

EPHESIANS 4:1-16
FIVE FOUNDATION STONES

Team builders – that’s been theme of our holiday club; we’ve been telling the stories of various people who have been members of God’s team: Joseph, Moses, Esther, Jesus, and Paul; we’ve been telling some of their stories and how they have lived for God. More than thirty children have come every day; about thirty other people have been there wearing blue t-shirts, the team! Some have been story-tellers; some have been signing children in; some have been singing; some have been leading games; some have been acting in the drama; some have been leading little groups, the “Coaches” in the dug-outs; some have been making tea; some have been helping children make crafts; some have been making sure children don’t hurt themselves. We have been *Team builders* in lots of different ways.

You can’t just throw thirty people in a room and say “be a team”; it doesn’t work that way. Monday was the team’s first day together and that was hard because we’re not sure of everyone’s names and what jobs each one of us was doing and how to do it. By Wednesday it was better because we had worked out what each one of us was to do and how to do it and we were more aware of the way in which someone else might behave and how to cope with that. By the end of the week, we were more of a team together, working with each other, helping and not getting in each other’s way, but then we were a bit tired so little niggles creep in. Sir Alex Ferguson (the Manchester Utd one) is one of the best sports’ coaches there has ever been in the UK. A story is told by a former player that at the start of the season, he would sit the squad of players down together and try to help them understand what it would mean to be a team together. There were two questions he asked that were nothing to do with being able to kick a football. He said to the players to think about the person sitting next to them and ask “What do I need to do to make him trust me?”; the second question followed: “what will he do to make me trust him?”

Paul writes to the Ephesians about growing a church. The passage is lots about the unity of the church and how much we share together: seven times he writes the word “one” to underline just how much Christians share together – “*there is...*” (*Ephesians 4:4f*) That’s great and how true it is that we need to know it. Then at the end he writes about gifts and what gifts God gives to His church to make the church grow and make the church mature and we talked about a little of that earlier. People have done lots of studies into how churches grow and a lot of it is about gifts and making sure that all the gifts are used for the good of the whole church. The Church is not about one person or even two or three people; it is a community where everyone has a part to play and that is the way the church grows; we all have a service to offer, a ministry to exercise and that’s what makes the church healthy and mature.

I have to confess that in my hurry to get to these pieces about unity and gifts, I have often gone straight past the place where Paul starts; but that’s the place at which we’re going to linger this morning. It is not about gifts; it is not about what makes us one, but it is about the qualities in us that makes these gifts work. There are two dangers: first of all, that we think we have all the gifts and that we don’t need anyone else; so we look down on other people because we have it all and can do it all ourselves, or that we have the better gifts; this is a huge danger for the church because it becomes dominated by big-headed people. The second danger is that we don’t think we have a gift to offer at all and so we hide away in a corner, frightened to take part because we think that all these other people will despise us for having nothing to offer. Neither of these is true, but there are churches where people behave like that. They will not be healthy churches; they will not be growing communities.

“*Be completely...*” (*Ephesians 4:2f*) These are five foundation stones that make unity possible. Without these qualities in our character, nothing else will really work. We can have all the strategies about finding out gifts and using gifts, but if they are not built on these qualities, then it won’t work. Like the football team, you can have the eleven most skillful players on

planet football, but if they will not trust one another to play together as team, they won't win the league. Here are five qualities of the way in which we need to behave, five pieces of character that are good for us to be and that we see best of all in Jesus.

"Be completely humble..." Here is the other side of the coin: *"pride only..."* (Prov 13:10) Part of us wants to have our own way all of time, or wants to be accorded the respect we think we're due, or that wants to have the top spot in our own community. Scratch pride and it squeals; pride doesn't like being scratched, it doesn't like being challenged; pride is all about "me" and is at the heart of much discord in the world and even in the church. The first foundation stone is humility: humility is the quality that takes a realistic view of ourselves and gives respect to others; humility is willing to listen to other people's views and accept that others may be wiser than we are; humility sees that we have good things going for us but that we also make mistakes and so we accord other people their place in world. Jesus humbled Himself, gave up glory that was His by right and gave His life for our sake.

"Be gentle..." There is a strength in being gentle! So often when we are riled we respond with aggression, we hit out at people; we fight fire with fire. If you've ever ventured an opinion that someone didn't like, then you may well have been the target of that kind of aggression; social media is full of it now. When I wrote a blog, some of the comments were came back were full of aggression and criticism. So we hit back? Yes? Well, all that does is make violence grow. There is a strength in being gentle, meek if you will, a strength that is under control, a strong personality who yet gives him/herself for sake of others.

"Be patient..." You've heard the prayer: "Lord, give me patience and give it to me NOW!" Jesus' disciples were full of questions and at times got things horribly wrong. Jesus was patient with His friends as they learned what it meant to follow Jesus, and sometimes they learned the hard way. The people of God in the Old Testament tried to follow the Lord's ways but then complained and grumbled and wandered off. God was patient with His Old Testament family, and brought them back time and time again, with patience and grace as they learned how to be a family of faith. Neither Jesus in the New Testament, nor God in the Old wrote people off, but patiently and gently brought them back. Patience is a quality to be sought after by God's people in our dealings with one another; when we're tired, patience gets shorter, niggles set in and we forget to be patient.

The fourth foundation stone is all about *"bearing with ..."* There are two levels of forbearance with other people, one that just works and no more and the other that takes it the whole way. "Tolerance" is just about workable; we will tolerate someone, just about putting up with them, but that always seems to be just enough and no more! On the other hand, acceptance takes that quality the whole way: we accept one another as we are; we accept each other with our faults and foibles, without trying to change other people or make them conform to our way of doing things; we accept one another as we are and we work together; we learn to trust each other and build the church. What does Jesus do? Does He just put up with us, or does He accept us as we are? He accepts us and His spirit lives in us.

Love sums up all these others, in a sense, the fifth foundation stone. We sign up to the quality of love for one another and applaud the idea, but often something inside us goes a very different way. Christians back-bite, we gossip about one another, we complain and grumble about our Church leadership, we hold grudges. Instead, love challenges us to forgive those who do us wrong and challenges us to care for other people deeply. Which should we be more and more? Which quality reflects the way in which God looks at us? How does Jesus look at us? The quality is love; that is the foundation stone of the Church community, of Christian being and living, caring for one another, looking out for one another, seeking the welfare of one another and of others in our community.

We are a community of people trying to follow Jesus, trying to walk in the Lord's ways. Some of us are better at that than others. We call this community "Church". In the Old Testament, the community of faith tried to walk in the Lord's ways; Jesus formed a group of disciples who tried to learn to follow Him; in our day, we are the community of people who believe – what can we do to make the church and make the church grow? Well, there are gifts to identify and use; we all have gifts to use in serving Jesus and in serving one another – it takes everyone's gifts to make the church grow! What do I have to do to let you trust me? What can you do to help me to trust you? Perhaps the answer to Sir Alex Ferguson's question is to be found in these five foundation stones, these qualities of our lives, these parts of our Christian character: humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, love. "What will promote unity; what will build my brother and sister's faith?" We are a community of people who believe in Jesus; a community of people in whom Jesus has done the same thing in all of us. How do we make that work? How do we grow the church? Is it about strategies? They have their place! But the five foundation stones are about character without which the best strategies in the world are useless. Humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, love – these are the ways we grow church; these are the ways by which the light of Christ shines into our world today; these are ways by which we become the people of God in day-to-day life.