

UNITY IN THE CHURCH

Acts 11:1-18

Jn 13:31-35

There's the little rhyme that says:
‘To live above with saints we love,
Well that will be just glory;
To live below with saints we know
Well that's another story’.

There has always been the challenge in the church for Christians to get along with others who are different.

In Acts 11 we heard about the first time this happened. It was in the very early days of the church. The church had started out as a purely Jewish movement. Jesus of course was Jewish and so were all the 12 disciples. So too were all the early followers of Jesus.

But as the church spread, there were Gentiles – non-Jews – who came to faith in Jesus. The Jewish church leaders were then faced with a dilemma: what was the status of such believers who weren't Jewish? Many of them felt that these Gentiles should first be initiated into the Jewish faith, in order for them to be accepted into the church. For the men that would include being circumcised. Peter was probably the strongest advocate of this view, and the Lord had to work rather radically in him to change his outlook.

The first thing was the vision that Peter has of a sheet being lowered from heaven with all sorts of animals in it, most of them unclean in terms of Jewish food laws. But lo and behold, Peter is instructed to kill and eat these unclean animals. The vision was God's way of impressing on Peter that the Gentiles should not be seen as ‘unclean’ and unworthy of entering the Christian family.

The final evidence for Peter is when the Holy Spirit comes upon Cornelius, a Gentile, just as He had come upon the Jewish believers at Pentecost.

And down the centuries the Church establishment has at times failed to accept the outward differences between people and has insisted that in order to be accepted people need become like those of the establishment.

When British missionaries went to Africa and other places, very often they didn't only take the gospel but also the British culture. And so, the new converts were made to dress like the missionaries and take on other elements of British culture. So today still there are those who feel obliged to dress in a suit and tie to attend church in the sweltering heat of an African summer. We may smile, but there is the danger that we do something similar if we expect people who come to church to dress like us or do things the way we do.

All churches tend to develop their own particular culture, with certain unwritten, but nonetheless definite expectations of those who attend. When one has been in a church for a while one isn't even really aware of them, but people who are new do tend to notice them. Most of those expectations are good, but some of them can be negative.

I read about a certain church where one of the women saw herself as the undisputed queen of the church kitchen. One day a bring and share supper was held but when the supper started one of the newer members couldn't see the salad she had brought. When she went to the kitchen to investigate, she was just in time to see the queen of the kitchen tipping the salad into the rubbish bin. ‘What are you doing?’ she asked. The queen replied, ‘You are new here. You'll soon learn that in this church we only use real cream, not a substitute’. Its difficult to understand how such things can happen, but they do.

But of course, there are even more serious things that have taken place in the church down the ages - dehumanising forms of prejudice and discrimination. For example, racial discrimination, which we know all about from South Africa, but which also occurs elsewhere. Also, gender discrimination against women; or discrimination based on sexual orientation, or nationality, or political persuasion.... and so we could go on.

Paul writes to the church in Galatia, ‘There is now no difference between Jews and Gentiles, between slave and free, between men and women; you are all one in union with Christ Jesus. Jesus puts it like this, ‘A new commandment I give you, ‘Love one another as I have loved you. By this all people know that you are my disciples, if you love one another’

It’s not just about avoiding discrimination; not just about avoiding the negatives; it’s about positively loving others who are different from us. We sang, ‘God loves you and I love you and that’s the way it should be’. But that isn’t always the way it is. It isn’t always easy to put into practice.

What are some practical things that can help us to love others as Jesus has loved us? The first one is that we must know that we ourselves are loved by God. Unless we know deep down God’s unconditional love for us, we are not going to be able to love as we should. In Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son, the older son despises his brother when he returns home. Perhaps the main reason for that is that he has not known and believed the love of his father. John says in his letter, ‘We love because God first loved us.’ We can only give what we have first received ourselves. Quoting John again, he says, ‘See how much the Father has loved us! His love is so great that we are called God’s children. And we ourselves know and believe the love which God has for us.’ (1 Jn 3:1; 4:16)

Together with accepting God’s love, we need to love and accept ourselves too. The second great commandment says, ‘Love your neighbour as you love yourself. If God loves me, who am I not to love myself? If God accepts me, who am I not to accept myself? If I do not love and accept myself it’s unlikely I can do that for others.

With that as the starting point what else can we do to express our love for one another? For one thing we need to let our actions lead our feelings. What do I mean by that? Too often we only show love in a practical way if we feel loving. But love means acting in a loving way even if we don’t feel loving. And often our loving actions will cause the loving feelings to follow. So, let’s not wait to feel loving; let’s act in a loving way and maybe the feelings will follow.

Perhaps you’ve heard about the 5 love languages – 5 ways of expressing love to others. They are time, touch, words, service and gifts. Those are some good pointers for loving others in the church.

Time. Time is perhaps the most precious commodity we have. To give time to others is a real act of love. Especially time to listen – to give focused time and attention to the other person. Really listening is an important way of showing love and respect to others.

Touch. Touch is a powerful channel for communicating love. Jesus reached out and touched those whom others would avoid – the leprosy sufferers and other outcasts. The simple act of shaking someone’s hand or giving a hug is a way of displaying love and respect and care. Obviously physical touch needs to be sensitive and appropriate. If it isn’t, it can be one of the most unloving and destructive things we can do.

Words. ‘Sticks and stone may break my bones, but words can never harm me’. We used to say and hear those words as children, but we know they are totally untrue. Words can inflict deep hurt and harm; harm that can extend through many years. But words can be deeply healing and loving too. In Proverbs we read, ‘How good is a timely word’, and ‘A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver’.

Service. An act of service can be a powerful expression of love. And in a sense, it is a double expression. It is not only about the deed itself but also the time involved – the gift of time I spoke of earlier.

Then gifts. Gifts can be a very tangible expression of love. And its not about the size of the gift – a small gift can be just as effective.

Let me add an important extra one – respect. It lies behind those 5 love languages, but it isn’t limited to them. To maintain unity within the church and the wider Christian family we need respect – respect for other people as children of God; respect for other people’s beliefs and views, no matter how much those views and beliefs may differ from ours.

It seems that as Christians we sometimes feel it is more important to be right than to be loving. We feel we have a right, indeed a duty, to criticise and oppose other people, including other Christians who, in our eyes, are wrong and misled.

On the subject of our beliefs, a wise Christian once said about , ‘In essentials unity; in non-essentials liberty; in all things charity.’ Or as someone else has said, ‘I may be right and you may be wrong; or you may be right and I may be wrong; but if it causes division between us we are both wrong’.

A new commandment I give to you, said Jesus, love one another as I have loved you. By this will all people know that you are my disciples, if you all believe exactly the same. No. If you all worship exactly the same? No. But if, despite any differences, you have love for one another.’