

Life Together (1) A Fellowship of Differents (Gal.3:26-29)

This morning we begin a new series which will take us up to near Easter time. In doing some of the background reading and preparation for this series I personally have been very challenged about what it means to be part of a church. I think some of us will find this series quite provocative - perhaps the most provocative that I have preached. I recognise that we have just finished looking at one of the most challenging parts of the bible in the Sermon on the mount. But if that challenged us in our personal walk with God perhaps this series will also challenge us on what it looks like to be a part of a church community, a body, the local congregation.

As we grow as Christians personally I believe that one of the ways that becomes apparent is in our commitment to body life – to each other. My understanding of the NT is that when people came to a real and saving and transforming faith in Jesus it had implications for how people related to their brothers and sisters in Christ. The closer we get to God the closer is our commitment to each other. As we sang with the children – we are part of the big family of God. In this short series of about six talks we are going to tease out what that looks like in practice. It will deal with relationships for God has made us to be relational beings. We will look at how we can walk side by side with each other through life. When we are followers of Jesus we have two families – we have our natural family and we also have our supernatural family.

Because we are living in a fallen world and we are all sinners we find that both our natural families and our supernatural families are far from perfect, but as the Bible says love covers over a multitude of sins. As we grow in love for one another we find that we are able to appreciate and help one another despite our weaknesses. We also need to realise that from the perspective of eternity we will find the supernatural family becomes more important. The bond of Christ that binds us together grows stronger into eternity while the natural ties weaken into eternity.

This morning I want us to focus on the idea that the body of Christ is a diverse body made up of people of different colours, cultures, tribes and nations. In the Psalms we have read today about the lovely unity that comes from having God as our Father. In Revelation 15:4 we are told that “all nations will come and worship before God”. In Galatians we have just read about Paul’s strong declaration that we are one in Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek (Gentile), slave nor free, male nor female for you are all one in Christ. Now Paul did not mean that we do away with cultural and national identities, or indeed sexual identity but that there is an identity that surpasses all these other ones and is more important.

We are first of all Christians, followers of Jesus when we surrender our lives to him. All the other distinctions should not be a barrier to our fellowship together - they become secondary. Every part of the world has its own cultures and differences and even hostilities. In Paul’s time there was a huge distinction as there is today between those who were Jews

and those who were not. The Christian faith sprang out of Jewish roots and many of the people in the Galatian church were holding on to certain elements of the Jewish faith – such as being circumcised – and saying this needed to be part of the package of being a Christian. But Gentiles, non-Jews said this was not the case. Jesus abolished the need for circumcision, the need to eat and not eat certain foods.

If we hold onto these things as being vital to entrance into the kingdom of God we are replacing faith in the death of Jesus as our means of salvation with some form of works based righteousness. We are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. All other distinctions and differences we can have but they are transcended by faith in Jesus.

This means that if someone comes to faith in India and they dress a certain way because of their culture they do not have to change the way they dress unless it contravenes another principle of sexual immorality. This is the beauty of the Christian faith that it can accommodate to different cultures in terms of how people dress, or what they eat or drink. The kingdom of God says Paul surpasses these things. These are earthly temporal habits which will fall away in the eternal scheme of things and should not be barriers to people coming to know Jesus and serving him.

You see some aspects of muslim faith require women to dress in a certain way and there are regulations for what you can and cannot eat. Some Hindus also are required to dress with turbans and so on. But the Christian faith moves beyond these externals and is more concerned with the matters of the heart. Nowhere is there any description of what Jesus wore, or indeed his disciples. It's just not a concern of the NT and it should not be for us as long as it is not excessively showy or sexually immodest.

As far as Paul was concerned we should not be making distinctions between each other on the grounds of how we dress, or what culture we are from, or what kind of food we eat we are one in Christ. Paul wants to encourage each congregation to celebrate its diversity and yet its unity in the more important matter of faith in Jesus.

Further he does not want us to make distinctions in terms of social class. An aspect of the Roman empire which is not as prevalent in our culture was there were slaves, freed slaves and those who were from the higher echelons of society. Commentators believe actually that large proportion of those early household fellowships were made up of slaves and freed slaves and those of the lower classes. But as well as this you had the lovely mix of those who were from the higher and ruling classes. It was a real mixture.

Romans 16 is one of my favourite parts of the NT because Paul just goes through a list of names of people who have been helpful to him in his ministry. There are males and females and from the names we can discern that quite a number were the common slave names of the day in v.8-10 Ampliatus, Urbanus, Stachys, Appelles. But in v.10 we have reference to Aristobulus who was probably the grandson of Herod the Great and brother of Herod

Agrippa 1st ; and in v.23 we have reference to Erastus the city's director of public works. In the Roman church you had this intermingling at an equal level of slaves, ruling classes and people who held high position in government. Come with me to Luke 8:3 where we have mention of some of the women who supported Jesus and the disciples. There is reference to Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household. Susanna is also mentioned and these were women of means who could support the work of ministry. You see the early church was *a fellowship of different*s (to borrow Scott McKnight's phrase).

You see the point that Paul makes is that once you become a member of Christ's church we are all at the same level – we are all sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters in the Lord. The ground at the foot of the cross is level. There is no-one higher up than another. We come to the cross on the same terms as sinners and we should relate to each other on the same basis as fellow sinners saved by the grace of Jesus Christ. We may come to Christ in different ways and have different stories to tell but we celebrate that.

Within our church fellowship we have some diversity. Now Ballymena has its limits in terms of diversity but as we know over the past ten years there has been an increase in people coming to the town for work from other countries. Some estimates say that 10% at least of the population is from outside N Ireland. It is great to see that during the week we hear Polish and Latvian and Lithuanian and Romanian and other voices in this building. If we were truly reflective of our community then at least ten percent of the fellowship should reflect that.

One of our great strengths as a church is the diversity of old and young, male and female, single and married, employed and unemployed, people from small houses and big houses, employers and employees, traditional Presbyterians and charismatics, introverts and extroverts. Our diversity is to be celebrated and encouraged. My son sometimes goes to a church in Belfast and there is no-one in attendance over 50 years of age. There are churches you can go to and you will not see anyone in them under 50 years of age. We need both. We need to encourage both and celebrate both and interact with both.

As human beings we tend to naturally drift towards those who are most like us and who we seem to have most in common with. That's ok, but we are not just to behave naturally but also supernaturally so we need to make efforts to get to know those who dress differently from us and have different interests because we have something in common that transcends those differences. Thus we may not be able to speak about rugby or golf or fashion or music but we can speak of that which we share – our love for Jesus and what Jesus is doing in our lives. We should hold that in common.

And here is part of the challenge of what we will be unpacking during this series. We know this stuff in our heads but we need to work it out through our hands and feet and lips as what that truly means to celebrate diversity and encourage it and to say we are the body together and that means we will push at some of the natural boundaries a bit that we allow

to build up around us and we grow too comfortable with and we allow the natural to influence the supernatural too much instead of the other way around. For some of us our natural family is everything and we have little time for our brothers and sisters in Christ. There is a wrong balance the other way of course as well – we can be so into the church that our natural families are suffering and Jesus and Paul spoke to that imbalance as well.

But if we are to really celebrate being “a fellowship of different” then how are we doing on this? Some of us will only interact with those we know well and we don’t speak to anyone else. We come in and we go out and we don’t really know who sits in the pew across from us and perhaps we don’t care. But to be the body we are brothers and sisters together. Now I am a realist and a human being so I know there is actually a limit to the number of people we can get to know well and an even smaller number whom we can call our close friends. But somewhere between having those close friends and not interacting at all with people is a balance.

In a large church it is especially challenging getting to know people but it’s also in a sense easier for there are more options. I would hope that by the time this series is over, if it is really doing its work, then people will be talking with different people over coffee, people will stay for coffee who have not before, people will be inviting folks for lunch or dinner and getting to know them. A table is at the centre of so much of Christianity and I don’t mean the Lord’s Table, communion. So much of Jesus interactions with people was around tables and meals because its where you truly get to know them and where so much of the real body life work can be done.

Some of us are introverts and we find this especially challenging but you know when you push through that natural barrier with God’s supernatural Spirit you are enriched. This is one of the ways in which we become a richer and more blessed fellowship. It does not take much, maybe sitting in a different pew so that you are rubbing shoulders with someone different. Getting to know just one more person’s name. You know this is faith in action. This is about being *a fellowship of different*s. My hope would be that we at the end of the series will take part in a grand experiment where we will invite someone we don’t know that well for Sunday lunch. Some of us will invite, others will be invited.

You see as elders some of us have been thinking and praying about what idols may be holding us back. There are the usual suspects of money, sex and power but as I was meditating and thinking during that night the strongest impression of an idol was not what I was expecting. It came to me quite forcefully and it was not what I expected. It was the idol of individualism. Being self-centred, personal tastes are supreme, consumeristic, not prepared to be put out, to be comfortable with everything just as I want it, no sacrifice and no love for others. Scott McKnight in a different book says “*At the core of the kingdom dream of Jesus there is a focus on God’s society – the Church. The dream of Jesus never creates individualism. The dream of Jesus always creates kingdom community...many people*

say they want a genuine community but are not willing to lay down their lives in the pain of relational struggle”.

To go deeper as Christians and as a church we need to celebrate our diversity as a family of believers, but that also involves making little and big sacrifices. The idol of individualism is a big one in western society and it is in the church. We will take this further next time as we look at what it means to walk side by side together and be a real help to each other in church.

But in the mean time we celebrate the fact that the church is meant to be a small foretaste of heaven where all are equal – we are all children of God, brothers and sisters in Him. The more we aim for the diversity in unity the more we are maturing in our faith and the more we display the glory of God through the church. May that happen more and more in High Kirk.