

Romans 12:1-13

In the Bible there are many images, pictures or descriptions used of the church. It is the temple of the Holy Spirit, the Bride of Christ, an assembly of God's people, a spiritual house, the body of Christ and so on. As we move on from our Giving in Grace series, I think it is helpful to think together what it means to be the church. Through Giving in Grace we have been thinking about our response to the grace of God through which the ministry of the church can develop. Over the next three weeks I want to help us think about the nature of that church using three images, those of the church as a bride, a building and today as a body.

In Romans 12:5 we read, "so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others".

I think this verse set in its context tells us three things about the nature of the church.

1. The point of its unity is Christ,

"so in Christ we". The church is described by Paul here as those who are "in Christ". That is he was writing to those who had through grace come to faith. V1 Paul sets the context for all he writes in the last 5 chapters of Romans with this statement "in view of God's mercy".

This week again many people have been affected by the ash from an Icelandic volcano. In view of the ash people have had to change what they do. Here Paul was saying look you know God's grace and mercy. You know that though you were sinners alienated from a holy God you have been changed into God's children through the death of God's only Son Jesus Christ. This is God's mercy shown to you that, though you deserved his punishment, Jesus took that punishment and as a result you have become a child of God. In view of that Paul called on these Christians in Rome to "offer your bodies as living sacrifices" v1. That is to give everything back to God, which is what we have been seeing in our Giving in Grace series. Also in the light of the mercy of God they were, v2, to be transformed by the renewing of their minds. As the Holy Spirit changed their minds so they would have the mind of God and grow to think with his heart and mind. That renewed mind would then enable them, v3, to "not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment". Here we begin to get into the theme of Christian unity.

The reason Paul wrote those words was because some were doing the opposite. Some were thinking themselves better than others with the corollary that others were thinking themselves worse than others. The proximity of vs 6-8 about different spiritual gifts both here and in a similar passage in 1 Corinthians 12 suggests that this was at least part of the reason for what Paul was saying.

What Paul was saying to these Christians who, like every church, were a hugely varied bunch of people, men and women, young and old, from a Jewish background and a gentile background and so on, what he was saying to them was your unity is not a matter of nature. Last weekend I spent a lot

of time with an English teacher from March in Cambridgeshire, a retired guy from Redditch and a buildings manager from near Peterborough. All very different but with a point of unity from nature in that we all come from the same mother and father, they are my brothers. However as Paul wrote to these Christians their unity was not like that nor was it a humanly contrived unity as in the cricket team I played for yesterday but a divine unity out of the grace and mercy of God. The same is true for us here at Christ Church. Different as we are because of Jesus we are united.

2. The unity of the church is inclusive,

“we who are many form one body”. Here Paul describes the essential nature of the church as many and different but one organism, one living entity. The church he said is like a body. It has many members with different gifts and functions but it is one and under one head, who is Jesus. The emphasis here is upon many and one. Just as a human body has many very different bits but is one so the church has many different people in it but is one in Jesus. Membership is open to all who accept Jesus as saviour and Lord and all who do that are included as equal members in the body. Here is where Paul’s call for the renewed mind helps us.

I remember during my journey to faith going to different churches and meeting lots of Christians and often feeling I didn’t quite fit in. I recognised that many of them had something I didn’t. Something would draw me to church but I felt a bit of an outsider. All that changed when God helped me to understand what Jesus had done for me on the cross. Then I became a Christian, a follower of Jesus, and fully part of the church. I belonged. What Paul was saying here was that if you are “in Christ” that is if you have accepted him as saviour and Lord, then you belong in his body the church. Our renewed mind tells us that even if our natural human diffidence says I don’t deserve it or I’m not as good as him or her. Look again with me if you would at v5 “so in Christ we who are many form one body”. If we are in Christ we are part of the “we” who form the body. We belong because of Jesus. Now if you feel you don’t belong then two things. One you may need to think about your relationship with Jesus, have you accepted his sacrifice for you as all you need to be saved and become a child of God. Two, if you have done that, you may need to take God at his word when he says through Paul here that we are one body, you do belong because of Jesus.

3. The church is mutually dependent,

“each member belongs to all the others.” It is true that we belong in the church in Jesus but here Paul takes it further and says we belong to each other. How does that sit with you? In our highly individualistic society Paul is saying to us through what he was saying to these Christians in Rome that we belong to each other and that means we have rights and responsibilities.

Now you may wonder what rights we have in the church and feel that perhaps we shouldn’t be using such language. However I think that Paul’s words here remind us that, as he puts it elsewhere, “if

anyone is in Christ he is a new creation" (2 Cor 5:17). So whoever we are if we are in Christ then we are equal and as such have the right to be accepted as in Christ and accepted as equals in the faith and in the church.

The responsibilities of belonging in the church are many and in these verses we can pick up at least four.

a. Be devoted, v10

"Be devoted to one another in brotherly love". The word devoted and the idea of brotherly love bring in the flavour of family and that was what Paul intended. As Christians we belong to a family and here are encourage to a commitment and love to the others in that family. That "devotion" will show in many ways. It will show in the things we do for each other, the respect we give to each and so on and of course it will show in the efforts we make to be with each other. Two of my brothers travelled quite a way to meet up last weekend but they saw it as important. In recent years I have to say I have wondered about the attitude people have today to meeting up with fellow Christians be it on Sunday or midweek. Increasingly there seems to be a take it or leave it attitude to meeting with the family of God. Often it seems that if anything else crops up people will do that in preference to being with their brothers and sisters in worship. Sunday and being with God's people seems not to be the priority. There doesn't seem to be this devotion to each other that Paul speaks of here. But of course devotion is shown in more than meeting each other.

b. Honour one another v10

"Honour one another above yourselves". That was the attitude of Christ and should be our attitude. This comes as we saw earlier from the renewed mind which recognises that he or she like I am part of the body of Christ not through some merit of my own but simply by the grace of God and therefore we are all equal. As someone put it, kneeling before the cross means I cannot look down on anyone else! We are to treat our brothers and sisters in the church as having value because God has placed an infinite value on each one of us in Jesus. In our thoughts about each other, in our words to and about each other and in our actions we are to afford each other respect and honour.

c. Share v13

"Share with God's people who are in need. Practise hospitality." Clearly it is as we share with others that we honour them, we show our devotion and love and that we belong together. Inevitably in a church there will be people in different situations and having different needs. Together we can often meet those needs. In one church I belonged to we had a long list of things that people had like lawnmowers, bikes and so on so that if people just needed something for a one off they could look and see if anyone had one and borrow it. However in one sense it is that attitude that matters, having the mind of God which is on the look out for how we can help others because they matter to

us. I hope we will be those who are looking not to our own needs but to the needs of others. You know a simple way we can do that is by talking to other people. Often before a service starts or even more at the end of a service there will be people standing or sitting on their own. We can get into the habit of talking with those we know and so effectively ignoring others. That doesn't honour them and it doesn't help them feel they belong. Let's be looking round us and asking who can I share a few minutes with over coffee and get to know and help to feel part of this church.

d. Serve v6-8

In these verse we are reminded a little of how different we are. We see here a small part of the many different gifts that God gives to his people. However, we may have different gifts but they are given for the same purpose, so that we can serve each other in the church which is mutually dependent. The gifts are given not so that we may feel good about ourselves, or enrich our spiritual life or may us look good. They are given for service in the church of God so that others may be blessed and built up. So what gift has God given you? Is it teaching? Then teach that others may grow in Jesus. Is it serving? Then find ways to serve that others may be helped and encouraged. Is it giving? Again then find ways of giving, recognising that giving is not just about money but about our time and talents as well.

Friends our church has so much potential, so much to offer God and our community, so much we can offer each other. God is looking to release that potential. He has placed so much in our hands in terms of money and talents. It is as we recognise our nature as a church as a body, one unit belonging to each other that God will help to release the gifts he has given to us to build us up, to bless us and to use us to bless others around us.

“so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others”.

We belong together in Jesus and together in Jesus we can build up each other and so bring glory to God. So in view of God's mercy be renewed in your minds to know that in Christ we belong together as the body of Jesus doing his work here on earth.