

EPHESIANS 4:1-13
THE IDEAL CHURCH

The ideal person? The ideal family? The ideal society? The ideal Church? The ideal world? Do we have any ideals like these? It is good to dream, to have hopes, aspirations and ideals. Society needs its dreamers, people who see what might be, who imagine a better world for everyone; people who are aware of the problems and troubles of the world, but can imagine what the world might be like if these are sorted. The Church needs its dreamers more than ever, people who can see what the Church is and what it might be in the future; people again aware of the problems and issues facing the Church, but imagining what the church can be like. We need our own dreams and aspirations of what life might be for us, married life, family life, retirement, etc, dreams of what we might be or become as people, aware of our faults and yet dreaming of, and working hard to become, the people God wants us to be.

Or are we living in an age when we just laugh at the notion of things being ideal? There is a cynical spirit that gets about that questions and challenges these ideals. It is so easy to say that the ideal church doesn't exist any more: we are so aware of the problems and tensions that affect the UK churches at the moment and the way in which the Church is more and more pushed to the side; this is realistic perhaps, but is there nothing left to dream of, to aim for, to pray about? The ideal family does not exist and again we know the pressures on the whole notion of 'family' but that should not stop us dreaming, hoping, planning, praying. The ideal world – we are far from the case and are all too aware of the needs of the world, will conflict and injustice; it can wear us down and it all seems incapable of being solved but having the sense of an ideal towards which we try to work is a good thing, looking for and praying for justice, peace, freedom in the world.

One of the brilliant parts of watching the Olympics is this whole notion of having a dream to aim for and then achieve. Listen to someone like the swimmer Michael Jamieson from Glasgow and you will hear how delighted he was to have achieved his dream of an Olympic final and a medal. Since the age of nine, he has played over and over in his mind that day when he would swim in the Olympic final; he has achieved his dream. There was a story in the press this week of the GB women's volleyball team: they have no funding, but they beat Algeria earlier in the week; their dream was simply to have a team that could compete in the Olympics and they invested so much of their time and effort and of their own money just to get there; they have no chances of a medal, but that's not the point. All over the Olympics is the phrase "inspire a generation!" – it's all about creating dreams in young people, giving them something to aspire to, in this case in sport, but it applies to other areas too!

Paul has a picture of the ideal church in Ephesians 4. We read it and perhaps think that given what we know of the Church, this is a bit of pie-in-the-sky! There are two parts to this: first, there is the dream of the ideal church, though Paul would argue that this is not just a dream; secondly, how to make that dream come true! It is good to dream; we are never too old to dream! But then there is always something to do to make that dream become reality. The New Testament gives us a picture of the ideal person, Jesus; this is not just for someone to admire, but to become like Him; that will not happen while we sleep; under the power and influence of the Spirit, we have to put on the attitudes and behaviour of Jesus and learn to think, speak and act like Jesus. So with Paul's picture of the Church: there is the ideal, and here is something for us to do to make that ideal become reality! This is for all of us!

The picture of the ideal Church centres on the word 'one'. "*There is...*" (Ephesians 4:4ff) Seven times he uses the word 'one' to express what he sees as the ideal picture of the

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Church and these are all at heart of being Christian and the life of the Church. He begins with God and what God is like: one Father, one Lord, one Spirit; these are simply fundamental to the life of the Church: there is one God and Father whom we worship and in whose love we stand; Jesus is Lord and there is no other; the one Spirit of God lives in all of us and surrounds us; we worship the same God together; we trust Jesus as our Saviour and seek to obey Him as Lord; the Spirit lives in all of us. The Church's unity begins with what God is like. There is one faith and hope: all Christians share the faith and hope that Jesus gives; we might express it in different ways, but the gospel tells us that Jesus is Saviour and that He has died for us and is raised and in Him we trust and in Him we have the hope of forgiveness, salvation and heaven. That faith and hope is expressed in baptism and baptism is our joining with Christ whether we do that as an infant or as an adult.

For all of these reasons and based on all of this; there is one body! The Church is one! That might seem a strange thing to say given how many divisions there are in the Church today; there are denominations that go about things in a different way from each other; there are divisions even within denominations, when people take different views and attitudes over particular issues. Christians can say some pretty acrimonious things to one another and even within congregations there can be times when differences and divisions are more apparent. Yet, Paul asserts this ideal that there is "one body": why? Every Christian belongs to Christ, the Church is the body of Christ; so at its deepest reality, there is one body, one Church; every Christian belongs to Christ in the same way as every other!

The ideal of the Church is this sense of unity! Paul tells us that Christ is Lord and King of His Church and He is the One who gives gifts to His people; he goes on to quote Psalm 68 and write about the different gifts that Christ gives to us; there is a diversity of gifts in God's people. We are all different and all bring different personalities, skills and gifts to the life of the Church. But we are one! Ideally, the Church will express that sense of unity. Jesus tells us that He is given honour and glory when His people have that sense of unity and oneness about us.

Then there is something we have to do to make that ideal of unity become reality: "*be completely...*" (*Ephesians 4:2,3*) This is about 2 things: first of all, it is about the kind of people that we are and there are four qualities here that we are to aspire after: humility, gentleness, patience and love. Let's put it the other way round first: we know that pride, harshness, impatience and contempt for other people are disastrous for our relationships. The qualities we need to have and by which we need to live in God's new society are humility, gentleness, patience and love. The challenge for us is simple: are these the qualities that mark every one of our relationships with other people? The ideal answer: yes! Secondly, this is about the way we behave towards one another. I saw recently that there are two ways of asking a question or making a comment to a discussion: we can ask the question with a sense of complaint, as a grumble, being discontent and promoting a sense of disharmony; or we can that same we ask that same question or make the same comment in a way that is helpful, positive, loving and gentle. We can do things to create that sense of unity and promote peace within the Church and with other people; or we can do things that create sense of disharmony and conflict. Again, the challenge that faces all of us about every action we take, every word we speak and the way in which we speak them is this: ask yourself – will this create unity and peace? Or will it create conflict and disharmony? Do what leads to peace; avoid what leads to conflict!

What will the history books say about us? When Tom Devine or his successor comes to write the history of Scotland in the early years of the 21st century, what will they write? Or

if someone chooses to write the history of the Church in Scotland looking back to this time, what will they write about us? Will they write about us that we are a people who are united in the gospel and who have promoted that sense of peace? I suspect not! I suspect that in writing the history of the Church in Scotland in the early years of the 21st century they will tell a story of a Church divided in so many ways and, perhaps because of that, a church that Scotland is coming increasingly to disown!

This nothing new! The people of God have not always been perfect. Psalm 78 is the history of Israel, perhaps written by Asaph, a temple singer, written to tell the next generation about their past, on the basis that knowing your history you might avoid making the same mistakes all over again! The part we read was about the story of the manna in the desert and we read about God providing for His people wonderfully: *“He gave...” (Psalm 78:23f)* They ate the ‘bread of angels’ and God did this every day for forty years, faithfully providing for His people all that they needed; water and food and they had enough and at times more than enough. So they loved God perfectly in return for His endless love? You might think so! But sadly no! *“In spite...” (Psalm 78:32)* They seemed to learn nothing; they kept sinning and forgot to believe! Yet, God didn’t go away. Asaph saw the big picture; as he looked back, he saw that the pattern keeps being repeated: God’s love goes on and the people are blessed and for a time everything is good, but sin creeps in and the people keep on getting it wrong!

Nothing has changed about the way in which we go. We know what is good and right; we know the ideals, but we just keep making mistakes or neglecting what is good. We know the ideal person is Jesus and we know that we should learn to be like Him and we want to be, but it is just out of reach. We know the ideal picture of the Church and we want to reach it, but we just keep getting it wrong. We know the ideal family, but it is a similar story. What then? Do we stop dreaming? Do we just let the cynical world take over? No! We keep dreaming! We keep praying! I once, in a prayer asked God that every person in Scotland would come to faith in Jesus and my friend took me to task; “that’s never going to happen”; but I can still dream and pray and hope! We dream and then we work: we need to have these qualities – to be humble, gentle, patient, and loving to one another and let these qualities shape all of our relationships, our words and the way we speak them, our actions and behaviour; it matters far more than we know! Let everything we do and say promote the unity and peace of the Church. It is easy for us to say that this is someone else’s job or responsibility; the truth is that this responsibility belongs to everyone who is part of, or has an interest in, the Church!

Here is the other reality: God has not gone away. God is still at work in the world. Asaph discovered that God’s love was extraordinary; for all that the pattern of love and sin and unbelief, God kept loving His people and loving the world. God has shown us in His love the extraordinary gift of His Son and our response should be to love Him with all our hearts. That we don’t is our fault and to our shame, but God’s love goes on; He keeps on loving us and nothing will take that love away. It seems as if there is no circumstance in which God will stop loving His Church! It seems as if nothing will persuade God to stop loving the world. We may fall way short of His ideal for us, but His love goes on! The challenge for us: to be the people God wants us to be; to be the Church God wants us to be; to be humble, gentle, patient and loving, to do what leads to peace and so to let the love and light of Christ shine into the world.