

12th March 2017

Unity – Fellowship – What it means to be part of God’s family

Reading: Ephesians 1.5-6 and John 1.12

Last week Peter talked about unity in the community, and this week I’d like us to look at unity in fellowship, and what it means to be part of God’s family.

Those who are familiar with the film trilogy ‘The Lord of the Rings’ based on the novel by Tolkien, might recognise these characters:

Aragorn, Gandalf, Legolas, Boromir, Sam, Frodo, Merry, Pippin, and Gimli.

These nine guys make up ‘The Fellowship of the Ring.’

For those who haven’t seen the film or read the book, I’ll give a short plot summary (hopefully without too many spoilers!).

An ancient ring, thought lost for centuries has been found, and through a series of strange events has been given to a small Hobbit named Frodo. It’s discovered that the ring contains dark powers and must be destroyed. Frodo is the one who must make an epic quest to destroy the ring in the fires of Mordor where it was forged. So Frodo becomes the ring bearer and faces a daunting task – the future of civilization rests on his successfully completing the quest.

Frodo is pretty much the size of a child, a meek Hobbit from the Shire, not particularly equipped to make such a venture, but he doesn’t go alone. He is joined by his eight companions. They trek through mountains, snow, darkness, forests, rivers and plains, facing evil and danger wherever they venture. It is a journey involving the powers of good ravaged by the powers of evil.

Despite the brotherhood being forced to physically separate at various points of the journey, and Frodo left only with Sam to complete his mission, the fellowship continues in a spiritual sense. His companions bravely fight off various enemies and distract the dark forces focusing on the ring bearer so Frodo can accomplish the fellowship’s purpose.

It’s a great film, and if you haven’t seen it, I recommend you do!

I wonder how it felt for Frodo, knowing he was up against such a mammoth task, yet at the same time, being carried by his eight loyal companions?

It must have been a huge relief knowing he wasn't on his own, that he was surrounded by friends who were sharing the same journey, people who were prepared to stand by and defend him, whatever the cost, because they shared a common purpose.

I wonder as Christians, in an ever increasing secular world, do we also feel up against a mammoth task? And do we feel supported and carried by our fellow believers? Do we feel that we belong together? Is our fellowship filled with sharing experiences? Is our fellowship about working together in partnership to serve God?

Well this morning was a great example of Christian fellowship. We welcomed our friends from Christchurch on the Mead, Hackney to come and worship with us and shared lunch together afterwards. It's always good to meet up with our sisters and brothers from Hackney, who despite some of their disadvantages and difficulties, are a joyful bunch of people and great to be with.

We may live quite different lives, live in very different places, but we share the same purpose: to love God with all our being and our neighbours as ourselves.

Tom Wright in 'Simply Christian' makes a list of what he believes fellowship means:

- Fellowship is to encourage one another
- Fellowship is to build one another up in faith
- Fellowship is to pray with and for one another
- Fellowship is to learn from one another and teach one another
- Fellowship is to set one another examples to follow, challenges to take up, and tasks to do

I believe for a Christian, fellowship is about being a part of the family of God.

God is our Father and we are his children. We are members of his family.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul says God 'destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.' (Ephesians 1.5-6)

In John's gospel we read this of Jesus: 'to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.' (John 1.12)

When we place our faith in Jesus, God becomes our Father, we become his children, other Christians become our brothers and sisters, and the church becomes our spiritual family. This family of God includes all believers, past, present and future. That's some family to belong to!

So how does it make you feel, knowing you are a child of God and part of his family?

Relationships are important to us human beings— we like to share our lives with others. Being a Christian is more than just believing, it's belonging. Being part of God's family joins us with every other Christian. The church is a body not a building, so wherever we might travel to, nationally or internationally, where there's a church we will always have the opportunity to be part of that family. In Romans 12.5, we are told, 'In Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.'

Our spiritual family will last forever! Learning how to love the family of God is therefore paramount. God wants us to love everyone, but he is particularly concerned that we learn to love others in his family. 1 John 4.21 tells us 'The person who loves God must also love other believers,' and 1 Peter 2.17 tells us to 'love the family of believers.'

Why is this so important?

God has created us to bring us into his family, and he wants every one of us to belong to that family.

Jesus said 'By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another' (John 13.35). So our love for each other is our greatest witness to the world.

Rick Warren believes 'The number one reason God wants us to love each other is so the world will see our love and will want to become a part of God's family too. God wants us to love each other because other people's eternal destinies are at stake.'

So how we relate to each other makes a difference to how others see us.

The disciples were well known for loving each other. In Acts 2.44 we read, 'All the believers met together constantly and shared everything with each other.'

Sharing together is an important aspect of fellowship. We have a choice to share... when we let people into our homes, we let them into our lives. This is a way we can learn to love others. Sharing a meal or having a cup of tea with others is a great way to get to know people better and reinforces bonds with those we know well.

When we meet together, we can encourage one another, as Paul encouraged the Hebrews, in chapter 10 v 25.

Our service here in this church is a chance to build each other up, support each other, and learn from each other. It's a space for us to share with other members of God's family. We can pray for each other and for the whole of God's family together. We can sing and praise God that we are his children.

Rick Warren believes 'real fellowship happens when people get honest about who they are and what is happening in their lives.' I've certainly witnessed this in the home group I lead.

When we 'rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep' (Romans 12.15) burdens can be halved and joy shared. When we share each other's sufferings and problems, we are obeying the commandment to love our neighbour as ourselves. Sharing pain, heartache and hurt brings us closer together and helps us learn to love, and needs the fellowship of trust, confidentiality and a safe environment to work.

Romans 12.10 tells us to be devoted to each other like a loving family. This is true fellowship. Are we prepared to treat every other Christian woman and man as a sister and brother?

Can we apply 1 John 3.16 to our lives?

‘We know what real love is because Jesus gave up his life for us. And so we also ought to give up our lives for our Christian brothers and sisters.’

Fellowship is being just as committed to each other as we are to Jesus.

In Psalm 133 (v1) David proclaims the joy of harmonious relationships:

‘How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity!’

Harmony between Christians is important because it makes the church a positive example to the world and helps draw others to faith. It helps us cooperate as a body of believers as God meant us to. Even if we don’t always agree on everything, the fellowship we have together renews and gives energy to our ministry, and strengthens our purpose to work together for God.

Serving together is another important aspect of fellowship. God never meant for us to serve him alone. We are members of Christ’s body – the church. ‘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.’ (Ephesians 4.16)

As members of the body of Christ we are his hands, his feet, his eyes and his heart. We are God’s instrument on earth and Jesus works through us in the world right now. Part of this work is our being responsible for telling the truth to the world.

By working together we are strengthened and supported, and better equipped to serve others. This fellowship of serving requires a commitment of time, so working as team players can make all the difference. Going out with others to help people in our churches and communities and visiting

those who are housebound or in hospital for example, unites us in our love for God and each other.

So, fellowship is about experiencing life together; loving one another, depending on each other, sharing honestly, serving practically, giving sacrificially. And as children of God we can be certain that we have a special relationship as part of his family, forever.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank you that you have given us the right to be called your children through your Son Jesus. Help us to show your love in our homes and in our communities.

We thank you for the family of the Church and pray that all may find in the church their true home. We pray that the lonely, the marginalised, the rejected and the broken may all be welcomed and loved in the name of Jesus.

And Lord, as we see the brokenness of our world, we pray for healing among the nations; for food where there is hunger; for freedom where there is oppression; for joy where there is pain; and that your love may bring peace to all your children.

As God's children, we thank you 'Abba,' Father. Amen.

