

ROMANS 12:9-21
LOVE GOD; LOVE GOD'S PEOPLE

“No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; ... any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind...” (John Donne) I wonder what Donne would make of 21st century Britain? I wonder if he would still be as positive about these relationships. I wonder if he would still celebrate this sense of connectedness. Islands are disconnected pieces of land; it is what defines an island. If you go to the West Coast of Scotland you will see thousands of islands, some big, some tiny; there are thousands of them disconnected from one another. Donne's vision of people is different; we are all connected, part of the continent, joined together, sharing a common humanity, sharing a common life.

Yet, we live in society where that sense of connectedness is disappearing and has been for some time. When people built Baberton Mains, they built only houses; there is no meeting place in the estate, no shop, no community place to meet; as a result, it becomes very hard to foster any sense of community. Some of the loneliest people you meet live in tower blocks, surrounded by other people, but how many actually talk to one another? Rather, they are more frightened of their neighbours, than trust them and their lives are shaped by that *fear*. People's lives are also shaped by other forces, forces that tend to undermine our relationships with other people: people are *defensive*, protective of their own space, because other people have invaded that space uninvited; some are *resentful* because others are given more attention – we have to do this for such and such a group, and they feel like victims more than beneficiaries; some feel *insecure*, their lives are shaped by the *desire to achieve* and succeed, but that is a shoogly nail on which to hang your coat, because the line between success and failure is such a fine line and the desire to achieve leads to sense of insecurity; some feel *suspicious* of others, and that is hardly fertile ground for a sense of community; some are simply *bemused* by life and by other people and are content to let others simply pass them by. Lives shaped by these forces are not fertile ground for any sense of connectedness or community.

Yet, we are made for relationships. “*It is...*” (*Gen 2:18*) That is God's verdict on Adam in the story of creation; this is the story from which so much of our understanding of human nature comes; we are made for relationship and we find these relationships in all sorts of places: in families, in friendships, in Church, in shared community activities. This what we are made for as human beings; John Donne was right, we are not made to be islands, but to be connected, parts of continent. Yet, these relationships are breaking down: families are falling apart at a faster rate than ever before, built perhaps on a weaker foundation than ever before; community groups struggle to survive because fewer and fewer people have the time, or energy, or the desire to take responsibility for these groups and so they fold. We are made for relationships, but either we don't want to connect with others or we find it harder and harder to make these connections for a whole host of reasons.

In Romans 12, Paul tells the Christians in Rome how to foster this community spirit in the Church; what qualities to have, what faults to avoid; he shows them that these relationships are important. Let's look at what he says. There are two themes running through these verses in Rom 12, there are activities, things to do that promote a sense of community and family in the Church; and there are attitudes to foster on which these activities are founded. We need both of these to go hand in hand if we are to build a sense of community in the Church; this is about more than being friendly to one another; we have to be friendly, but this runs deeper than that!

There are arguably three activities listed here, though I'm not sure about the third – there is a fine line between activity and attitude:

o “Share with ...” (12:13a) The Christian Church in its early days was a mixture of people, with some wealthy Romans, but some slaves who had nothing; there were some who were prominent people in the community and others who were poor. From the very beginning, the Church had a way of sharing with those in need: property was sold and the proceeds shared out amongst all the Christians; some churches collected money to be taken and given to other churches in other places, to people who were in need; from the very beginning of the Church there was a sense of responsibility for others who were in need.

o “Practise...” (12:13b) This is literally the ‘love of strangers’ – there were lots of travellers who needed a place to stay, or people who needed a meal but were poor. Those who were able to, were urged to help those in need by giving them a bed for night or a meal to share.

o “Rejoice...” (12:15) ‘Bear one another’s burdens’. I’m not sure if this is activity or an attitude, but it is certainly an attitude that needs to be expressed in action. There is something here about walking together, about sharing other people’s experiences, about being glad when they enjoy good things, but also sharing their sadness too.

By doing these things the Christians in Rome would be able to foster a spirit of love, a family spirit in their Church. By doing these things, the spirit of community would be given time and space to flourish. What do we do that fosters the same spirit? Our worship is a community event, by that I mean something that we do together on a Sunday morning. A community and family spirit is hard to foster in group of 150 people, so our smaller groups allow that to happen in a deeper way: the Guild of Friendship, Men’s Breakfast, Open Door Café, No Men Allowed evening, Green Strollers, Housegroup and Discovery Group – all of these allow us to meet people, get to know people, talk to one another, share one another’s experiences of life. Our Bereavement Support Group and Pastoral Care teams are set up to provide some structured way of bearing one another’s burdens. There may be a gap where you feel left out and would value contact and conversation – come and tell me! These are some of the activities that churches do to foster a sense of community and connectedness. Someone in need with whom to share; hospitality and the love of strangers; support one another – how can we do these things more?

Paul then describes the attitudes that Christians need to have in order to make the community spirit flourish; attitudes are the important foundation for activities. “Be devoted...” (12:10) ‘Philadelphia’ – this is a family word; there is to be this quality of love within the family of God. We know that families can be difficult, but we also know that families can be and are devoted to one another enormously; family-ties are almost unbreakable; parents will do anything for their children; there are times when children learn to do anything for their parents, sometimes no matter the cost. We need to bring that spirit into the Church and care for one another in the Church in the same kind of way; to give and give and not to count the cost! All the other attitudes that Paul mentions are included in this sense of family commitment to one another.

o “Honour...” (12:11b) “Do not...” (12:16) Here’s where it all really starts; love for others begins with our attitude to ourselves and others. Is it all about me-first? If it is, we will never love as Jesus loved. If our attitude is ‘you-first’ then we are beginning to emulate Jesus. “There is to be no aristocracy in the Church, no cliques of the wealthy over against the poor, no pedestals of unapproachable dignity... for those who are in office in the Church.” (John Murray *Romans*; p.137) How easy it is to create barriers of any kind; no barriers are to be allowed in the Church, but we are to love as brothers and sisters, as family in Christ.

o “Bless those...” (12:14) “Do not...” (12:17) Even enemies are to be loved; even people who miss-call you and who persecute you for your Christian faith are to be loved, cared for, and minded. Revenge is not a word that should be in any Christian vocabulary

o “Live in...” (12:16a) we are all different, unique human beings; we have different experiences of life, we are wired up with different emotions, we think differently, we have different opinions about all sorts of things; in Rome the Christians were of different social spheres. For all of that – live in harmony! We need to be honest with one another, and be able to speak our mind, but always humbly, always seeking the good of others; we need to listen to one another in that same spirit.

There are two mistakes we make: firstly, we have the wrong attitudes. Church is a messy place, these attitudes that Paul teaches are often not found in Churches and sometimes we find the very opposite attitudes – pride, arrogance, revenge, cliques, people putting themselves on pedestals – all kinds of attitudes that are very opposite of brotherly love; we need to repent of these and turn away from them. Secondly, we neglect good things because we have just never thought of them: we have never thought of offering hospitality or of visiting someone in hospital, or that someone else might need support and that we can give it.

Christians have two commitments: the first is to Christ. The greatest commitment of our lives is a commitment to Christ as our Saviour and Lord; this is a commitment of faith, to be a disciple, to follow Jesus, to honour and obey Him. Our second commitment is to the Church; love God, love God’s people and there really is no escape from that. We find people who can be committed to Christ, but not to the Church! In fact, the two belong together. Our commitment to follow Christ brings with it a commitment to love our fellow-Christians. “Love me, love my dog!” Well, here is a slightly different version of that: love God, love God’s people. We need to learn to be involved actively in Church and not just as a spectator, learning to live in harmony and peace, learning to love and care for one another actively. Jesus was committed to do will of God, *and* committed to the people He met, to people in need; He loved and served His Father *and* loved and served people in need. We can learn to be like Him.

The church needs to foster this community spirit: we have places to meet, to talk, to get to know other people by name and more; at a time when these meeting places and spaces are becoming fewer in the world, it is vital that the Church continue to have these meeting places and spaces. More than that, we need to foster brotherly love in our hearts, to put aside any ‘me-first’ attitude and say to others ‘you-first’, what do you need? How can I help and support you? How can I bear your burdens? In a world where people are becoming more and more like disconnected islands, we have to be a people who connect, who love, who care, who belong together. That is not easy to do; it takes time and effort; so speak to someone you’ve not met before; get to know them by name. Love God; love God’s people!