

Love and unity

Rev 21.1-6 [<http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=328509271>]

Acts 11.1-18 [<http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=328509290>]

John 13.31-35 [<http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=328509317>]

A theme which runs through all three of today's readings is love and unity. In the Revelation 21 reading, God speaks about a time to come when he will remake all things – the heavens and the earth. And, as part of this, he will remake human society to be perfect. The reading speaks of God living with his people in perfect community in the heavenly Jerusalem. It also invokes a common Biblical metaphor of marriage, again speaking of relationships in perfect harmony. Of unity and love.

This is where we are headed at the end of the age when God's kingdom comes completely. But we do not need to wait until then. The kingdom is already coming now and we can already begin to share in this unity within our church community.

The Acts 11 reading speaks of unity in two ways. Here, we find Peter telling the Jerusalem church the story of how he came to go to the house of Cornelius and share the good news of Jesus with gentiles. Such an idea was unthinkable to Peter and to the Jerusalem church – that God's chosen people might include not just Jews, but gentiles too. And yet, as Peter tells the story, it becomes abundantly clear that this is the message the Holy Spirit is giving. Unity even across the Jew/gentile divide – that this great barrier will be dissolved by God.

Secondly, in Acts 11, we find the church handling conflict well. The reading begins with conflict as Peter is accused of doing something wrong. By the end of the reading, however, all the church, including Peter, are praising God together in unity.

And then we have John 13 in which Jesus gives his great “new commandment”, to love one another as he has loved us. We have to understand that when Jesus uses the word “love”, he is speaking of the love which unites Father, Son and Holy Spirit as one God. This is an incredibly powerful love – far far more than the notion of love we see on our television screens or that which Hollywood generally portrays. This is not a love of fluffy hearts and cherubs on clouds strumming harps, but a love which is as strong as diamond.

If we continue reading from the end of John 13, we find that for the next few chapters, Jesus is speaking to his disciples. This is the famous “farewell discourse” given by Jesus to his disciples on the night before he died. At the end of this discourse, Jesus prays that great prayer that we, the church, may be one just as the Father and the Son are one. That is where the call to “love one another” leads – to the kind of unity that exists between Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

So, love and unity are important themes in the readings. I did not choose these readings for today, but I must say how well-timed they are. Anyone who was at Wednesday evening's annual parochial church meeting may well be reminded of the vision I outlined for our church at that meeting. What I said was this: that I have been looking at the parish profile which was compiled when our church was seeking a new vicar. In the parish profile there is a clearly expressed desire that the church should grow into deeper community and that we might grow in love. And, indeed, all the other

things mentioned in the parish profile are dependent on this community. For example, reaching out in love to our parish can only truly happen if we are a community of love to begin with.

But how do we achieve this kind of deeper community? My conviction is that we have to make a point of being intentional about it and that this will probably take the form of some kind of covenant. That is to say, that we need to think and pray about promises that we might choose to make to ourselves, to each other and to God. And I promised on Wednesday evening to explore in sermons over the months to come various themes and ideas that we might incorporate into a covenant that would be right for this place and this time.

When I suggested the idea of formulating a covenant we might commit ourselves to, I had in the back of my mind a book which was written around 1500 years ago, called “The Rule of Benedict”. This was written by St Benedict of Nursia, founder of the Benedictine order of monasteries, based on his experience of leading monastic communities. Benedict found that for Christian community to work properly, there needed to be a list of “rules” or promises the members of the community would make to themselves, to each other and to God and he formulated a list of 73 rules which are still the core around which Benedictine (and some other) monasteries live today.

However, Benedict's Rule affects not just monastic communities. Through the years, all kind of Christian communities have been inspired by the Rule of Benedict in formulating their own covenants by which they promise to live together. And so, it was natural for me to suggest that we might want to do the same and, through prayer and reflection, come up with a covenant that we might share together.

In today's sermon, I want to reflect on this theme of love and unity and how it might be expressed in a covenant we might make. And I want to zero-in on the question of how we should handle conflict within our community. You will all be familiar with 1 Corinthians 13, the great chapter on love. In the middle of this chapter, St Paul tells us that:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Now, these words are all very well for wedding couples – and this is the most popular Bible reading used for weddings – because wedding couples have chosen each other and they really like each other. To choose to be patient and kind and not envious, boastful, etc. is easy for wedding couples. They want to live their lives together, always nurturing and giving life to each other.

For the Corinthian church the same could not be said. They were not people who had chosen each other. Indeed, it was not their choice at all to be in community. It was the choice of Jesus. They didn't choose each other, Jesus chose them. And there were people in that church who were as different from each other as the Jewish Peter was from the gentile Cornelius. The same is true of us as a church. Or it should be. We, too, should be people who have not chosen each other, but people who are chosen by Jesus. If we are people who have chosen each other, we are not a church at all – we are a club. If we are truly a church, then we are like the church in Corinth.

And the church in Corinth was struggling with conflict. 1 Corinthians 13 is known as the great love chapter of the Bible, but it could just as easily be described as the great chapter on handling conflict.

If you read 1 Corinthians 12, you will see that the Corinthian church was riddled with infighting about spiritual gifts. Paul responds in 1 Corinthians 13 by saying that spiritual gifts are secondary, by a long way, to love: a love that is patient, kind, etc.

This kind of love is not easy. My own natural inclination – and I suspect this is true of all of us – is to associate with people who are like me. People who share my background and interests and world-view. Doesn't that seem normal and natural? Well, God has been telling me for a long time that this is a character flaw and he has been working on it and changing me. One of the principle ways in which God has been doing this is to place me in a church full of all kinds of different people – people who are not like me – and telling me I have to love them!

When you're placed in a context like this and you have your eyes open, you soon see that there are cracks between us. We are different. And it's uncomfortable. This is true of all churches. And churches have developed three ways of dealing with these cracks. The first, and most common, is to paper over the cracks. To maintain relationships at a sufficiently superficial level that the cracks are never exposed. Only ever to discuss safe topics. So we talk, mostly, about the weather (the universally agreed safe topic for English people). And we have a superficial kind of harmony and a superficial kind of concern for one another's welfare. When we ask, "how are you?", we do not expect people actually to tell us how they are – to say "actually I'm struggling a bit at the moment". We all know that the correct answer is "I'm fine, thank you, how are you?" This kind of pseudo-community is safe and nice and you can find some expression of it in every church. But it doesn't take us where we need to go and it doesn't honour Jesus' new commandment to love one another.

The second way of handling the cracks is disharmony. You can find this in pretty much any church as well. We encounter the differences and then we begin to dig trenches. Factions develop. Entire sections of some churches never speak to other sections. Anger and hatred brew and sometimes explode within church communities. There is something to be said for this way of relating: at least it is honest about the existence of the cracks. But it is even further from "loving one another" than the pseudo-community above and it is deeply destructive.

The third, and by far the hardest, way is the way of love. Not to stop shy of the cracks, to push on and let the cracks become apparent, but to love beyond the cracks. There is only one way to do this: we have to learn the skill of letting go and trusting God. This is extremely difficult because the things we are asked to let go of are deeply-held core beliefs and values. That is the problem – some of our deepest and most passionately held convictions are in conflict with those of other people in our community. This is extremely emotive territory. But this is what God calls us to do: to let go and trust him.

This is what Archbishop Justin calls "disagreeing well" and what he hopes the Anglican church across the world can learn to do. Acts 11 gives us a worked example of disagreeing well. Before the vision on the roof at Joppa, Peter could not have conceived of the idea that the Christian good news might be for the gentiles as well as the Jews. "No Lord," Peter said, "you must have it wrong – I could not possibly eat that food." The same is true of the Jerusalem church. Their world-view was threatened to its foundations by this new idea. Nonetheless, they were able to practice letting go. Peter, one step at a time, allowed the Holy Spirit to guide him into a new understanding. The Jerusalem church were open and willing to listen even though what Peter was saying seemed to verge on blasphemy. And all of them were open to the Holy Spirit. So, in the end, they had all

moved to a new place and were praising God together in unity. Being open, allowing the Holy Spirit to work. Letting go and trusting God.

I remember hearing the former rector of a well-known and very active church tell the story of how God once spoke to him quite clearly and said, “The church needs to stop everything it is doing”. Obviously you want to be sure you're hearing God with such a message, but once he was convinced that God really was speaking, he was bold enough to stand up and announce to the church that this was what they were going to do. After the service, a man came to him and told him how wrong he was – that this idea would destroy all that God was doing, that it could not be right at all. The two men agreed to meet and talk and then to pray together. During their prayer, the other man suddenly looked up and said to the priest, “Oh, yes. You're right. This is what God is saying”. What a dramatic transformation – from conflict to unity. Because they were willing, both of them, to be open and to listen to the Holy Spirit. (The epilogue of this story is that the church did stop everything and God used this time very powerfully so that, when they started up new ministries, they flourished).

But how difficult it is to do all this. To love through the disagreement, no matter how uncomfortable this makes us. How difficult to not give up, but to let go and trust God. But that is what love does: love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Worst of all, this way of loving changes us and none of us want to be changed. I find that it is only when forced to love someone who is different to me that I begin to understand myself, to see myself and my motivations in a new light. Only in this way can I then begin to ask questions about how my core beliefs, how my world-view fits into God's world-view. This kind of love changes us, just as it changed Peter and, later, the Jerusalem church.

I want to conclude by exploring some practical ways in which we might express this kind of love: things we might write down as part of a covenant. Firstly, then, there's an idea I have from a church I know about which has a simple set of things to which members agree when they join (yes, a covenant just like what we've been considering). They have an agreement that no one will leave the church without telling the church they are going. Everyone promises that they will not just walk away, or fall by the wayside, or quietly disappear. This is good for church order anyway, when there are positive reasons to move on. But far more than this, it is a wonderful expression of openness, of letting go and trusting God, when there are hurts which are prompting the move. Needless to say, they leadership of the church need to be full of humility in handling such a situation.

So that's one thing we might think about promising to ourselves, to each other and to God: not to leave without telling someone. Another promise we might make is always to seek reconciliation, not to leave things unresolved and festering. The peace is an excellent opportunity for this. There have been a number of particular times when, during the peace, I have sought out a specific person – even if they happened to be at the far side of the room – and taken them by the hand, looked them in the eye and expressed that no matter what stood between us, I wanted the peace of Jesus for them. I have found that this breaks down barriers and can be very healing. This is especially true because I cannot genuinely wish peace upon someone whilst also doing things that harm them. It's not comfortable, but it is very powerful.

Sometimes, when things stand between us and other people, we cannot, even with the best will in

the world from both sides, do it alone. Sometimes we need the help of other Christians. So the commitment to seeking reconciliation may also mean we commit to asking a mediator to help – not someone who will help us gang up on the other person, but someone who can be impartial.

So that's a second promise we might make: always to seek reconciliation. A third might be to promise to get to know ourselves better. To genuinely reflect on our own motivations. To genuinely entertain the possibility that we might be wrong. To understand what gives power to the buttons other people push in our lives. Just knowing ourselves better can help us to avoid conflict – we can sometimes see that the thing we object to so much is far more about us than it is about the other person. Other times, knowing ourselves better can help resolve conflict. To be able to say to someone else, “This is how I felt, this is why I felt threatened when X happened.” can rob the entire situation of its sting. Often the other person will say, “I never knew you felt that way, I never knew my actions affected you in that way, I will stop doing X.”

So we might consider making a promise to get to know and understand ourselves, to understand our own feelings and our own motivations better. A final idea that springs to mind is that we might promise to associate more with people who make us feel uncomfortable. Where do we sit when we come to worship? We all do this, don't we: we sit with the people who make us feel comfortable. How about mixing it up a bit from time to time and sitting with people we don't know – or with people we do know and who we'd rather avoid. What about our conversations over tea and biscuits after worship? How about deliberately joining a different group to the one usually join for a chat? I love to do this at conferences, especially clergy conferences. The results can be hilarious. I start the first morning session sitting in one place, but after lunch I deliberately sit somewhere else – often with people I don't know – and then I introduce myself to them. It's very amusing when the person “whose seat that is” comes along. Usually there is an uncomfortable pause and then they go and sit somewhere else. Sometimes they challenge me and we have an interesting conversation about unity. And then when they do sit somewhere else, of course, they are displacing yet another person...

So there are four ideas (I'm sure we might have many more as well): not leaving without telling, seeking reconciliation, knowing ourselves and associating with people who make us uncomfortable. Would you think and pray about these? Maybe God is calling us to promise these things to ourselves, to each other and to him. Certainly, if we commit to these kinds of things, our community will flourish and love will grow amongst us – the love of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit which will change the world.