

ACTS 2:42-47
COMMUNITY

“Together”. Is that an important word in your vocabulary? We are social beings; we are made to be in company; people have learned to live in communities, families and the like; we view as eccentric those who choose to live at distance from community. We are made to be together, to do things together; it is part of our human nature. There are other parts of the world where this ‘together’ culture is stronger, that being together and doing things together is a bigger part of the way in which people think. Our culture is much more about the individual; we see that in the statistics – a huge proportion of the UK population live on our own and that seems only set to get larger. Will that lead to lonely people? Will it breed a way of thinking that is self-centred and selfish? We don’t care for other people as we should, perhaps. That culture infects the Church as well; our participation in Church is so often for what we can get out of it and how people are to us, rather than for what we give and how we can be to others. “Together” is not the strongest word we could use for Church life in 2012 Scotland.

Do you know the film *Finding Nemo*? It is about a young clown fish captured on the reef and the adventures of his dad to rescue him. It is a great film with so many themes that resonate with the Bible. Nemo is captured by a diver who is a dentist in his day job and the captured fish is introduced to the fish-tank in his dentist’s surgery; there are other fish already there; they ask him which pet shop he has come from and when they discover that Nemo comes from the ocean they decide that he needs cleaned up. Pierre the prawn comes to sweep him clean of outside bugs and the others will talk to him only when he is rid of any bugs that he might have brought with him into the fish-tank! “Churches quickly become sheltered artificial environments” (Alan Hirsch); Church has its own way of doing things, its own language, its own interests, which so often get in the way of building genuine community.

A few weeks ago, I asked the question: “what makes up the DNA of the Christian? What makes up the DNA of the Church?” DNA is what makes us the people that we are, it shapes our lives. DNA is why we have blue eyes or brown, why we are short or tall etc. DNA shapes us as people. I want to ask the same question of us as Christians or of Church. The first answer we came up with is the confession “Jesus is Lord” and we said that we need to rediscover the place and importance of Jesus. The second thread of our Christian DNA is found in the word ‘grace’; grace should shape the way in which we think about God, ourselves and other people. The third thread: community. We are made to be together; Church is family; so many of the pictures of Church are corporate, ‘together’ pictures. We spend a lot of time talking about our faith and our relationship with God and that is entirely right and good; we don’t spend much time talking about our horizontal relationships, with one another; we do that today.

In April 2010 I posted a blog called *Better Together*. I listed there many of the things that we do together. There are 19 items on that list. We are a Church who: worship together, pray, laugh, cry, learn, make decisions, have cups of tea, walk, play, discuss the Bible, look after our buildings, do the garden, clean the halls, care for and look after one another, serve the community, have conversations about all sorts of things, support one another when life is hard, celebrate, and travel to Cambodia. After most of these 19 items the word ‘together’ appears. We do all of these things with other people; these are all part of Church life and it was the theme of the blog that these are often done better

together. We think of ourselves as a friendly Church, but this is about more than being friendly. Let's see what this strand of our Christian DNA is all about.

Linda read this fascinating piece from Deuteronomy 26. Deuteronomy sets out what the people should do when they've settled into the Promised Land. The people are on a journey from Egypt to the Promised Land under the leadership of Moses and Deuteronomy is Moses giving them instructions for the future. When they've settled into their new land, this is how they are to live and behave. In chapter 26, they are to give thanks to God for their very first harvest and are to bring an offering to God which the priest will offer on their behalf. It's the form of words that I find so interesting. "*My father...*" (Dt 26:5ff) The individual Israelite is to make this confession. The words refer to Jacob and his wanderings and struggles; then the people are in Egypt and their slavery there is recalled; then their release and freedom under Moses' leadership is recited and all the ways in which God has blessed them as a people. It is the little word 'us' that attracts me. "*the Egyptians...*" (26:6) These words are to be said by people, some of whom weren't even there, but they had sense of community; "this is 'our history', this is who 'we' are" and they have the feeling of solidarity with those who had gone before them. It's about 'we' and 'us' rather than 'they' and 'them'.

If you read so much of that part of the Old Testament it is all about community. There are screeds of rules and regulations for the people to keep and to do; we look at them and are not sure what some of these rules are all about, but so many of these rules and regulations are about building community: how they are to be a people living together in their new home; how they are to treat one another and some of that is given in great detail! The poorest are singled out for greatest care, the widow, orphan and even the alien and stranger are given their place as part of the community. They are in this together; solidarity with the past and their history is important, as is solidarity with one another. The prophets are at their most scathing when pointing out later how the poor are down-trodden and the rich abuse their wealth and power and that sense of community is pulled apart. God is disappointed.

The other piece of bible that we read puts that same theme into a Church setting. Acts 2 tells the story of Pentecost, the birth of the new Church and at the end of the chapter we have this little summary to describe the way in which the Church is behaving, the things the Church is doing. It describes their devotion to learning from the apostles, to praying, to worshipping. All through these verses, we find our word for today – "together". There are all kinds of clues to this:

- *Fellowship* – Here's a word that we don't give its proper strength. Fellowship is, we say, what we have over coffee: "we talk to one another and have fellowship together!" In fact, this word is hugely more powerful and more meaningful than that. It is the Greek word 'koinonia', which comes from the word that means 'common'; it suggests that the Church has 'a common life'. It is the word that Paul uses in Philippians when he talks there about the partnership in the gospel between him and the Christians from Philippi. The Church is a partnership in which we share things in common and express that common life.

- "*All the...*" (Acts 2:44) This is perhaps the most distinctive feature of the early Church – the wealthy sold their houses and gave the money to the Church to support those who were poor. "*Selling...*" (v45) This was a hugely powerful demonstration of the common life that the Christians held together, a sense of community, solidarity with one another, rich and poor, strong and weak. Here are people being more than friendly, but caring for one another, being generous to one another, being partners in the gospel.

□ “Every day...” (2:46f) they did things together that expressed their notion of partnership or community. They worshipped together in the temple and in one another’s homes; they had meals together and talked together, having conversations, building relationships with one another; they “*broke bread*” which we take to mean, they shared in the communion service together, remembering Jesus; they learned together from the apostles, sitting listening, learning, asking questions, hearing the stories of Jesus; they prayed together. All of these activities gave expression to community and partnership and built community and made it stronger. “Christian fellowship is Christian caring; and Christian caring is Christian sharing.” (John Stott)

The Church as community? There are so many questions raised for me by these Bible pieces about the Church as community in 2012 Scotland, or Juniper Green. By raising these issues, we know some of this we’re beginning to get right, but there is a long way still to go!

□ **Young people and the groups they belong to** – a few years ago at Christmas, some young people in Birmingham were killed in a drive-by shooting and it was suggested in the media that the music they listened to had influenced these people to commit the crime. I was part of a discussion with some S6 pupils at Currie High School not long after that about what influences our choices and they talked about the different groups to which young people belong and the clubs you go to if you are a member of a particular group; group identity has such a strong influence. People look round church when they are new to the congregation – “are other people like us in this Church”; if there are, they might stay; if not, they probably won’t come back; adults behave in the same way as these young people. The sense of belonging is so strong!

□ **Open Door Café** meets on Tuesday and is growing! One of the factors in this growing group is the word of mouth contact mums have with each other through, amongst other things, a facebook group, some mums telling other mums that the group is here and that it is a good group and so others come and they are building a sense of community; they chat together, they get to know new people, people in same situations and they share stories!

□ **“They” or “we”** – people laugh at me when I raise this question, but it is hugely symbolic. When we talk about Juniper Green Parish Church do we say “they” or “we”? “They” suggests that we know the group, but are not part of it; “we” tells the world that it is our group and that we have sense of partnership and solidarity with others who also describe Juniper Green Parish Church as “We”!

□ **Names?** – how many names of people in the building this morning do you know? You might be new today and so you might only know one. You might have been here for 20 years and if you still only know one...! Make it your aim to get to know a new name this morning, someone you’re sitting beside perhaps, and let’s give up worrying about offending or being offended if the person you ask is also 20 years part of the Church. You both know that you should have asked long before now! Knowing names is a key element to partnership and solidarity.

□ **Rules and community behaviour – how to belong if you don’t know the language** – every community has its rules and community behaviour; sometimes these rules get in the way of building genuine community. Someone observing *Messy Church* last Saturday commented that there was no sense of rules and behaviour and that people were just free to belong! Can we concentrate on building community and relationships even if the children make a noise or people come and go from the service?

□ **Snow – people talk to one another!** Here’s the context: last winter, 2010, when the snow was on the road, and when people were arranging to clear the snow from the roads around here, it was said to me “it’s great; people are talking to one another!” Our

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community life is so often about people living in their own space; organisations struggle because people have no time or desire to be involved; groups become smaller and smaller; people become isolated.

Community is part of our DNA. There is a sense of partnership, of solidarity with our history, with one another, with people who are new, with Christians across the world. We worship, pray, have conversations, learn, eat, work, walk – **together!** We need to be open-hearted, willing to take risks, serving, generous with our money, our time, ourselves. God has called us to be a community of faith, living out that faith together.