

Worshipping Together

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 13th June 2021 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Reading: Colossians 3:12-17 (NRSV)

¹² As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³ Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

¹⁴ Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Sermon for 8.00 service

The story so far

If you were here last week, or if you looked up my sermon on the internet, you'll know that the topic was "Belonging together", the first in a series of four sermons that are intended to help us as a church to explore what it means to be *intergenerational*. Last week we looked at St Paul's well-known passage in 1 Corinthians 12 about the church being the Body of Christ, and each person being different and having something unique to contribute. My

main point, you may remember, was that Paul was challenging wrong attitudes about ourselves and about others. We shouldn't think either that we ourselves have little to contribute, and are less important than other people, or that other people aren't important, and haven't something to contribute. And if we apply this to different age groups, then no one is too old or too young to contribute something to the life of the church which others can share.

Belonging together

So if we all belong to our church, what should this look like in practice? If you belong to St Michael's Church, and the 2-year-old who comes with her parents to the Family Service also belongs to St Michael's, then you and she belong together – both members of this part of God's family here in Sandhurst. But have you ever met each other? And does it matter if you haven't?

I suggested last week that belonging together as a church means more than attending the same service, or even attending church on the same Sunday. It implies that there is a corporate life of our church – it isn't just an institution that puts on some services on Sundays. During the pandemic, there have been several ways in which this corporate life has been expressed, particularly in the ways people have cared for each other through phone calls, socially-distanced walks, the distribution of simple gifts and letters at Christmas and Easter and practical acts of service.

And of course, when there isn't a pandemic on, we have social events, which are a great way of meeting others you don't regularly worship with. I think that if we want to develop our sense of community, we need to take the opportunity to get to know others from our church at social events. And there are 2 coming up on my garden which you're invited to!

Worshipping together

But this week I want to tackle the question of worshipping together. We had a little flavour of this during July and August last year, when we re-opened the 9.30 service and several of you from this congregation worshipped with us, either in person or online. But now we're back to 3 main services on a Sunday morning, plus some in the evening, and most people know what they like and stick to it.

Clearly there are advantages in doing so. We do sometimes have children attending this service, but I can't say that a Book of Common Prayer said communion would be the first thing I'd recommend to a family who asked me to baptise their child! Children certainly can learn to sit still and be quiet when they have to, or want to, for example in assembly at school. But what they are being asked to listen to in that situation is geared to their experience and level of understanding. Children learn best by hands-on methods of learning, rather than by just listening and taking it all in.

But then again, a lot of adults learn better by interactive forms of learning. Visual aids, discussion, making something or solving a problem in a small group works for people of all ages. I have seen people make huge strides in their faith and in their enthusiasm for God through taking part in a course in a small group setting.

What is worship?

However, worship is not principally about learning. And it's certainly not just following certain rituals and repeating particular words. These can be aids to worship, but worship itself is about coming close to God, showing him our respect, appreciation and love. We can do this on our own, but we come to church to do it

with others, and when we share in worship together we grow closer not only to God but to each other.

Colossians

So let's have a look now at what St Paul wrote to the church at Colossae.

You might well have wondered at first why I chose this passage for a sermon on worship. After all, most of the reading seems to be instructions on Christian behaviour:

¹² As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³ Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

But now think about the context. This is part of a letter from Paul to a church. He's addressing relationships within that Christian community. The letter presupposes that this is a group of people who see each other at least once per week for worship, and maybe at other times too. Paul had never visited Colossae – the church had been founded by his co-worker Epaphras. But he had a pretty good idea that in any Christian community there were going to be people who saw things from different points of view, different personalities who found it hard to get on, and undoubtedly some misunderstandings or thoughtless words and actions. And we all know that conflict can arise between the generations.

And so Paul reminds them that they belong to *one body*:

¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body.

He follows this by encouraging them to celebrate their unity in their worship together:

¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.

There's a clear sense here that people are sharing with each other in their times of worship, not all sat in rows facing the front and passively receiving, as we are rather accustomed to do in many of our services.

Intergenerational worship

Now I'll admit that Paul doesn't here explicitly talk about all-age worship. But in the verse just before our passage he says that in Christ the distinctions between Jew and Gentile, slave and free don't matter anymore. Everyone is equal in God's eyes. So I think it's not unreasonable to say that old and young are also equal to God. I can tell you that I have heard some very profound things said by children in all-age services I have led here. And the hearts of adults have been delighted by seeing small children joining in the worship by dancing along to the music, or banging tambourines.

Involving children in worship doesn't mean we only sing lively songs and make a noise. Both children and adults can learn to experience the presence of God in stillness. I know I still have a lot to learn about helping children to tune in to God – and helping adults too. Worship is not entertainment.

So how can we get better at intergenerational worship here at St Michael's? I think we all need to put our minds to this, and hold it in our prayers. Children grow in faith when they sense that they belong to the Christian community, and to belong they need to spend time with other members of that community. There's certainly value in having activities specially for children, but if that's all they experience they will never really believe that they

are part of the church community. There is much we can learn from children, and they also can benefit from getting to know older members of the church.

We're not about to abolish the separate services and just have one jolly all-age service every week. But I do want us to try new ways of worshipping that involve people of all ages. Maybe this will just be once a quarter, or once a month. I'm open to suggestions. And I'm hoping that people from all congregations in our church will be willing to try something new.

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, you taught your disciples that we have to become like children to enter the Kingdom of God. Thank you for the family of your church, which includes people of all ages and all backgrounds. Help us in our church to learn how we can live out our calling to be your Body, in which everyone has a place and all can give to, and receive from, each other. Amen.