

The theme **“Growing Together”**

In the first half of verse 1 St Paul tells us that he is a prisoner in the Lord, meaning because of his faith in Christ, and almost certainly a prisoner in Rome,

In the second half of verse 1 Paul begs us to lead a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called, and St Paul may well have in mind here Jesus’ great commandment. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. And the second is like it: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.””

And in verse 2 Paul commends us to obey these two commandments with humility, gentleness, patience, and love because he wants us to be united in and encouragers of our faith, and it is these characteristics which are likely to be encouraging and to keep us united.

And the final part of that sentence, “Bearing one another in love.” Bearing means caring, holding, enduring, and every relationship, including marriage and the church family requires all three of these attributes plus patience, humility, gentleness, and love if the relationship is to prosper and grow.

But there are times of course when a relationship is under strain due to some unforeseen circumstance or behaviour, and it is at these times when hard decisions may have to be made but let them be made in an atmosphere of love and forgiveness if we are to maintain the unity.

Verse 3 reads, “Making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” And of course, this can more easily be achieved in an atmosphere of humility, gentleness, patience, and love.

St Paul wrote to the Corinthians in chapter 12 verse 13, “For we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body.” We are united because we are all members of the same body.

And St Paul goes on to say, “Whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free.” and now Steven, bishop of Oxford is reminding us, that the body of Christ also includes children and young people who are also baptised into the body of Christ.

Bishop Stephen is asking us to imagine a church community where the generations participate together in all the dimensions of being church; in worship, in making a difference, in fun. A church where all contribute; a place of learning and listening, playing and praying, and sharing together God’s love and activity in the world; and this is a quotation from Bishop Steven’s introduction to his model of an intergenerational church.

We need to remember that in St Paul’s Day there were no large churches, Christians met in each other’s houses where teaching and worship would have been intergenerational,

after all most houses 2,000 years ago probably only consisted of one room where every member of the family worked played learnt and slept together.

Verse 4 and 5 refers to one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, those are the elements that bind us together into one body with God the Father at the head.

Now whereas we have been talking about unity, verse 7 is talking about diversity. Just as every member of our body is united but having a totally different function to perform, so we, as the body of Christ are united in one body but have different gifts, and therefore different functions to perform.

Verse 7 starts, "But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift." Paul wrote for what was for him an essential truth; that every good thing a person has is the gift of the grace of Christ.

At verse 8 Paul quotes psalm 68 verse 18 which describes a king's triumphal return after battle, and who marches up the hill of mount Zion into Jerusalem ahead of all those he has captured in the battle, and for their gratitude towards the king, the population of Jerusalem are showering him with gifts.

But in Paul's letter Paul makes a significant change to the ending of Psalm 68 verse 18, in the psalm it reads, "And **received** gifts from the people. In Paul's letter it reads, "He **gave** gifts to his people."

In the Old Testament the conquering king demanded and received gifts from his people: in the New Testament the conquering Christ gives gifts to his people.

In the Old Testament a jealous God insists on tributes from people, in the New Testament a loving God pours out his love to all his people by giving them the gifts of the Spirit; that indeed is the Good News of Christ.

In verses 9 and 10 St Paul is affirming that the Jesus who walked the earth is the Christ who ascended into heaven, we need to remember that this was early on after the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Christ back to heaven, a miraculous event that still needs to be restated.

In verse 11 Paul describes some of the gifts that Christ bestows following his triumph on the cross, that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors, the word pastor is Latin for shepherd, and some teachers. This list also gives us a clue as to what the organisation of the church was like at that time.

These gifts are to be used for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, verse 13.

Now the definition of an apostle is someone who has been sent by God to proclaim the gospel of Christ, which today can be the ordained as well as lay people, both of whom we have in our church. Prophets, who were mainly itinerant have become rare due to the growth of local parishes who have their own spiritual leaders, in our case John our rector.

There was and still is a place for evangelists, pastors and for those whose ministry is a calm prayerful one in a supportive role.

Verse 14 reads, "We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming."

Children behaving like children is normal, but not so endearing when we are adults. That well-read passage in 1 Corinthians 13, "When I was a child I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways."

And we put an end to childish ways by studying and reading our Bibles and getting to know the true nature of God.

And here at St Michael's we made significant progress in enabling us to become more mature in our faith when we placed our sermons on our website for everyone to read, so that those who come to church could hear and read them and those who couldn't make a service could still read them.

The sermons are there for all of us to read, so please read them and the Bible passage to which they refer.

It is by knowing and understanding the Bible that we can discern the true nature of God and not be deceived by trickery, craftiness, and deceitful scheming.

Regarding deceitful scheming, there are people who try to tell us that you do not have to go to church to be a Christian, and if you believe that you will believe anything. We all need to be taught the true nature of God, we all need spiritual food, we all need to be able to recognise God when we see him. These days of course, due to covid, many people are being taught and receiving spiritual food at home through Facebook.

Our faith needs a firm foundation, based on God's words as found in the Bible and by association with other Christians, not based on a God of our own making or invention; and the best thing we can do for children and young people is to introduce them to the Bible early on.

Verse 15 asks us to speak the truth in Love, love that will make the truth acceptable to the listener, as against the truth that can be aggressive and wounding. or worse still be unspoken.

The last part of verse 15 reiterates that we must grow up in every way into the likeness and imitation of Christ with whom we are joined.

Emma has been asking for volunteers for jobs within the church, and the more volunteers we get the smaller the tasks will be. But in asking for volunteers, we are making it possible for people to grow in Christ, or grow up in faith, because it is in exercising of the gifts of the Spirit to the glory of God that we grow in Christ.

I have noticed people growing in faith who have attended house groups or been church wardens and I include myself in both of those, we all need to get involved in some sort of ministry to be able to grow in faith, and we are never too old or too young to take on a task.

I was about 12 when I was a sides person in my village church and where I was asked to pump the organ for the hymns, every job in our church is an important part of our worship and ministry however humble.

In verse 16 St Paul wrote, "From whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament." The body here is the body of the church of which Christ is the head, and the individual parts are joined and knitted together by every ligament, and St Paul never envisaged that bond to be broken.

Now although we are still united with Christ at the head, we do have different views on how we are to worship which has led to the different churches which are beginning to be brought together through the churches together movement.

And now our Bishop Steven is asking us to think about the issue of children and young people who tend not to be involved in main services of worship and how that issue can be addressed, remembering that every baptised person is a part of the body of Christ.

Rev. John White