

St Martin's Sunday 15 November 2015 09.30

What kind of Church – relational. Colossians 3:12-17 and John 15:1-12

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts, Be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen

This week we return to our reflections on “What kind of Church?” You will remember three weeks ago Jan started our reflections by asking us to think about being Jesus focussed. Jan emphasised that we are a pilgrim people, a people on a journey; a people who want to move forward with Jesus as their guide. Jan reminded us that Paul tells us in Colossians 1 verse 15 that Jesus ‘is the image of the invisible God’. Paul is telling us that if we want to see what God is like, we must look at Jesus. He perfectly represents God to us in a form that we can see and know and understand. So we need to be Jesus focussed if we are to know God more intimately.

God's ultimate goal for us is to become like Christ. As we become more like him, we discover our true selves, the persons we were created to be. How do we become like Christ? We can do this by reading and reflecting on the scriptures, by spending time in prayer, by listening to God for his guidance in our lives and the life of the church, by encouraging one another, by following Jesus example as we live out our daily lives and doing his work in the world. As we do this, we are building and strengthening our relationship with Christ, which brings us to the second attribute which we are going to reflect on today – a relational church; developing relationships that enable us to grow as disciples and to bless others.

We know from the doctrine of the Trinity that relationship is at the very heart of God's nature. It is this relationship of love between Father, Son and Holy Spirit which helps us to understand that we are relational beings; we are not complete in ourselves, but only in our relatedness to God, to one another and to his creation.

Christianity is all about RELATIONSHIPS. So what is the key to these relationships – in our Gospel reading this morning for me the key is in verse 4 when Jesus tells his disciples “Abide in me as I abide in you.”

With the metaphor of the vine, Jesus underscores his close relationship with the disciples and their absolute dependence on him for life and growth. And so it is

with us, it is only by staying close to Jesus, like a branch attached to a vine, will we be in a right relationship with him which will enable us to produce fruit in our lives. Jesus emphasises that this is a multidimensional relationship when he says in verse 9 “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.”, and in verse 12 ‘This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.’ So love flows from the Father, through the Son to us and through us to those around us. Jesus said he wasn’t going to give us a lot of rules – in fact just one: This is my command: Love one another” (John15:17).

In the reading from Colossians Paul also emphasises the importance of love when he says in verse 14 “Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”; “in perfect harmony”... That is Paul’s assessment of what life in the church ought to be like. It is the place where discordant lives are brought into tune, through relationships with a loving community, resulting in a beautiful harmony.

What is a relational church? A relational church is a place where everyone is loved. A loving community, a place where nobody stands alone. Love holds Christians together in fellowship under the strain of everyday life. Love checks the selfish, hard tempers, which keep people apart and which militate against the maturing of good fellowship. Here “perfect harmony” is the full expression of love in the Christian community, devoid of bitter words and angry feelings, and freed from the ugly defects of immorality and dishonesty.

Our hearts were made for community. We hunger for the deep, authentic relationships Jesus had in mind when he prayed that his followers would be one. Yet in many churches, and perhaps for some in our church, the connection we crave is lacking. How can these churches become a place where nobody stands alone? How do we become a complete church, a loving community?

It doesn’t happen by simply saying we love one another. As any of us who have suffered through a broken relationship can testify, the words often come easy. The complete church moves beyond the spoken word. The other attributes which Paul speaks of in Colossians help us to understand how we might build that loving community. As William Barclay says, it is important to note that every one of the attributes listed has to do with personal relationships; there is no mention of virtues like efficiency, cleverness, diligence or industry, only the great basic Christian virtues which govern human relationships. These are “compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.”

Paul begins with compassion – we are to show mercy and concern for the sick, the aged, the weak in body and mind, in fact for anyone who is in need of our help. Then comes kindness which the ancient writers defined as the virtue of the man whose neighbour's welfare is as dear to him as his own. Next is humility, having a modest view of ourselves. If as Christians, we believe that all people are the children of God, then there is no room for arrogance or thinking that we are better than any other person. Gentleness follows next in Paul's list – gentleness of attitude and behaviour, in contrast with rudeness or harshness in one's dealings with others.

Lastly, there is patience, a state of emotional calm in the face of provocation or misfortune and without complaint or irritation. It denotes that longsuffering which endures wrong and puts up with the exasperating conduct of others rather than flying into a rage or desiring vengeance.

Such virtues (or graces), call for a strength, which is rarely seen in the cut and thrust of real world. And without such an attitude toward others no group of individuals can become and grow as a community, with a proper care for others and willingness to submerge one's own personal interests. It is not enough to simply be a warm, and welcoming congregation. If we think that our investment in relationships at regular events is enough, we are terribly wrong. A loving community will never be built on Sunday relationships alone.

It is in the depth of relationships outside of Sunday gatherings that these loving traits are exemplified. Which simply means this – in order to be the complete church, an authentic loving community, we must constantly be investing in building loving relationships with one another and our communities outside of our regular gatherings; in our homes, our workplaces, our clubs and wherever we interact with others.

What produces this extreme character make-over? In one phrase – the love of God. The relational church reflects a loving God. Loving character flows from our relationship with a loving God.

In verse 12, we see the essential foundation of a loving community. "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved". God chooses us. The unselfish, sacrificial, compassionate love we are to have for one another is inherently and irrevocably tied to the love God has for us. The relational church is the place where the perfect love of God is perfectly refining the relationships within his body perfectly.

One of the ways which we build that relationship is as we join together in the Eucharist. As we gather week by week and partake of the Eucharist, not only are we made one with God but we are united with each other in the fellowship of the meal. This is a “multidimensional sharing”; a vertical dimension where we as individuals share in relationship with God and a horizontal dimension where we share in relationship with one another. Through Jesus Christ, his body and his blood, we share in God’s love for humanity and - having received this unconditional love, we are expected to share that same love with each other.

When we share in the Eucharist, we are not just sharing with one another where we are, but we are sharing with all those throughout the world who come to the Lord’s Table. This means that as we enjoy God’s gifts to us, we should be working to overcome the injustice that means so many people do not even have the basic necessities to sustain life. After all the Eucharist ends by sending us out into the world “to love and serve the Lord” - what we have received is meant to be shared and we can only share if we are building relationships in the communities where we live and work.

In Jesus name, Amen.