

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Ghost, be with us all evermore. These words, the final blessing found in 2 Corinthians, apply three divine qualities to those who receive God's blessing: grace; love; and fellowship. The third of these – fellowship – is a word commonly used in Reformed congregations to describe both the human and divine bonds which hold them together. In many congregational churches, you become a member through accepting the 'right hand of fellowship'. This indicates your commitment to the congregation, their commitment to you, and the shared commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ. This is done with great depth of feeling and sincerity.

The blessing used by Paul can be translated another way, however. The Greek word, *koinonia*, which has the sense of a togetherness that transcends individuality, is translated into Latin as *communio*, and this in turn translates into English directly as *communion*. No doubt the word fellowship is used so as not to confuse the issue with Holy Communion, but there is a human aspect to fellowship that somewhat limits the understanding of Paul's blessing.

What I mean is the way that human fellowship so easily becomes turned in on itself; the way one group of people defines itself negatively – we are not like the others! – the way church communities forge their identity not so much on the foundation of Christ but as being different – in faith, worship or practice – from the church down the road, or from the church we didn't like, so we founded this one.

I'm reminded of the joke told by Rabbi Lionel Blue of the Rabbi who was cast away on a desert island. When he was rescued, they noticed he had erected two substantial buildings. When asked, he told his rescuers: 'This one is the synagogue where I worship – and that one is the synagogue I wouldn't be seen dead in!'

This danger exists on a low level where there is lack of care about the pronouns 'we' and 'us'. Jonathan, and others who have to do with this church's publicity, will know how concerned I am not to run any risk of giving the impression that 'we' are talking to 'you out there'. 'Welcome to *our* service...' – what does that say to the casual visitor or newcomer? Words meant to embrace and include can do just the opposite. (Besides, it's God's service, not ours – but that's another issue!) 'We sing *our* next hymn' – what does that say to those who can't sing, or today don't really feel up to it, or who for some reason have lost their ability to sing? Or the instructions in service books: 'We stand to...' – what does that say to the 'old school' who think they should be kneeling at that point of the service, but their knees can't take it, so they sit down – are they somehow no longer part of the service because at this point *we* stand?

I hope you see what I am saying. It goes all the way from saying to a newcomer – 'You'll get to know us and the way we do things' to the funeral I attended once where I attracted some flak for not sitting with all the rest of the clergy who had turned up, and then watched at the refreshments afterwards when the clergy group were standing all in a circle sharing some joke, with their back to everyone else in the room. They no doubt had the greatest of fellowship, but it was a fellowship where others were clearly not welcome to belong.

Using the word *communion*, on the other hand, while it needs to be explained – and, yes, it needs to be said again: this isn't just Holy Communion – using the word *communion* forces us at least to take hold of the fact that the fellowship of the Holy Spirit is the very fellowship shared by God in Trinity. The Trinity is never closed off, never exclusive, always open to new life and new possibilities. The very existence of creation is testimony to the fact that God's communion is overflowing with life for all, and never, never, self-contained.

Here, too, there are dangers. Especially in recent years, when we have increasingly come to understand the Church's unity in terms of communion together, that very inclusive word has been used in ways that reflect the human limitations of the Church rather than the divine immensity of it. 'We are not in communion with you'; 'our communion has been impaired' – by divergent understandings of the role of women, by disagreements over sexual relationships – somehow, even the infinite, all-embracing life of God has succumbed to human limitation.

This week's title in the Lent Course is *Receiving Christ in Prayer and Fellowship*. I have chosen to begin this evening's address by identifying ways in which fellowship or communion can be anything other than Christ-like. You would think that at least in prayer it would be easier to be Christ-centred, but maybe even that is easier said than done.

I have a vivid recollection of attending a clergy event where at Morning Prayer there was a period for open intercession. Two prominent colleagues took on an issue of the day, effectively praying against each other! Several times they went at it, effectively telling God two contradictory versions of what God ought to do. While there is always the danger of praying in a way that pays no heed to the needs and issues of the day, there is also a way of prayer that in College we used to call 'The News'. You would discover on a weekday morning who had been listening to the news on the wireless because certain individuals would give out the headlines as part of their prayer for the world. The motivation good; the effect perhaps less so.

What I am saying is that if you want to receive Christ in prayer, fellowship or anything else for that matter, the focus actually has to be on Christ. So often the announcer tells listeners on Radio 4: *Sunday Worship today reflects on... whatever* – and the programme that follows is an often very worthy set of thoughts about some event, present or past, with passing reference to God or the odd bit of sacred music. If it's worship, the principal focus surely has to be on God. If we are to receive Christ, the means by which we receive him cannot become the most important thing – Christ must be the most important thing.

I don't want to suggest in any way that the means be ignored. One of the ways in which Christ is most commonly received is by means of the Church's liturgy, or indeed by contemporary events which don't call themselves liturgy but offer the same sort of structured space in which through prayer, reflection and multi-sensory action individuals and communities may encounter Christ. Properly done liturgy has a simple and easy dignity which does not distract from the encounter which is going on, but which enhances the experience and focuses on Christ.

So I am suggesting that any prayer or fellowship in which Christ has a part needs to be open enough to have space for Christ. When prayer of any sort becomes a closed circle of personal or community feeling, how can there be room for Christ? Where fellowship becomes an intimate community of like-minded people who enjoy each others' company, how can there be room for Christ? Basically, if there is no room at all for the outsider, there is not going to be any room at all for Christ; but where even the smallest space is given, Christ will find a way in, disturbing easy assumptions, asking awkward questions, and tearing down the barriers that distinguish 'us' from 'them'.

Let's end with some words of prayer, using words written by Saint Paul in chapter 3 of Ephesians:

I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

If the prayer we share and the fellowship we seek have that as a firm foundation, then we can hope to receive Christ through them.

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