

Ephesians 4:1-16
Unity and Maturity
1st August 2021

The letter that St Paul wrote to the Church in Ephesus really sets out what he believes to be God's vision for the world. That alienated humanity, fractured humanity, would be reconciled and reunited with God and with each other and that from this new life there would be a new society with new standards. This society would be the family of God that humanity was always supposed to be, A Holy People, remember last week we talked about the fact that we are Holy because each one of us is set apart for God.

Unity in particular is a very big deal for Paul. I don't think we really grasp just how wide the chasm was between the Jews and the Gentiles. For Jews like Paul, Saul before his conversion, Gentiles were not just unclean, but totally other. They were God's chosen people, the only ones who had access to Him, they wanted nothing to do with Gentiles, could have nothing to do with Gentiles – ever. This of course was entirely their own view of humanity, not God's. Yes they were God's chosen people, but originally they had been chosen to reveal God to the world. But this calling, this purpose had been lost to them. Centuries of persecution and alienation had caused them to become entirely insular and separate. This is why Jesus's interactions with gentiles like the Samaritan woman at the well were so shocking, scandalous and revolutionary. Human beings need to feel they belong, we need to feel connected to other human beings and the way we set about this is to gather together as a group and decide how we are different and better than everyone else. This is how Nationalism works, we are British, these are our values, this is who we are and we are better than you. You are not British, you are Johnny foreigner! Every tribe, every nation does it and seeks to dominate others. This is why in the 21st century there are still wars being fought all over the world.

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God's vision, God's plan for humanity is one tribe, one family, one nation, one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, under one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. And that is who we are, that is our identity in Christ.

Every nation gains a reputation for certain characteristics – sometimes ones they are proud of and deserve, sometimes just how other nations characterise them and affirm their otherness. The French are passionate; the Germans have no sense of humour etc.

This new society is given its characteristics by God and they are:

Lowliness, meekness, patience, mutual forbearance and love. These should be the characteristics that we are proud of and that unite us. Lowliness and meekness really go together and are not weaknesses but great strength. It is not weak to put others first, it takes great strength of character to treat everyone else as more worthy and deserving than yourself. To be patient in all circumstances, to practice mutual forbearance. This is one of my favourite passages in the bible, "you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace". I am not saying that I am very good at this yet, but by God's grace I pray that I am getting better at it. Bearing with one another in love. Not just putting up with each other, suffering each other, but actively loving, making every effort to love each other.

The trouble is that our fallen, alienated natures still pull us back to our old ways, don't they? In the beginning the Church united Jews and gentiles and this new society was born. But straight away people started to make differences and factions and some thought they were better than others. That was the subject matter of many of the epistles, the letters that were written

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to the early Church. And we have been doing it ever since, splitting into denominations, Catholic, Orthodox, Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal and so on. And not satisfied with this, even within our denominations we create factions. High Church, low Church, conservative, evangelical and on and on. And we believe ourselves to be better than others because of the language we use, the music we like, the way we worship. We are not even sure that the *others* are really Christians at all. Sometimes we even dare to mock and deride or to look down on our brothers and sisters, because they love liturgy, or wear robes, or because they are happy clappy. One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all – not just us, but all. How will those who don't know God yet ever believe in His love, if we can't even bear with each other in love? And they watch us and they listen to us and they judge God by our behaviour and the things that we say.

As well as unity, Paul's other big concern is that we grow into maturity in our faith. And to help us to do this God has given us gifts to equip us for the work of ministry and the building up of the body of Christ. John Stott talks about a church he came across where on the pew sheet is listed the Rector's name as John Smith, the assistant Rector as Peter Jones, and then the Ministers as, the congregation. We are all called to minister to others to each other in the church and to the world. What is this ministry? What does it mean? It simply means to share the love that you have received and use the gifts that you have been given to reveal the love of God, in Jesus to the people around you.

For many years I truly believed I had no gifts at all. This wasn't lowliness, meekness or humility, it was low self-esteem which is not healthy and I needed God's healing. Every one of us has been given gifts. In this passage Paul talks about gifts of being an apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, or teacher but this

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list isn't exhaustive, in other places he also talks about many other gifts, hospitality, prayer, wisdom, serving others, generous giving. We tend to think of gifts as being practical or spiritual, but we really must learn to stop making these distinctions – we are spiritual beings, we have God's Holy Spirit in us and as strange as it may seem to some of us, even the gift of administration is a Spiritual gift, especially when it is used to build up the body of Christ. Also, we need to remember that some things we are all called to do, pray, give, practice hospitality, etc but that some people will have a particular gift in one or more of these things. Just because it isn't our particular gift doesn't mean we don't all have to do it.

Paul tells us that we must no longer be children, blown about by every wind of doctrine and people's scheming, but that we must grow up in every way into Christ who is the head of the body. He says we are knitted together by our gifts and that when we are working properly, we promote the growth of the whole body in building itself up in love.

During this week, I would like you to think about, pray about what gifts you think you have. It is also ok to ask for a particular gift. Think about how you can use your gift to serve others inside and outside of the church.

Right now, I would like us to spend a few minutes thinking about what characterises our church and what we need to do as a church to continue to grow in maturity. This is a big question, and we don't have time to fully explore it now, but maybe just start a conversation that we can carry on thinking, praying and talking about.