

St Paul's Beckenham, Sermon, 19 February 2023

Why do we aspire to unity?

Romans 12:9-21

This week we are continuing in our sermon series looking at why we do what we do: why we receive the sacraments; why we teach the scriptures; why we serve; why we use our gifts. This week we reflect on why we aspire to be one.

We'll be focusing on this extraordinary passage from Paul's letter to the Christian community in Rome. First though, we zoom out to the big picture.

To creation, the garden in which we walk at peace with God

We recall our human identity and purpose

To rule as servants

as God does

to keep the earth

and all that is in it

we live in harmony with one another

We look ahead

to the heavens and the earth renewed

the settled peace

of the rule of God

at last

uncontested

the garden city in which God once again dwells with humanity

and once again live in harmony with one another

This is the end to which the creator, redeemer God is working

This is the rule of God inaugurated by the Christ

And we see in our reading from John's gospel, Jesus' prayer for us, his last prayer before he is betrayed to death: that we may be one, extraordinarily that we may be one as he and the father are one.

It is God's purpose for us

that we should be one – with one another and with him

and it is the work of Jesus the Christ to achieve this

in his life and teaching

in his cross and resurrection

in his ascension and outpouring of his Spirit

It is God's intention that we be one in Christ

It is God's purpose for us

It is Christ's work for us

It is the Spirit's work in us

We aspire to be one in Christ, because it is God's purpose for humankind.

We aspire to be one in Christ, because it is Jesus' intention that, in him, we should be one.

Why do we aspire to be one?

Because

Paul writes to the Romans

Is God the God of Jews only?

Is he not the God of Gentiles also?

He turns to the Jews and says you cannot boast of Torah

And to the Gentiles you cannot scorn this vine into which you have been grafted

We all are saved only by our allegiance to Jesus the Christ

This is the long argument of chapters 1 to 11

That the work of Jesus is reconciliation

Between us and God

And between us

one with one another

across ethnicity

across nation

across status

across sex

The world is divided into them and us

But Jesus does away

with racism

he does away ethnic conflict

he does away with nationalism

with class and status

with sexism

We aspire to be one in Christ, because it is God's purpose for humankind.

We aspire to be one in Christ, because it is Jesus' intention that, in him, we should be one.

We aspire to be one in Christ because in him the old divisions of nation, race, class and sex are broken down.

And now,

here in chapter 12 of Romans

we find the way of life of being one in Christ

if you're not already there, please turn with me to these verses in Romans 12.

This is the great *'therefore'* to all that has been accomplished by God in Christ. As we have been reconciled with God. As the barriers of nation and race have been broken down. As it is by allegiance to Christ alone that we are made right with God. As we have been made One in Christ. *Therefore* live this way. Take up this way of life.

And when we read these verses, which one of us is not daunted. I fear that no sermon can do justice to these verses. Each phrase demands much of us. Each one commands an hour-long sermon. Each one a lifetime's reflection, a lifetime to be transformed; this transformation is the true worship God desires.

Let love be genuine says Paul in verse 9
Love one another with mutual affection, he says in verse 10
and in the next chapter at verse 9, love your neighbour as yourself
and not just one another, nor even just our neighbour, but also our enemies
in verse 14, we are to bless our persecutors,
in verse 20, to bless our enemies

We have seen before that when Jesus (and Paul) say love one another
they do not have in mind a sentimental feeling
but mean 'act for the good of one another'
Love one another, act for the good of one another
act for the good of your neighbour as much as you act for your own good
do good to your enemy even.

This is the way of life to which the gospel of Jesus Christ calls us
a way of life utterly transformed, and transformational
a reordering of our priorities
the gospel of Jesus Christ does not permit us to carry on as we have been with a few lifestyle
tweaks; it demands a reordered way of life

Act for the good of one another.
Especially across divides of nation, race, status and sex.
here in our community in Beckenham let us act for the good of one another
live in harmony with one another.
And looking further afield:
act for the good of your sister in famine-hit East Africa
your brother in flooded Pakistan
your neighbour in low-lying pacific islands
we act in love to make changes to how we live so that we cease to do them harm
how we travel and how far
what we eat
what and how much we buy
how even we heat our homes
as an act of love for the good of our brothers and sisters in Christ
for our vulnerable neighbour.

And there is a progression in these verses outwards
Love *one another*
Love your *neighbour*
Feed your *enemy*
Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Act for the good of your neighbour, in your neighbourhood, in
your workplace, at the sports club.
So far as it depends on you live peaceably with all. An ambitious work colleague perhaps. A
difficult family member. So far as it depends on you live peaceably with all.
Bless those who persecute you, says Paul.
Who are your persecutors?
In Rome, and in many parts of the world today, a persecuting government.

Perhaps at the office. Perhaps in your neighbourhood. Perhaps on social media.
Bless those who persecute you.
If your enemies are hungry, feed them; who are your enemies?
Another nation, perhaps one with whom Britain might go to war?
Love your enemies.
If your enemies are hungry feed them.
Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

This is the way of life to which the gospel of Jesus Christ calls us
To seek the good of one another
our neighbour
our enemy even
as much as our own.

It's a way of life that doesn't make sense
if we're hanging on to the promise of the world.
It doesn't bring us greater wealth or more power.
It doesn't bring us what is rightfully ours.
Or security, comfort and ease.

It's a way of life in fact that makes sense
only when we remember
we follow the one
who himself came not to be served but to serve
to make peace
to give himself in love for us.

It's a way of life which overcomes division
which brings peace

It's a way of life which creates the possibility of putting aside war.
It's a way of life with the power to overcome climate breakdown.
To bring reconciliation to broken lives and broken relationships.
It is a life transformed and transformational.

This the life of the church now
to live now
one in Christ
as one day it will be fully when God makes all things new
when his rule at last is full and uncontested.

Do not be conformed to the world, says Paul,
but be transformed.

We aspire to be one in Christ, because it is God's purpose for humankind.

We aspire to be one in Christ, because it is Jesus' intention that, in him, we should be one.

We aspire to be one in Christ because in him the old divisions of nation, race, class and sex are broken down.

We aspire to be one in Christ, because the way of life he calls us to is utterly transformational.