

Belonging together

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 6th June 2021 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31; Mark 9:33-37

Introduction: how do you think of the church?

“What do you need to make a church?” This was a question I asked children at St Michael's School when I spoke to them at class assemblies before half-term. And I got a huge variety of responses. Some children immediately thought of the physical church building and I had answers like “stained glass windows”, or “stones”. Other children thought of the people who did things in the church, and still others came up with words like “kindness”. I then showed them a photo of the inside of our church building without anyone in it, and asked “What's missing?” They all responded “people”.

One of the things that we have perhaps realised even more keenly in the past 15 months is that not only is the church not a building, but church life doesn't need a building to carry on. I'm not just talking about the ability to participate in services online, or the services that we've held outdoors. I'm thinking of the phone calls that have been made, the visits to doorsteps and the socially-distanced walks for fellowship and support. The Church is a community of people who follow Jesus, and who learn to know God, to grow in faith and to show his love to others not just by individual prayer and action but by doing things *together*.

Looking back over past sermons, I found notes for one I preached three months into my new job at Namirembe Cathedral, Uganda, in 2000. Talking with leading lay people in the church, we had identified the need to build a sense of community in that large congregation, and I preached on today's passage from 1 Corinthians 12 as a launch to a three-month programme of sermons on the church as community.

Belonging together

Today's sermon is the first in a series of just four, where we will look at *Belonging together*, *Worshipping together*, *Growing together*, and *Reaching out together*. As our country begins to come out of the restrictions imposed to keep us safe from the Corona virus, I think it's a good time to rethink what it means to be a church. But we have been particularly challenged to look at how we can be a more *intergenerational* church. So what does that mean?

In one sense there is no doubt that we are intergenerational already, as we have people attending services from babies to many in their eighties and nineties. But how often do the toddlers talk to the eighty-year-olds? How often do people from the 8.00 service mix with people from the Family Service? How well do you think the teenagers from some of our church families feel they fit in to St Michael's Church?

Today I'd like to see what we can learn about how the church ought to be from St Paul's letter to the Corinthians.

The Body of Christ

I'm sure we're all familiar with this idea that Paul uses to talk about the church.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. (1 Corinthians 12:12¹)

Paul describes how the human body has many parts, all different and with different functions. Applying this to the church he is saying that each person is important in their own way, and no one should think that they are less important than the people who have the more “up front” functions, such as the clergy, the churchwardens or the choir:

If the foot were to say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body’, that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear were to say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body’, that would not make it any less a part of the body. (12:15-16)

Equally, those who seem to be more important should not forget that the humbler members also have something to contribute:

The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’, nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable. (12:21-22)

Jesus is making pretty much the same point in our gospel reading today, where he confronts the disciples arguing about who is the greatest, and says that welcoming a child is to welcome him.

¹ All quotations are from the NRSV

Now, I'm guessing that most of you are thinking, "This is old hat. We know that some people read, some clean the church, some serve on the PCC, etc etc. It all seems to be working pretty well to me."

And while we think that, the average age of our church is getting older, not just because the regular members are getting older, but because we are not attracting and growing enough younger people to keep the church vibrant and dynamic. We're keeping going because of the tireless commitment of a small number of people who often have more than one role and express their sense of *belonging* to St Michael's in practical ways. And I respect and value their service more than they perhaps realise.

A question of attitude

There's more to Paul's message in this chapter than just telling everyone that they have a part to play. If you read the earlier chapters of the letter, you will realise that the biggest problem for the church in Corinth was not a shortage of people with gifts and a willingness to serve. It was a problem of *attitude*. How did they think about themselves and about people who were different to them? The biggest problem in Corinth was a lack of *unity*, or you could say, no sense of belonging together and needing each other.

They were a diverse bunch, some Jews, the majority were Gentiles, some wealthy, some poor, some slave owners, some slaves. There were also some who thought Paul was great, others who didn't like him and thought Apollos was a much better preacher, and others who looked to Peter as a

distant figure of authority from the mother church in Jerusalem.

The lack of unity or “belongingness” showed itself in the way they conducted both their worship and their social life, as you can read in the second half of chapter 11, which I don’t have time to comment on now.

Disciples Together

In the past few months, the PCC have been reflecting on two documents produced by the Diocese of Oxford. The longer one is a report called [*Disciples Together*](#) and is about how we need a cultural shift in our work with children, young people and families. If you care about the future of our church, I would strongly encourage you to read the report and pray about how we can respond to the challenges that it gives us.

The other document, [*Intergenerational Church*](#), is much shorter, and there are copies to take away today and read.²

To summarise the message of these two documents in one sentence, we need to move from an approach where each age group in the church is catered for mainly in isolation, to a situation where we show our togetherness through worshipping, learning, serving and having fun together. This doesn’t mean we should never do activities in separate groups for different ages or interest, and it is also not just about what we do on a Sunday morning. There’s a whole lot

² Another article worth reading is in Christianity magazine [here](#).

of thinking and experimenting we need to do to find the things that would work in our own church context.

But the place we have to start is in our thinking, informed by reading, listening and praying. That's what this series of 4 sermons is designed to help us do this June.

The message of 1 Corinthians 12

Let's go back to Paul's letter to the church in Corinth for some guidance before we close.

So far Paul has challenged our attitude to ourselves, for example not to think that we have nothing to offer, and to others – not to think that particular people or groups have nothing to offer the church. Now he moves on to show what a right attitude to ourselves and others would look like in practice:

But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.
(12:24b-27)

Here Paul moves on to show that a healthy church will value and honour all its members, and will share in each person's successes and joys as well as in their sorrows and sufferings. I am glad to say that I have seen so many examples of this attitude at play recently, for example in the way we said goodbye to Angela Harper, and the ways in which those who

have lost loved ones recently have been supported, both by kind words and by practical actions.

The challenge that I think faces us is to be able to share the joys and sorrows of people who also belong to this church but whom we never meet. How can we express our sense of belonging together in more practical ways? To grow in our sense of belonging together we will all need to think, pray and then be willing to try something new or different, or even, maybe, to suggest or volunteer to help with or lead a new initiative.

Are you up for the challenge?