

EPHESIANS 4:1-6
TOGETHER WE ARE STRONG

'Together we are strong!' You could say that of any group of people: it could be your business mantra, you could say it of a family; there is strength in numbers and there are times when we celebrate that. Can we say it of Church? 'Together we are strong!' When we are new to Church, we look around to see if there are other people there like us; when we see people like us, we stay and it's much easier to become part of that Church; there is "a strength in numbers" thing going on there. Or we talk to other people and find that their experience of life is much the same as ours and we find encouragement in talking to other people who have the same struggles in faith and life as we have; together we can talk these questions through and find solutions together. We develop a sense of belonging to a group, a family, a Church; it becomes 'ours', and we become part of something bigger that takes some of its strength from that sense of togetherness.

But when we look at Church, there are all kinds of things that work against that sense of togetherness. Faith is a personal thing and an almost individual thing – we talk about 'my faith, my Christianity' and in some ways it needs to be that way, but we live in a culture where people are becoming more and more individual and isolated. Churches disagree over seemingly big issues and the last two weeks in the life of the Church of Scotland have demonstrated that quite markedly; the danger is that those who disagree forget to speak to one another. There are all kinds of Christian groups, who seem to be different from one another and who almost seem to be in competition with one another. Or at an even more basic level, people forget to talk to one another; in a big congregation like ours it is hard to develop a sense of togetherness that includes everybody; there is a danger of in-crowds that talk to one another, but some are excluded; so the sense of togetherness is lost. "Together we are strong" – how do we develop that? How do we express that?

In Ephesians 4:1-6, Paul talks about the unity of the Church in two ways:

1)what we share together as Christians – the word 'one' appears 7 times in 3 verses. Christians have far more important things in common than divide us. The Church has an inherent unity – there is only one Christian Church, one body of Christ across the world; there is one faith, believing that God is and that He blesses us as we come to Him through Jesus; there is one baptism as an outward demonstration of that faith, though there are different methods; there is one hope in our hearts and then biggest of all there is One God, One Lord, one Spirit. God is one; there is a basic oneness, unity and togetherness about God. Because there is only one God, there can be only one Church; because God has this unity and togetherness, then there is only one people who belong to Him. This is our togetherness, our unity. We might express some of this differently from one another even in this room; one Church might express its faith in different ways from another Church, but all seven of these declarations are true for every Christian. These seven 'ones' are already true of us, together. So this is not a manufactured togetherness that we need to create from nothing; we already have a basis for being one.

2)how to live together – 'be what you are!' That can be hard to do. There are some qualities here that are fundamental to us living out that unity and togetherness: "*be completely...*" (v2f) It is our Christian responsibility to foster a spirit of unity and togetherness and to avoid attitudes and behaviour that will spoil it. Being humble, gentle, patient, loving – these are not always qualities that come naturally to us, but these are some of the qualities that foster good relationships with other people; these are qualities that help us get on with others, something of the glue that binds us together. Yet, it is so easy to be self-centred and want our own way, to play power

games in Church that we want to be top dog and being self-centred and playing power games are destined only to drive churches apart and into meltdown. Our responsibility is to do everything we can to be the right kind of people in our relationships with others and to make sure nothing in us or nothing that we do is the cause of disunity, disharmony, or driving people apart.

Communion is a family meal. This service is one way of demonstrating our family-ness. We take bread and wine together and so we express our common faith in Jesus as Saviour and Lord, who died for us and who reigns over us; we may have come to that faith in different ways and may express that faith differently, but together we share one faith in one Saviour and Lord. Communion is not just an individual communion with Jesus, where we get something personal, for myself; communion is a group action – we pass the bread and wine to our neighbour, we share it together, we eat and drink together. This is a place where we express the foundation of our unity, one faith in one crucified and risen Lord.

What else? Talk to one another, even people you don't know very well. Work together – if there is a group you would like to join, or a project to be part of, then take part in that and work alongside others. Look out for people who are in need, people new to Church who may not know anyone – befriend them; encourage people you know who are hurting and in need. Don't just sit back and let others do this, because this sense of unity and togetherness in Church needs everyone to play their part – it is one thing to avoid a church falling apart and we can avoid that reasonably easily; it is another thing to be as good at being together as we can be and we will only succeed in that when this is something we all work at. Together we are strong. God is One, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together, one God with one mission to bless the world. Let us be a Church like that!