

Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity

Sermon Series 2022 Week 5

Preached at Goring and Streatley 16 Oct. 2022

Fellowship

AIM: To show how vital regular fellowship is for the Church

Let us pray

O Lord, You have given Your Word to be a lamp for our feet and a light for our path. Grant us grace to receive your truth, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Well, this is the fifth week in our series of sermons looking at our churches and the question ‘What are we about?’ The aim is to think about what we should be focussing on as Christians and how far what we actually do reflects this. We’ve looked at worship, prayer, generosity, forgiveness, healing and wholeness. This week we are looking at ‘fellowship’.

In my dictionary, fellowship is defined as ‘a feeling of friendship resulting from shared interests or experiences’, but in Christian circles it is much more than just a ‘feeling of friendship’. I want us first to look at the early church and what fellowship looked like then. In our reading from Acts we learn that at the beginning the whole congregation of believers was united as one. They shared everything. They had the advantage of the presence of the apostles who were able to give them eye-witness accounts of the life and teachings and resurrection of Jesus and ‘grace was on all of them’. This sounds idyllic, and possibly was for a while, but inevitably human weaknesses soon started to become evident. One notable example is recorded in chapter 4 of Acts when Ananias and his wife Sapphira tried to make out that they were

generously donating the full proceeds of the sale of some property when in fact they had kept back some of it for themselves. When this was revealed they were accused, not of greed for, after all, the money was theirs and they could do whatever they liked with it. No, they were guilty of something much worse: of trying to deceive God! Shockingly, both of them dropped dead when they were confronted with their offence. St Luke comments that after this, everyone knew God was not to be trifled with!

Clearly, some kind of discipline had to be enforced if the church was to maintain its integrity. As we heard in our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus himself had given the apostles some advice on how problems within the body of Christ should be dealt with and how Christians should be generous and forgiving in their dealings with one another, just as God has been with them. No doubt Peter will have recalled this when he was leading the church in Jerusalem. The reason why discipline was important was twofold: firstly, for the sake of the believers themselves so that they could grow as Christians and become more Christlike, and secondly, so they would be credible witnesses in their main task which was to make disciples. Jesus suggested that their non-Christian neighbours should be heard saying, “See how these Christians love one another!”

So we see that fellowship in the early church consisted of meeting together not just on Sundays but during the week as well. They had so much to talk about and much of their conversation must have been about Jesus and what following him meant. They needed to talk about their experiences of sharing the gospel with non-believers and to encourage one another. Some of the followers were in need and decisions had to be made as to how to support them. From time to time they were persecuted for their faith and so they had to decide how to keep one another safe

while continuing to share the gospel. Sometimes one of their number or even a group would behave badly and this had to be discussed and dealt with. They needed to pray together about all these things. We can sense a feeling of excitement amongst them. Have we lost that feeling of excitement? Do we pray with expectation? Something to think about.

We live in very different times and our culture is quite unlike that of the first Christians in Jerusalem, so how does the fellowship they shared translate to our churches today? Is our situation so very different? Jesus's message was counter cultural in his day, revolutionary in fact, and so it is today. Our culture encourages people to aim at becoming rich and famous and, yes, sexy. Think of all the advertisements which bombard us everywhere we go. As Christians we know that these ambitions can often lead to an obsession with self, followed by disappointment, despair and emptiness but God has planned much better lives for the human beings he has created. Our task is still the same as it was for those early Christians: to make disciples, to introduce people to the God who loves every person he has created and wants the best for them.

Meaningful fellowship has to include prayer and encouragement beyond these walls, during the week. Seeing one another in church each week isn't enough to make our churches dynamic and effective. How often have you had a deep conversation about an aspect of faith while drinking coffee after church? I don't think most of us get beyond finding out how well or unwell someone is or where they went on holiday. I know occasionally serious conversations do take place but on the whole it just isn't the best time and place for serious talk. If we are to make progress together, we have to set aside time to spend with one another talking about our faith, reading the Bible together, and praying for opportunities to share the gospel. We all have lives

outside the church and it's how we live out our Christian faith in non-Christian contexts, whether at work or play, that is our greatest challenge. We need one another for support and encouragement. Where else can we have these conversations?

Many churches have found that small groups are the way forward. I have certainly benefited from being part of such a group in the past. About 30 years ago, I was diagnosed with breast cancer and I remember being very encouraged and feeling truly blessed when the group members surrounded me and prayed for me in one of our meetings.

Fellowship does involve a degree of vulnerability. The members need to be open and honest with one another and keep personal information shared in the group confidential. This degree of trust can take time to develop before people feel they can ask for help and prayer but it is worth persevering.

I sincerely believe that we would all benefit from being part of a small group meeting regularly as Christians, to share our journeys and pray for one another as we seek to serve the Lord. You may have other ideas about how to do this and this is something we could discuss further at the Away Day in November. I do hope you will come to that. We want to know what you think about our progress as a Christian community witnessing in a secular world, and how we could do it better. Amen.

Judith Aguda

