Visitation 2024

A reading from the letter of Paul to the Colossians (3:12-17)

As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. 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. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. 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. 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.

Address

It may come as a great surprise but sometimes relationships, even in churches, can be difficult! Sometimes people fall out, sometimes they don’t treat each other nicely. And let’s be honest we will all have had people who we find it difficult to really get on with. And I think it’s a comfort to see that this is something that has happened since the earliest times of the church, and I guess that’s because it has something to do with human nature!

So Paul in the reading we heard (Colossians 3:12-17) was addressing some issues about how to be together as a family. And I want to pick out 3 parts from the reading.

Firstly, there are the straightforward lessons about how to treat each other. If we’re talking about dealing with people these ideas aren’t radical. Compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience, and then if all else is failing, bear with one another! Relationships in churches and between churches are incredibly important, not just in making things easier in the life of the church but in our witness to people outside who are often interested and watching.

At the end of last year the Diocese launched a Culture Guide. Some people wondered why it was needed but it was offered as a constant reminder of the importance of thinking about how we treat others in our churches and in the wider communities. If you haven’t had a look, it’s worth it. There is also a course that can be done in small groups based on the guide.

Ministry Areas are developing well in most places, but they’re not without challenges and working together across churches is essential to continue to build them. But it’s not just essential as a practical, structural need. It’s essential because God calls us to be one body, united, and this reading reminds us that we’re not called to be individuals doing our own thing, but a family enjoying the privilege and the joy of helping to do God’s work…

In the busyness of our churches always remember we’re about relationships, we’re about doing those things that Paul mentions in this reading.

Second, and building on that, the reading says, ‘let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts’. **This isn’t about ‘just us’ at all, but it is about us**! The peace of Christ is about knowing and being confident of God’s love and presence. It is about knowing where to turn in good times as well as more difficult times but I think it’s also about the recognition that we’re called to be God’s people.

All of us as Christians have a story to tell. For some it may be of a dramatic conversion, for some it will be years of faithful prayer and worship, and/ or years of dedicated church attendance and so much work… But so many joys in life and hopefully in church. But do we know our stories, can we try to explain that peace of Christ… Because that’s important. It’s important for us to know what we believe, what we feel. If we’re just assuming a faith in God which isn’t really much tested then who knows what will happen if life suddenly throws something at us… Will we know how to connect to God at that point?

Knowing our faith is important, asking questions is important, and that’s one of the great advantages of small groups and opportunities like that. But knowing our faith is important for others, because telling our story, dramatic or not, might be an incredibly powerful witness to someone who needs to hear it. If we don’t know our story, opportunities to share the greatest news the world has ever known with a family member, a friend, a colleague, anyone, might just slip by…

So, think about the peace of Christ and how we are growing in our faith whether we’re a new Christian, or someone who has been a Christian for decades. Last week I did a Mothers Union retreat in Llangasty and I spoke about a neon sign in Liverpool Cathedral by the contemporary artist Tracey Emin. It simply says, ‘I felt you and I knew you loved me.’ When have we felt God most in our lives? When do we seek him most? Could we tell our story of faith if someone asked?

‘Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts..’ wrote Paul. What is that peace for us? Where do we feed that peace? And peace I think comes from finding time to be with God, in quiet places perhaps, in fellowship and also I think in serving others - true peace doesn’t allow us to be totally insular and look only at ourselves.., we need to be aware of the needs of others too and be part of responding to those needs in whatever way we can.

And finally, let the word of Christ dwell in you richly… with gratitude sing psalms, hymns, spiritual songs to God… and whatever you do in word or deed, do it in the name of Jesus giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Again, we’re building on the last point. This is pretty lively stuff! We’re being reminded that faith isn’t a burden that we carry involving all kinds of difficult roles in churches and meeting lots of people, some of whom we might even find quite difficult at times. The word of Christ reminds us that the Christian faith is built on love and fuelled by joy and hope and peace….

Church life has all kinds of practical things for us to do. They need to be done but underlying all that we do has to be the knowledge that we’re doing it for God. We’re doing it as part of an incredible privilege – being called to serve by God… I recently read an article about volunteers and the challenges of finding volunteers in anything now, but this made the point that we’re not called as volunteers, we are called as disciples of Jesus…

So let’s think a little bit of those practical things – I am an archdeacon after all! The first is to thank you for the work that is being done. Ministry areas are still in their early days really, but the development in most places has been positive. There are certainly challenges to be faced, but there is an increasing willingness, even desire, to work together and support one another. That is enormously positive. We are, after all, one church.

Something that has caused considerable questions has been the membership app. I’m pleased to say that this is now being done by most places, and where it isn’t please can we make a start soon. The diocesan office are really pleased to offer support if that’s needed. Don’t be afraid to ask. There are a couple of reasons for doing this – firstly, the very practical reason is that the Church in Wales have asked that this be done, and they give our diocese a considerable sum of money each year which may end up being dependant on this being done.

But perhaps more importantly, we all need to know where we are in terms of numbers as a church – this information was always needed and previously part of the annual returns. This is, when we get used to it, a much more simple and easily analysed system which allows all of us to see where things are, so please make sure this is being done and if you need help and support to do it, please ask.

People say numbers aren’t important but that’s wrong. They’re not the only thing and they’re not a perfect measure of what’s happening, but they are a measure of how well we are connecting with people.

Another area where we’re looking at offering support is in team building, details of the training for that will be out soon, but from that we want to try and identify or help you identify where you think any training needs are.

I’ve mentioned the culture guide, but also want to remind you of the diocesan vision. We have run ‘Faith in our future’ sessions with nearly every ministry area in the diocese now and want to continue to build on some of the ideas and energy that was shown in them. Another booklet that was put out in the last year was the wellbeing guide, ‘Caring for those who are caring.’

This is really important. Working for church is hard work, whether as lay people or clergy, and it’s crucial that in doing that work we’re don’t end up doing too much. I recognise the feeling, ‘If I don’t do it, nobody else will’, but this is one area where, as ministry areas, we need to share the load more. It isn’t easy and it’s not going to happen overnight, but it can happen.

I could cover lots of other things but ultimately, I want to say a huge thank you for what you all do. It can seem hard and sometimes even dispiriting but at those times, we can remind ourselves that we’re not doing any of this to preserve a church institution, we’re not doing it to preserve our buildings, important though they are, we’re not doing it to maintain a tradition, though some of those traditions are really important. We’re doing it for God.

We are called as disciples to make a difference, to share a gospel that is about love, peace, hope and joy. It is a gospel that is relevant in a world where there is a desperate need for those things.

And so, we return to our reading... Displaying those qualities as individuals, as a church; those qualities of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience; sharing God’s love in our communities will continue to make a difference, and doing it as lots of individuals, lots of churches, but **one body, united in Christ**, and doing it prayerfully and thankfully and with praise that echoes out the joy we have through knowing Jesus is going to continue to build on the good things and hard work that is happening.

We’re doing what we do for God. There is no greater privilege. Let’s make it the greatest joy!