

Our youngest boy, Nathan, has since the age of 4 been a passionate footballer. His football skills have really developed. Initially he was in a team of 7 players on a small pitch playing for 15 minutes each half, and now he plays in a team of 11 on a full-sized pitch for 45 minutes each half. In the early years I watched as 7 children all ran in the direction of the ball. There was no concept of positions on the football pitch. No one was interested in what the other player was doing. But now at the age of 17, Nathan knows that he plays in a midfield position on the pitch. He also knows who everyone else is on the pitch, and what their different roles are in the game. As a football team their success is dependent on every person, how they communicate with each other and how they work together. When issues arise in the team around relationships or differences of opinion, it affects their overall performance.

Now you may know that during the summer, we don't follow a specific teaching theme, but rather we take the readings that the wider Church have allocated for today, and then preach on them. And so, we are in Ephesians 4 and it aligns very well with this idea of team. Like any team, there is diversity when we gather, and that is so important. We are not meant to all be the same – we come from different backgrounds, and different stages in our faith journey, but God desires unity in his church and through that unity many incredible things can be achieved for the Kingdom of God.

If you wonder today why we exist as a Church, you will be wrong if all you think it's about is singing songs, or praying. You may remember that when Jesus was commissioning his team before he would leave them, he said this, (Matthew 28) "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

So the purpose of the Church is to go – that means not being in here, to make disciples – that's evangelising and sharing the Gospel, baptising – notice that's after they have received the Gospel, and finally teaching – that's to disciple people into a lifelong commitment of following Jesus.

Now, there will be many thoughts on how to do that, but there is no doubt that this must be done in unity. I'll give you an example. We are a parish of 2 churches. That means we have one unified vision, but with two worship centres. In St John's we are close to shops and schools, and therefore evangelism can be done in a variety of ways. In Christ Church we are located on a country road, and therefore we must think completely differently about how we reach out to people in our community. How things are done will be different, the people that you reach may be different, but there should be unity within the church when it comes to the need to reach out. All churches at some point will face challenges when it comes to priorities and purpose. Sometimes decisions will be made that not everyone agrees with. Sometimes decisions will lead to disputes. But there is no place for division, and Paul throughout his writings emphasises this and seeks unity.

The passage that we read today is a letter written by Paul to the Ephesians. And it is a church like any other church with its issues. He writes this letter from a prison cell, spurring the Christians in the Church to remember the overall purpose even in their difference. Ephesus is the capital of the Roman province of Asia and a busy commercial port. It was also the headquarters of the cult of the goddess Diana or Artemis whose temple you can still see today as it is one of the 7 wonders of the world. We can read in Acts 19 how the success of Paul's mission to Ephesus has threatened the sale of silver models in the temple so much, that the silversmiths had stirred up a public protest. So, he's writing to believers who are holy because they belong to God, they are faithful because they have trusted Christ, and they have two homes, because they reside equally 'in Christ' but also 'in Ephesus'.

However, in this context, Paul's personality was different to others. Paul and Peter had different views on what they were tasked to do, and yet Paul was in no doubt that even in diversity and difference, the Church could not lose sight of its common purpose. And so in this 4th chapter he now calls upon the church to strive for unity, even when recognising their diversity.

So the question for us today as we think about the role of Church,, is this. How do we ensure we maintain our unity? And so, I would put to you a few observations from the opening verses of our reading. Our unity depends on our character as Christians. At the beginning of this chapter, Paul gives 5 characteristics of the Christian that unity needs to display. They are humility, gentleness, patience, mutual forbearance, and love.

So humility.

None of us will disagree that there is no greater example of true humility than Jesus himself. (Philippians 2 - who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; 7 rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross! Using the football analogy, for some of us, God doesn't want us up front playing the striker role. More than anything he wants us to be humble and keep our eyes on the overall purpose. The opposite of humility is arrogance or pride. As a Church we should never be thinking about what we can get out of something we do to suit our own need. That pride can lead to all kinds of disharmony. When we compare what we are doing over someone else or the Church down the road, that folks is a recipe for disaster. If as a Church we display respect to one another, because we recognise the other person's intrinsic God-given worth, then we'll be promoting harmony in the Church and ensuring that we all understand the importance of each part in the body. We don't need several bodies running around. God wants us to be one body, working together, humbling ourselves in his purpose before him and before each other.

Moving on to Gentleness.

Gentleness isn't a very masculine word is it. It almost comes across as being weak, and none of us want to be walked over. But the Greek word for gentleness was a word used for work animals around a farm. It had the idea of having strength under control. So, it's the characteristic of a strong personality who doesn't let their strength control them, nor use it to control others. Rather it's a strength that's there to serve others. Paul uses the term in

his instructions in 2 Timothy 2:24,25 about how pastors are to deal with those who oppose the gospel, where he says, "And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kindly to everyone, an apt teacher, patient, correcting opponents with gentleness".

So each one of us, if we have given our lives to Christ, have been equipped with spiritual gifts to be used together. But as we discover more about what those are, then we must ensure for God's greater purpose that we use those strengths to serve, in the same way as Jesus came to serve.

You may remember many years ago I led a course called Network which was created by Willowcreek Church in America. It helps people consider prayerfully their giftings and passions in life. In humility and gentleness these gifts will be hugely effective when people bring these in service alongside one another. If their gift dominates over others then there's a problem as it will cause division. So as your pastor I need all of you to work in gentleness with one another using those gifts that God has given to you to compliment one another.

Next there's patience & forbearance.

I was trying to think about how you describe patience to someone over forbearance, and here's the best definition I found. Patience is a longsuffering attitude or peace that comes when waiting or dealing with a decision, while mutual forbearance is the sort of mutual tolerance without which no group of human beings could ever live together in peace for any length of time. I have little in the way of patience, and I can see how my wife Alison definitely has much forbearance towards me. Paul Tournier who was from Switzerland and lived at the start of the 19th century was excellent in his work on pastoral care, and he gave this explanation, "Marriage teaches you loyalty, forbearance, self-restraint, and a great many other things you wouldn't need if you had stayed single." As a Church we all need to recognise that God has not made us identical. And you can be relieved that you don't have to live with me, but in our unity of purpose as Church, we are called to be patient with one another, to recognise that it's in our differences with each other that we can be a far stronger witness to the community around us when we work hard at working together, being patient with each other's diversity and differences.

And so finally Paul lists **love**, which is more of an overarching quality that takes in all the other four characteristics, and I guess actually enables them to be expressed. If we don't start from a place of love for each other, then it is going to be very difficult to walk together in our diversity. Remember the commandment given to us all from Jesus in John 13 that we are to love one another just like Jesus loves us. Think about that for a moment. Think about how far Christ was willing to go in his love for us – even to the point of death. And so as a church we need to strive towards that same love. So that love means also a depth of forgiveness when disagreement arises.

So, there's all 5 characteristics. These will make or break our desire as Church to work in unity with each other. And in each one of us I'm sure we can see where we are lacking and need to improve. If you think you have already perfected these, then you're not being honest with yourself. We all can improve. Why do we need to improve? Well because as we strive for unity together under God, we move closer to spiritual maturity. We learn to be more and more dependent on God; all of us united under his cause and not our own. The danger is that as we grow, we want to become more independent don't we. When we

were young, we were so dependent on our parents for feeding us and clothing us and cleaning us. But as we get older, we soon realise we are not like everyone else, and so we assert our attitudes and behaviours believing that if we are free from others, we will be independent. Culturally we equate maturity with independence, but for us to be united in Christ, then we need to be interdependent. It means we commit ourselves and all that we are, to serve one another. It means that we recognise different gifts and skills in each other which we don't need to be skilled in, but we work with them. It means we recognise that everyone is not like us, and whilst it may not be our style or way of doing things, we recognise that under God the goal is much more about accepting each other, giving freedom for each element of the body to be used, rather than restricting the body because it's not what we like. It means that we unite in moving the Church forward. It means that we put to one side what we want and think of the bigger picture that God has planned for his Church here.

So the end result of our striving for humility, gentleness, our patience, forbearance and love, and our growth in spiritual maturity is actually the words of Verse 15 & 16, that “we will grow , become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

So as a faithful follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, focused on his great commission to go and make disciples, we need every part to be working, and we must be joined together in our unity for growth. Every part needs to be working properly for the body to be built up, otherwise we are like a jigsaw puzzle that has some of its pieces missing, where society never truly gets to see the amazing picture of Christ in us, because we are more interested in what suits us than in serving each other.

So I'd ask as I finish to consider your part in the body today. You might today not have an active role, and if you don't I'd ask you why? Because your age, your ability, or your busyness is absolutely no excuse. Maybe today you feel you can't use the gifts that you have because the Church are currently not doing things in that area. So if that's you, I'd ask you to speak with me, and if your ideas align to our mission values, and that you are walking faithfully with the Lord, then I assure you I will be the first to encourage you to use those gifts to glorify God. And finally you may not think that your role in the body is of any worth or use. If that's you, remember that God needs every part to be working, and so everyone is needed.