

SHOWING GOD'S LOVE, Matthew 20: 20-28 and 1 Cor.12: 12-26

CCO and StJN 25 February 2018

Father, may we listen with our hearts as well as our minds, and may we learn from you today. Amen.

This is the third sermon in our series for Lent; we've thought about Knowing God's Love, in worship, and now we are thinking about Showing God's Love, in fellowship.

Some friends of my son, Roland, got married just a few years ago; in due course the wife became pregnant and gave birth to triplets. They were a Christian couple and had been going to their local church for a while. Talking to the mother some months later, I asked her how on earth they had coped. She replied that the people from the church had worked out a rota whereby someone came to help for at least two hours a day, every day, doing whatever jobs needed to be done, and they had provided a main meal for the family every day for the first three months. She said it was a brilliant witness to others: she didn't have to talk about God or Christianity, she just told people what the church community had done for them, and that said it all. It is indeed a lovely example of fellowship in action, of Christians serving one another, as Jesus explained in our Gospel reading.

The Church is a remarkable organisation when you think about it. Where else would you find, gathered together, a mixture of people between the ages of 93 and 3, most of whom are not related to each other by blood; some with very basic education, and some with several university degrees; some who have lived in the same place all their lives and some who have travelled the world and only recently come to settle in the parish; some who have large families, and some who live alone; some who like the music of Bach and some who like country and western or rock music. We are a very

mixed bunch. But what we all have in common is that we are members of the Church, and as such we are called to gather together and share our lives.

St Paul in our reading from Corinthians talks about the Church community as a body, likening it to our human bodies. And he tells us that each and every one of us is a part, or a member, of that body. Nowadays we don't often use the word 'member' in this old sense, meaning a part of a body, a limb or an organ. We have kept the older meaning in the word 'dismembered' – you all know what is meant by a 'dismembered body'. So Paul is telling us that being a member of Christ's church, means that we are intimately and vitally connected to each other, to all the other bits of the body; each of us is an essential part, and each of us has our role to play within the whole body, our own special role.

St Paul acknowledges that we are all different: we are not all eyes, or all toes; but we all belong. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" We cannot say "because I'm not like you, I'm not part of this group", or worse, "because you're not like me I don't need you"! We all belong, and we are stuck with each other. This is something we should perhaps stress more in our baptism services: the baptised person has thrown their lot in with the church, they have become part of that community, for richer for poorer, for better for worse – yes, that's from the marriage service, but is the Church not referred to as the 'bride of Christ'? The same level of commitment is expected. To love, to cherish, to honour one another. If one part suffers, the whole suffers. If one part is praised, all the other parts share its happiness. That's how it should be.

This implies a level of closeness that, sadly, we have not always seen in the Christian church. But it is still our goal. It is still what God hopes for and expects from us, his people. It is a real challenge to us. We are called to model a life of mutuality.

Jesus himself is our model – he shows us how to live this way, and he teaches his followers to live this way too. The model is to be handed down from generation to generation of Christians; the church is supposed to be a model for all community. When it works, it is amazing. Your care and support for me over these last few months has been wonderful, and my example at the beginning shows just what can be done.

Those examples are on a very local level. But we are also part of a worldwide fellowship, the worldwide church. Since the earliest times, Christians have tried to support their brothers and sisters in the faith who lived far away. You will remember St Paul giving thanks for the gifts that one group of Christians had sent to their suffering brethren miles away, and how he is always praying for the new young churches. Often it is not gifts of money that are needed as much as the support of prayer and the willingness to stand up and make a noise, to demand justice for those who are being oppressed. Many of us fight shy of getting involved in campaigning, but we can make a difference – remember the Jubilee campaign that brought freedom from crippling debt to many countries? You might like to ask yourself: what am I doing to help and support my fellow Christians across the world? There are organisations you can get involved with. The Mothers' Union does good work, Tear Fund, Christian Aid, Cafod, Embrace the Middle East, Help for the Church in Need – there are a number out there, and they need your prayers. Find out about them and the work they do. You may not feel you can afford to send money, but you can always pray. Imagine if you were being persecuted and threatened, how would it make you feel to know that Christians far away were faithfully holding you in prayer, day by day?

But returning to the idea of the church as a body, with lots of different parts, all with their role to play. When you come to church, you do not come as 'an attender'; you are not a 'consumer', here to

get what you want, and then go home. You are far more intimately attached than that! Your presence here makes us whole. When you are not here, we are no longer whole, there is something missing – YOU! Yes, you, whoever you are, you really are THAT important. We as a church cannot flourish and thrive unless you are with us, bringing to our whole body the gifts and the insights that are unique to you. We need you. And in the same way, you actually need us, all of us, if you are to grow and flourish as a Christian. God has put us together. He doesn't just seat us side by side, or even at a respectful distance, in the pews! God mysteriously joins us to each other through himself. He pours his love into our hearts, so that that love can be poured out from us onto one another. We say it week by week in the Eucharist: though we are many, we are one body. We need to keep asking ourselves what do we really mean when we say those words.

In several places, St Paul talks about the church as being built up; he isn't talking about the church buildings, of course, but the word he uses means to construct a building, with all the different stones being joined together to make a new whole, the living stones that St Peter refers to. Pull one stone out, and the building will be weaker.

We are urged to build each other up spiritually. So how do we do that? Well I think this fellowship involves four main aspects. First of all, we have to get to know each other. Just have a look at the people around you, and ask yourself: "What do I know about these people? Are they going through any difficulties just now? What would they want me to pray about when I think of them?" How well do we really know each other? How might we get to know each other better?

This is one reason why John and I often go on about the importance of Home Groups, or of small groups of Christians meeting together to share their thoughts and experiences,

their lives as Christians in a secular world, the problems, the joys, and to learn from each other as they study the Bible and hear each others' insights, questions, doubts, testimonies.

Meeting together and sharing that way means that, as you get to know each other better, you learn to trust each other more. As you trust each other you are less afraid to confide more deeply in one another. I was recently with a small group of old friends; we hadn't met up for quite a long while, but we spent a couple of days together, and one of them revealed something that might have seemed quite shocking. But, do you know, none of us was shocked. Because we knew the person so well, and because we love her, we could hear all that she had to tell without batting an eyelid, and we could surround her with our love and concern and help her deal with the whole thing. That is fellowship, where knowing each other really well creates a depth of love and trust that allows the other person to be truly honest, accepting themselves as they are, warts and all, because they know that they are loved and accepted by the others. They know that God's love is there for them through those around them.

Knowing, trusting, loving, helping – that's what Christian fellowship is all about. Supporting, encouraging, building up, learning from one another, from our different experiences of living as a Christian, at work, at home, within the family. Look around: how have other people here helped you in your faith journey? Who has taught you? Say a word of thanks for them. Now how might you be able to help those around you today? Who needs you just now? . . .

We who claim to be God's children, to be followers of his Son, Jesus, we are called to show God's love as Jesus did. The church is where we can learn to do that, learning to create community and to model it to the world. We may have failed sometimes in the past, but God never gives up on us and it is never too late to learn. We

have a lot to be thankful for, and much to build on, so let us not tire in our learning how to live as God's people day by day. Amen.