

Ephesians 1:3-14

3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. 4 For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love 5 he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— 6 to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. 7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace 8 that he lavished on us. **With all wisdom and understanding, 9 [God] made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, 10 to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.**

11 In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, 12 in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. 13 And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, 14 who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.

Unity under Christ

Ephesians 1:3-14

[God's will] to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

Unity, or lack of it has become an extremely relevant issue in our present social and political climate. The general sense of this verse is that as we continually pray that God's Kingdom will come, all things will be brought to completion in Christ. So we pray for an increasing unity and purpose for all people because that is God's hope, and I use hope because God gives us the freedom to make other choices. Since Brexit and now the pandemic have become the main issues of the day, there's been deep division in our nation over those and other problems, even the Union of the 4 countries itself. The unfortunate result being that if I believe a particular thing to be right there will be someone else who thinks I'm stupid. And of course I'm tempted to think the same about them. Look at social media, particularly Twitter or Facebook, or the tabloid press, and you will see it. We seem as a nation to have become entrenched in our opinions and unable to engage intelligently and agree to disagree. There's black or white but no grey. And this has resulted in a blindness and an inability to see real moral corruption when it stares us in the face. Some have called it the 'footballification' of politics. In other words, supporting our 'team' whatever they do, even if it's quite clearly wrong.

This trend was most noticeable during the Trump presidency. As an example there was an LBC presenter, Maajid Nawaz, this week arguing on the basis of a scientific study by Carl Heneghan, a professor of medicine at Oxford University, that masks are not effective against Covid. One of his callers simply told him he was wrong and stupid. His response was *not* to argue back but to plead with people not to do this, but to listen to each other respectfully and at the very least agree to differ.

Again this week, the England football team were praised for their persistence in standing up against racism despite vitriolic abuse, but also for the way they approach the game itself. Their manager Gareth Southgate is putting into practice a philosophy based on more than just football tactics, using his prominence to work for a better society. He wrote this in a 'Letter to England': 'It's [the players] duty to interact with the public on matters such as equality, inclusivity and racial injustice, while using the power of their voices to help put debates on the table, raise awareness and educate.' Quite a few of the team have done work against racism and food poverty, and raised money for the NHS and for children's welfare. Marcus Rashford and Jordan Henderson have both been awarded the MBE.

It remains to be seen if this results in success on the field tonight!

Now you may wonder how all this is relevant to the church.

Well, sadly the churches have been past masters at this from nearly the beginning. Jesus prayed before his crucifixion for the unity of all believers, who then went and invented denominations.

There are hundreds of them now worldwide, in direct opposition to Jesus' prayer. In reality churches struggle to live in unity, because we so often believe that the way we do things is right, and people who do it differently are wrong. Not to say that we can't discern right from wrong, just that we cannot recognise that we might be the ones who are wrong and others might be right. And that there are different ways to worship which are *equally* good. St Paul here is writing to encourage the church at Ephesus to be true to what God has always had in mind, **[God's will] to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ**. What struck me here is his use of **all**. God wants to bring unity to **all things** in heaven and earth. Not just the church. Because whatever we believe, even if you're an atheist, really doesn't affect whether or not God exists and loves you or not. The gospel message is for all people because God created and loves all people, and wishes for them to know Him. That's something which has increasingly become clear to me, that the church has a prophetic role in the world, of speaking God's word to everyone, whether they accept or reject it. This can seem like a massive responsibility. But it's also a privilege, and one which the church in Paul's time took very seriously. It's primarily due to their groundwork in the first century that the message eventually went out to all the world.

And of course Paul is writing from the prison where his preaching of the gospel had landed him. That message is still rejected today as unacceptable, and often criminalised, as it was then.

John the Baptist paid the price for his prophetic ministry as we heard. But whatever we believe, it will be better to be in unity under Christ, because in time it will be the reality for all of humankind that *every knee will bow to Him* (Philippians 2:10). This is what many find unacceptable. In fact the work of Satan is to convince us that it's a preposterous lie.

How then should we live as followers of Jesus in the face of all this, in the light of the biblical teaching that all things will be brought into unity in Christ? I think it affects the way we behave in every detail. If we're to be prophetic as Jesus was, we need to be challenging by our actions the idea that unity is not important, by the way we are as church, because our very civilisation will collapse without a sense of unity and *belonging*. We've learnt during lockdown that there is a deep need to be together, to celebrate together, to create together, to create community, all things we have lost in the last year.

This is the positive lesson we need to take from it.

Brené Brown in *Braving the Wilderness* says this about her research: *“Over and over, [people] talk[ed] about their concern that the only thing that binds us together now is shared fear and disdain, not common humanity, shared trust, respect, or love. They report[ed] feeling more afraid to disagree or debate with friends, colleagues, and family because of the lack of civility and tolerance.”*

The values of Jesus are the complete opposite of this.

The gospels and the New Testament, as we all know, are full of the idea that we should love and respect the needs and feelings of others;

that we should show humility in our attitude, that we should make ourselves vulnerable, and be accepting of others as they are and not as we might wish them to be. That we should seek to serve and not dominate. That we should be affirming and encouraging and not critical or judgemental.

Relationships are the foundation of a healthy society and must be reciprocal. In other words we cannot act as independent individuals with concern only for ourselves, or even just for our families, or even those we decide are important to us. It has to be much wider than that. In a global community we have to be interdependent and not independent, as individuals or as nations. The direction of our society at the moment, in the behaviour of many of our leaders and people held up as role models, is the direct opposite of this.

So the gospel message of unconditional love and forgiveness, of faith in Jesus, has to be the foundation of a healthy society as well as a healthy church. I'll finish with Paul's words of affirmation to us as a church.

you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory. Amen.