



The Anglican Parish of Whangaparaoa Peninsula
3 Stanmore Bay Road,
Whangaparaoa, Auckland, N.Z.
www.ststephenswgp.org.nz

Sermon

Unity in Christ

Ephesians 4:1-10

30th August 2015

© 2015 The Revd Ian Hardcastle

We have reached a watershed in the letter to the Ephesians. Do you remember when we started I explained this is a letter of two halves?

Chapters 1-3

Adoration
Belief
Experience of Christ
Worship & Witness
Saved by

Chapters 4-6

Application
Behaviour
Example to others
Walk & Warfare
Saved for

In real grammatical terms the separation is:

Indicatives

Imperatives

That is the case. The first 3 chapters are full of indicatives – “this is so, that is so.” Statements of fact and theology. There is only one imperative which is “remember.” But in the second half we find many commands and instructions.

Someone objected that I had not provided a practical application of the theology in an earlier sermon. That was consistent with the text being explored. Now we reach the portion of the letter when Paul starts to apply it all to Christian living and how the Church operates.

V1: As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.

Paul writes to them as one who is in prison for the faith. That gives him a certain right to speak; a certain credibility – he is suffering for the faith he professes and teaches. Based on the theological platform he has built so far, he tells them to live a life worthy of their calling. The real expression is to walk worthily. That word, “walk”, is a key word in this second half:

- 4:1 I urge you to **walk** worthily of the calling you have received.
- 4:17 **Walk** no longer as the Gentiles **walk**.
- 5:2 **walk** in love
- 5:8 **Walk** as children of light
- 5:15 Be careful how you **walk**, not as unwise but as wise.

How do you define walking? What about this: “To take one step at a time in the right direction.” Now to walk takes balance. We have to learn to control our muscles so we can balance as weight transfers from one side to the other and from front to back. We swing weighty legs and arms around and keep ourselves steady.

Paul says we are to walk worthily of our calling. Apparently, the Greek word “worthily” has a root in the balancing of scales. Worthy is about fair measure and justice. Walking worthily is balancing our calling to be in Christ with our responsibilities of a Christian. Our lives need to match our profession of Christ. Through these next three chapters, Paul will lay out for us that balanced or worthy walk in Christ.

Unity

Some say unity in Christ is broken and lost. Others say that we are all one in Christ Jesus. What is the truth? I listened to David Pawson teaching on this passage and he says both. Our essential unity in a gift in Christ from God that cannot be broken. However, our practice of unity can be lost and can be regained.

You may remember the plan for Church Union in the 1960s. It was intended to join together Presbyterian, Congregational, Churches of Christ, Methodist and Anglican denominations into one and in the end it did not succeed. I remember well our curate saying, we strived to achieve union and we failed. Then God sent renewal in the Holy Spirit and gave us unity instead.

When the local pastors meet monthly for prayer – we have a good unity in Christ. And let me commend Pastor Joe Josef in particular for his strong commitment to taking a lead in building the depth of relationship and honour between us.

What does congregational unity look like? It is easier to see perhaps times when it breaks down. When the opposites apply. I guess we can remember instances of people showing self-centredness, harshness, demanding their own rights etc.

However, as I cast my mind back over the years I have been here, I want to compliment you on some examples of congregational unity:

- There was the adoption of the plan for this building and raising the rest of the funds to achieve it. You had come through difficult waters but you found a good way to go forward and committed to it.
- What about the enlargement of the Op Shop last year with the vestry singing – singing! - the Gloria after the vote!
- Your picking up of the challenge to employ another staff member, voting for it and committing to the funds – which resulted in Tony starting with us last year.
- Your touching response to +Given when he visited when you gave \$4000 that week and then supported his ministry so strongly in the three years since.

These are just some of the times when unity has been to the fore.

V2 Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.

Practising unity in the fellowship requires: humility; gentleness, patience, forbearance.

Humility

The word was originally low-mindedness and grovelling servility. But Christians redefined it to mean the humility of Christ in contrast to the high-mindedness admired by pagans. It is to see yourself as God sees you – a true appraisal. To show humility requires that we renounce self-centredness.

Gentleness

To be gentle is not to be weak. Think of the gentle giant. Gentleness is about controlled strength. I find it fascinating to hear Shamus talk about his work in designing prosthetics. He was telling me about helping those with Cerebral Palsy. He explained that their violent movements result from the fact that some muscles do not get any signal from the brain. Our controlled movements are because we use opposing muscles at the same time to produce a steady or slow movement. Without the opposing muscle the limb lashes wildly. To be gentle requires controlled strength. If we are to be gentle with one another we need to be self-controlled and renounce harshness and violence.

Patience:

Patience is not taking revenge. We use the term short-tempered. This patience is long-tempered! Do you like that word? Long-tempered. Being slow to anger. We need to renounce the tyranny of our own agendas.

Forbearance

Do you remember Miranda's mother, with her repeated line, "Bear with..., bear with?" It is more of an English idiom than a NZ to say, "Bear with me while ...". Perhaps we can express it more colloquially as "put up with one another." For that we need to renounce our own rights.

In Love:

All this is to be in love. Not an emotion but a positive act of the will.

You may think this is being a doormat. But this is not subservience, it should not result in allowing others to be selfish and irresponsible. Love seeks justice and cares enough to confront. Paul says in Eph 4:15 that we are to speak the truth in love. If you think the life Paul describes is passive and weak, note his assertiveness in instructing converts to imitate him and rebuking Peter when he withdrew from table fellowship with gentile Christians. There was tough love.

Unity in Christ

Unity is not absolute – it is unity in Christ. The goal is not unity itself but unity in Christ. That comes from a shared faith and knowledge of Christ. The Church and its unity are always defined by our understanding of Christ and God – by our Christology and theology.

This understanding is summarised in the terms: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and father of all. God is over all and through all and in all. Christ is above all and fills all.

V3 Keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Paul says we are to make every effort to do this. We have it in our NZPB main liturgy. I met Bishop Brian Carrell recently and he mentioned that it was he who introduced those words into our liturgy when he was on the Prayer Book Commission. Do you ever think about them when we say them?

If we are to make every effort, what does that mean for how you treat others? What does it mean for how you respond to others when you are offended?

One commentator wrote, "Peace is the clasp which ensures that this God-given unity will not fall apart."

Foundation of Unity

Having looked at the practice of unity, Paul turns to the foundation of our unity. This is a foundation we can never lose. It is arranged in three sets based on the trinity and shows seven facets.

V4: There is one body and one Spirit--just as you were called to one hope when you were called--⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Realisation of Unity in the Spirit

There was in that day a visible unity of Jews and Gentiles in the same church.

One Spirit indwells this one body. By him the body lives and breathes. The Spirit is its soul – apart from him it cannot exist – how could there be two bodies with the same breath?

Paul says literally, "... you were called to one hope of your calling..." This is the hope of sharing Christ's glory at the end of the age.

Focus of Unity in the Son

V5 "one Lord, one faith, one baptism..."

There is one Lord who is the sole head of the Church. Believers cannot call anyone else Lord – even to escape death. There is one faith which recognises that Christ is Son of God and saviour of Mankind. There is one baptism which is the external seal of incorporation into the Body of Christ. Baptism is recognised across denominations: we are baptised into the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, not into a denomination.

Source of Unity in the Father

V6 “One God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”

Paul was probably thinking of the Jewish Shema when he wrote this: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” One God - not many as in pagan culture. The God who is father of all: by creation and particularly by redemption.

He then develops the third point with another 3-fold structure: the Father being:

- over all (reigning in transcendent sovereignty)
- working through all in his creative activity;
- dwelling in all by his immanent pervasiveness.

Our unity has this solid foundation of the unity of the trinity, the incorporation into one Church and the commonality of our salvation.

Think of your family relationships with your siblings or amongst your children. Brothers & sisters can lose their peace, but they remain brothers and sisters. They will live in the same house they have one father.

That is the unity we can't lose - but you need to make it apply in our relationships.

Diversity

But there is Diversity in Unity:

V7 “But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.”

Now we come to the individual and grace being apportioned. Remember that grace is God's unmerited favour. It is his generosity not because we deserve it but because he chooses to give. Last week Peter retold the parable of the workers in the vineyard. Remember those who worked all day got their agreed wages. Those who were taken on in the last hour got the same wage. Not fair – no it isn't: it is generous; it is grace.

There is difference here. There is diversity. We shouldn't be surprised at this. God's unity is not uniformity. A tree is a unity it has common sap yet no two leaves are identical. No two trees are the same; no two people are the same. God is only one who can perfectly combine unity and diversity.

The diversity, Paul introduces now is of gifts given. John Wimber quoted the term gracelets for the gifts. They are little expressions of God's grace. We don't earn them, they flow from his generosity.

No one gets all the gifts. Christ dispenses them as he decides.

Now in verse 8, Paul quotes a portion of Psalm 68, to express the idea of Christ distributing gifts. The imagery is of a conquering general returning with captives and booty from the battle. The custom was to distribute some of the booty as gifts to the people. Here he sees Christ returning from the triumph of the cross leading captives and giving gifts to men.

We have heard that Paul tends to wander off into related ideas and here he explores the idea of the Ascension being related to the incarnation. That Christ first descended to earth and then returned to the highest heaven where he fills, literally, all. We have read that the Father is in all, and here we learn Christ fills all.

Next week we will explore what Paul has to say about the ministry gifts he gave to the Church.