commitment", which is a set of affirmations and actions agreed by the Evangelical Alliance when it was founded in the 19th century, and which to my mind provide the blueprint for us applying these passages today. You can find it on the website of the EA.

Affirmations

1. We welcome as Christian brothers and sisters all who experience the grace of new birth, bringing them to that fear and knowledge of God which is expressed in a life of obedience to His word.
2. We recognise our Christian duty of trust and mutual encouragement to all who serve Christ as Lord, not least to those who conscientiously prefer not to be identified with the same churches, alliances or councils as ourselves.
3. We respect the diversity of culture, experience and doctrinal understanding that God grants to His people, and acknowledge that some differences over issues not essential to salvation may well remain until the end of time.

Actions

4. We urge all Christians to pray as Christ prayed, that we may be one in the Father and the Son, and so by the Spirit promote personal relationships of love, peace and fellowship within the Body of Christ, His universal Church.

5. We encourage all Christians earnestly to contend for biblical truth, since only as we are open to learn from others and yield fuller obedience to the truth will we be drawn closer to Christ and to each other.
6. We call on each other, when speaking or writing of those issues of faith or practice that divide us, to acknowledge our own failings and the possibility that we ourselves may be mistaken, avoiding personal hostility and abuse, and speaking the truth in love and gentleness.
7. We owe it to each other, in making public comment on the alleged statements of our fellow Christians, first to confer directly with them and to establish what was actually intended. Then to commend what we can, to weigh the proportional significance of what we perceive to be in error, and to put a charitable construction on what is doubtful, expressing all with courtesy, humility and graciousness.
8. We rejoice in the spread of the Gospel across the world and urge all Christians to commit themselves to this task, avoiding unnecessary competition and co-operating, wherever possible, in the completion of Christ's kingdom of peace, justice and holiness, to the glory of the one God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

May we follow this approach in our dealings with other, and strive for the unity that Jesus prayed for us.