

**“YOU WERE FORMED FOR GOD’S FAMILY (PDL3)”**

***Romans 12:3-21***

If you were here last week, you’ll remember that we looked at the first couple of verses of this chapter 12 of Paul’s letter to the Christians in Rome and reflected on what **worship** is all about. We concluded that it is to do with complete surrender to God in response to his mercy towards us. Worship is about our love for God. This week, as we look at the rest of the chapter, we’re going to reflect on **fellowship**: our love for one another. As we think about the purpose that drives our lives, the first and fundamental purpose is our love for God – we were created to bring him pleasure, which we do when we acknowledge that he knows best and try to live according to his principles. But flowing from that fundamental purpose is the need to express our love for God by our love for one another.

Our culture is a very individualistic one – and it has become more so over the past thirty or forty years, with a great deal of encouragement from successive governments. Just think of how many things you see around you which include the word “personal” – equity plans, pensions, stereos and music players, trainer, named nurse. Wherever you look there is a reminder that we are living as small islands, self-contained and self-motivating. We retreat into our homes as never before and there is a growing emphasis on human rights – which usually means the right of the individual to do what he or she likes with no interference from anyone else. It almost seems as if there is a concerted effort by many people (mainly lawyers and politicians) to try and prove that John Donne’s famous “*No man is an island*” sermon is wrong.

Well, experience teaches us and the Bible reminds us that we cannot go it alone. However much we might want to argue with it, God made us as gregarious creatures, people who need others to survive – materially, emotionally and spiritually. Our particular brand of evangelical Christianity, ever seeking new bandwagons onto which to jump, gradually adopts the vocabulary and ideas of the culture around and we find ourselves talking about a “personal” Saviour, my “personal walk with God”, fulfilling my personal potential: even this book which we’re following during Lent has a bit of that in places. But you cannot develop as a Christian on your own. You need other people. There is a need for commitment to others. Paul praises the Macedonian Christians for that in *2 Corinthians 8:5*.

The New Testament is full of the language of community – a flock, a church (which really means a group of people called out of the world), a kingdom, a nation, a family. In *Ephesians 2:19* Paul writes of “*God’s household*”, a word which includes family and others living together in a home (the Greek word, οἰκεος, forms the root of our word “ecumenical”). The New Testament knows nothing of Christians who do not meet together, who do not “go to church”. From time to time I conduct funerals for people who are nothing to do with this church here and usually when I’m talking to the family about the deceased I ask about any church connections. I well remember one such conversation with the son of a lady over Hopwas way. She was a Methodist, he told me. I asked if she went to the local Methodist chapel and he said, “Oh, no. The Methodist was the church she didn’t go to.” Many people will tell you that you can be a good Christian without going to church. That is just not true. God has called us into fellowship with others and he knows (once again, because he made us) that we cannot hope to survive, let alone develop, as Christians if we do not have the help and support of others.

Jesus himself made it clear in his last, long conversation with his disciples as he tried to prepare them for his death and its aftermath in the upper room on Passover evening. In *John 13:34,35* he tells them that their very togetherness was going to be seen as a sign by those as yet outside the company of believers. The identifying mark of the Christian was that he or she was part of a community – and a community where the members loved each other. That’s what we’re acknowledging in a formal, even stylised way, as we welcome several people into membership here this morning. The people who will be at the front here later on are effectively saying, “I want people to know that I’m part of this. I want to support others and to be supported in the Christian life.”

Paul returns to this theme again and again as he writes to churches around the Mediterranean where the members are arguing about what **they** want, where they are following their own ideas rather than trying to share with others, where they are moaning and complaining about what is and isn't being done (much like Christians have been doing for the best part of two thousand years, really). He reminds them of the commands that they have been given by Jesus to love others, and emphasises that they are particularly to show that love to other Christians in their fellowships. Look at what writes to the Galatians in *Galatians 6:10*. And Peter writes in similar vein in *1 Peter 2:17*. But Paul's most comprehensive and also most succinct summary of it all is in the words we read a few minutes ago from *Romans 12*. So let's just look through that passage now and reflect on what we are asked to do as those who claim to follow Jesus.

Firstly, we are to show **HUMILITY** (*vv3,16b*). None of us has any right to be proud. None of us has any cause to be proud. We are all sinners. We all have failings and need to learn to admit it. One of the easiest things in the world is to identify and criticise the failings of others – a ministry which some Christians, alas, exercise with a fervour that in other contexts would be highly impressive. Don't do it! Paul tells the Romans to "*think of yourself with sober judgement*": why not give it a try as we follow this course during Lent?

The reason, of course, that we need to do that is because we are all very different. Paul highlights that **DIVERSITY** in *vv4-8*. He uses a briefer form of the idea he develops at greater length in *1 Corinthians* concerning the "*one body with many members*". You've all got something to offer. None of you has everything to offer (however much you might like to try and convince yourself and others). And within that diversity there should be a **MUTUALITY** (*vv5b,10, 16a; Romans 1:12*) which we must all strive to maintain. We belong to each other as members of the body of Christ. We cannot opt out. We cannot go it alone. We need the gifts of others to complement our own and to ensure that we don't get conceited. You may be a captain of industry or a high flying educator or a gifted engineer or a big shot in the world of marketing or entertainment or medicine – but here in the church of Jesus Christ you are just another disciple. You can use your gifts but you can't parade them. You can enjoy the gifts of others but you cannot demean them.

Why? Because at the heart of it all is **LOVE** (*v9a*). In four words here (three in Greek), Paul sums up what it takes him the whole of that glorious chapter 13 of *1 Corinthians* to say. But notice that in both places Paul is writing in the context of the church. Yes, we might want to use *1 Corinthians 13* at weddings and praise it as wonderful poetry, but it's all about how we get on as followers of Jesus Christ. And it has to be "*sincere*". The body of Christ does not have two faces, but to see how some Christians behave, and hear what they say, you'd assume it was a prerequisite.

And that sincerity which should characterise our relationships with one another has wider implications as we recognise that **INTEGRITY** (*vv9b,17b,21*) is also an important factor. It should be clear to all that the community of Christ's followers sticks to what is good and upright. I think I mentioned last week that I'd been speaking to the University of the Third Age about the history of this church and I read them some excerpts from the church meeting minute book from the mid-nineteenth century about how certain members were disciplined for being drunk, for swearing, for fornication and so on. To us today it might seem quite harsh. During the question time at the end one person asked if we still did that and I told her that, by and large, we didn't. So she asked if we still believed in the concept of sin! I assured her that we do! But it's not always obvious, is it?

Paul goes on to mention a few characteristics that don't really need too much commentary (*vv11,12*), then returns to his theme of togetherness by talking about **SHARING** and **HOSPITALITY** (*v13*). One of the earliest descriptions of the Christian church underlines these qualities. Look at *Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35*. It must have been amazing to have been part of that community. Unfortunately, our current preoccupation with ownership and security and status seems to mean that we have relegated that kind of powerful Christian witness to the sidelines. Although, having said that, it must be added that there are many outstanding examples within this congregation of both these qualities, which I get to hear about but maybe most people don't.

But in God's family – as in any other – things do not always go as smoothly as we'd like them to. People don't always behave as we'd expect. Relationships go wrong. Paul recognises that and urges **FORGIVENESS** (vv14,17,19). Once again, we are very fortunate in some ways in this church. Many churches have within the congregation families who have been part of the church for several generations and I've come across places where a falling out which happened decades ago still casts a shadow over the life of the church today. Feuding families – and individuals – who refuse to forgive and forget, who are insistent on getting their own back, can mean churches are crippled in their witness and stunted in their fellowship. If there is anything that threatens to prevent God's people living in harmony and helping one another to grow as well as showing the wider community something of what Christ's love means in action, then get it sorted out, either on your own or with the help of others. The longer you leave it to fester and simmer, the deeper the resentment goes and the more radical has to be the action required to set it right again. If you're able to do that, then there is every chance that we will be able to be **PEACEFUL** (v18b) and live together in way that speaks loudly to those who are still to become followers of Christ.

Finally, Paul encourages **SYMPATHY** (v15) within the church. Paul returns to the theme in *Galatians* 6:2. We're in this together, folks. There will always be those amongst us who have cause to get excited about the good things that are happening in their lives. Like the grandma with a pocket full of photographs, they may be desperate to share their joy with others. Don't pour cold water on them, but share in their happiness. And there will be those who are struggling with problems and pain that it seems will never go away. Weep with them. Share their sorrow and show them the care that no other group of people can truly give them.

This morning we are welcoming several people into formal membership of this church. It is an acknowledgment by us all that we cannot get by on our own. It gives a strong signal that we realise that the Christian life is more than just a commitment to Christ; it includes a commitment to other Christians. In a church this size that doesn't mean – it cannot mean – that you have to know every other member intimately, but it does mean that you have a willingness to get involved and that you are ready to share with smaller groups in prayer, witness, worship and support. As Paul writes towards the end of this letter (*Romans* 15:5). “*May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*”

## **"THE PURPOSE DRIVEN LIFE"**

### **3. You were formed for God's family**

#### **Read – Romans 12:3-21**

Following on from last week's consideration of worship as an expression of our love for God, we look at fellowship as an expression of our love for one another. The New testament is full of images of the followers of Jesus Christ as a community – flock, church. Family, household etc. The idea of a Christian as an individual on his or her own is quite foreign to the New Testament. And there are plenty of examples of Christians being commanded to show love especially towards each other (e.g. *Galatians 6:10; 1 Peter 2:17*). Paul's words to the Roman Christians in this passage provide us with a list of qualities that should be apparent in the Church.

- Humility *vv3,16b*
- Diversity *vv4-8 (cf 1 Corinthians 12)*
- Mutuality *vv5b,10,16a; Romans 1:12*
- Love *v9a (cf 1 Corinthians 13)*
- Integrity *vv9b,17b,21*
- Sharing/Hospitality *v13 (cf Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35)*
- Forgiveness *vv14,17,19*
- Peace *v18b*
- Sympathy *v15*

A congregation that exhibits these qualities will not only find itself growing in its care and concern for each other and developing in its spiritual life, but will be a powerful witness to those who are, as yet, not part of it. In a world of individualism and fragmentation, the fellowship and unity of the Church need to be seen more than ever.

#### **QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS IN YOUR HOUSEGROUP**

1. How is "*being as committed to each other as we are to Jesus Christ*" different from the way most people understand "fellowship"?
2. What are the barriers that keep us from loving and caring for other believers?
3. What would make it easier for you to be able to share your needs, hurts, fears and hopes with others?
4. What are the most common excuses people give for not joining a church, and how would you answer them?
5. What could our group do to protect and promote unity in our church?
6. Is there someone you need to restore a relationship with that we could pray for you about?

## SOME THINGS TO DO THIS WEEK

### Day Fifteen

#### ***I was formed for God's family.***

Remember: *"His unchanging plan has always been to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ."*  
(Ephesians 1:5a)

How can I start treating other believers like members of my own family?

### Day Sixteen

#### ***Life is all about love.***

Remember: *"The entire law is summed up in a single command: 'Love your neighbour as yourself'."*  
(Galatians 5:14)

Honestly, are relationships my first priority? How can I ensure they are?

### Day Seventeen

#### ***I am called to belong, not just to believe.***

Remember: *"In Christ, we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others."*  
(Romans 12:5)

Does my level of involvement in my local church demonstrate that I love and am committed to God's family?

### Day Eighteen

#### ***I need others in my life.***

Remember: *"Share each other's troubles and problems, and in this way obey the law of Christ."*  
(Galatians 6:2)

What one step can I take today to connect with another believer at a more genuine heart-to-heart level?

### Day Nineteen

#### ***Community requires commitment***

Remember: *"We understand what love is when we realise that Christ gave his life for us. That means we must give our lives for other believers."*  
(1 John 3:16)

How can I help cultivate today the characteristics of real community in my small group and in my church?

### Day Twenty

#### ***Relationships are always worth restoring***

Remember: *"Do everything possible on your part to live in peace with everybody."*  
(Romans 12:18)

With whom do I need to restore a broken relationship today?

### Day Twenty-one

#### ***It is my responsibility to protect the unity of the church?***

Remember: *"Let us concentrate on the things which make for harmony and the growth of our fellowship together."*  
(Romans 14:19)

What am I personally doing to protect unity in my church family right now?