

We all have reasons for being in some place or some situation. Of course there are times when we find ourselves in situations not of our choosing. But if we don't like where we are we usually move on, if we can. This is the same for churches; if people don't like something about the church they worship in, they move to another where the worship or teaching is more what they are looking for in a church.

What is it that brings us here? Why did we choose to become a part of this Church? I don't necessarily mean Thornliebank, but the wider church. Why did we choose the Church of Scotland or the Presbyterian church? Maybe we checked out other places of worship first and then choose this church. Perhaps you were brought up in this church and it was a natural choice that you would become a member of this church. I am sure we all have different stories about how we arrived in this church, or reasons for being here. What's important is that you feel at home here, and that you feel part of the church family at Thornliebank.

What's equally important is that we are aware that we are part of a greater, worldwide church. Sometimes we allow our belonging or identity in one church to cause us to forget the church outside our own locality or denomination. Sometimes within one church there can be factions or groups that exclude others, it is very possible to belong to a church but feel like an outsider. The divisions we allow to build up between churches or even within churches is exactly what the Apostle Paul was addressing in chapter four of his letter to the Ephesians. *As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.*

There is one body and one Spirit; just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Eph 4: 1 to 5).

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There's no ambiguity here: We are called to keep the unity of the Holy Spirit who is one with God the Father, and Christ the Son. We are taught that the Church is the body of Christ and we are called to unity within that body through the Holy Spirit. When we speak of calling it's usually in the context of someone being called to a particular gift. People are called to serve God in the role of elder, worship leader, musician, pastoral carer, deacon and so on. The calling Paul refers to in this chapter of Ephesians isn't any particular vocation but a much more fundamental calling: He is referring to an even more basic calling of the Gospel itself. Paul is summoning people to put aside their differences and preferences and believe in Jesus as the risen Lord, and to give them complete and undivided allegiance for the rest of their lives.

The church in Ephesus that Paul was addressing in this letter was a young church. It was part of the early church that was growing in the years after Christ's death. These Christians were infants in the faith and they had no doctrine or tradition, they had no Bible to guide them for the Bible didn't appear until two hundred years after this letter was written. The Ephesians were trying to live faithful lives under the guidance of Paul who had established their church. They knew little about what church should be and it was against this backdrop that Paul warned them about divisions.

The Ephesians were lucky! They hadn't developed theologies or denominations or difference in doctrines, they weren't sophisticated enough for the stuff that we hold dear.

We're educated and we recognise the differences between us and the other churches, where all love their labels of Presbyterian, Baptist, Roman Catholic, Episcopalian and so on. They didn't have the problem of some sticking to an orthodox reading of the Gospel, while others took a wide interpretation of the Scriptures to suit their times. I don't have a problem with people choosing different denomination. I think choice is good providing we recognise that we belong to the same body, the Body of Christ which is the church. *Our problems start when people believe that their church is the only true church and we forget that all Christian churches belong to our crucified Saviour.*

We are about to enter the summer period which is a quieter time in terms of church activity, but with the autumn will come renewed mission initiatives, but this quiet time gives us an opportunity to recognise how God has led Thornliebank over the past few years. And we must have faith that God will continue to lead us in the many years to come. But if we are to allow God to lead us then we must focus on being the people of God first and allow our local identity to be secondary. Yes, acknowledge that our traditions have served us well in the past and then give Christ control to move us on as the people of Christ in our community.

The Apostle Paul calls us to live a life worthy of our calling when we were called to follow Christ, and become part of the body of Christ: The one universal Christian Church. Division in the church is not a sign of passion according to Paul; it is a sign that we have forgotten who we serve, and that belonging to the church is a gift of grace from Jesus Christ! *We are the church because God called us to be so. When we cling to divisions and makes rules and boundaries, we are serving ourselves and such action has nothing to do with Christ and His mission!*

John's gospel says quite plainly that Jesus died *for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one*. If Jesus suffered and died on Calvary's cross to make all believers one, what must He think when he looks upon us today, and sees the fractured and fractious church which bears His name ?

It has been heartening and encouraging to see a growing unity among the people here. And there are healthy relationships between ourselves and neighbouring congregations. The attitude among our local churches is much healthier than in the church I came from in Edinburgh. We only had joint worship services with the local Baptist church and the Episcopalian church that is about four miles away.

The reason for this was not sectarianism as we recognise it, but because we were all evangelical churches and we didn't have a very high opinion of the neighbouring Church of Scotland congregations or the Roman Catholics, because they didn't have the same evangelical beliefs as we did. In our prideful arrogance we dismissed others as not really worth worshipping with. This attitude of spiritual snobbery was an invention of people who thought themselves better than others, so when I speak of unity, I know what I'm talking about because I come from a church that actively practiced disunity. I couldn't say that Christ's body was united between the churches I used to belong to.

We've spoken about divisions between denomination and geographical churches, and there's another type of division I want to address. Pentecost was three weeks ago when churches mark the coming of the Holy Spirit to God's people. Acts 2: ***When the day of Pentecost came they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.***

All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. This passage tells us that Christians were filled with the Holy Spirit and were enabled to speak in Tongues! When we're filled with the Spirit we find that we are freed up to worship God in a less restrained manner. Some people find that the Holy Spirit releases them to raise their hands when praising, to move or dance and feel less inhibited. And although how we worship is an individual expression of praising God, it can be a cause for division among worshippers. We all are aware of what makes us uncomfortable and what we are happy with, which is natural.

But I hear people in churches say things like *I don't like that happy clappy stuff*, or *that dancing and jumping about with hands in the air puts me off*. I know some prefer traditional praise while others prefer contemporary styles of worship, and this causes some people concern or discomfort. Which presents us with a dilemma: Either the people who sense the Spirit moving within them to worship God in a more exuberant way are restricted, or the folk who prefer to a more restrained manner of worship are annoyed.

The different ways people praise God can cause division among worshippers, and when God's people are not united the Church suffers. So instead of one group feeling restricted by another, why don't we all focus on worshipping God in whatever way the Spirit leads us. I've never felt the inclination to praise God through the medium of dance which may be a relief to you, but there are times that the words I am signing lead me to raise my hands up to God. And I respect the right of others to worship God in whatever way they feel led. I certainly don't have the right to tell them how they should worship: None of us have that right, as *Praise is something between God and the worshipper.*

So should there be any division in Thornliebank over how people praise God, let's put that aside and trust that God knows what He is doing, that God knows how He leads each one of us to respond to Him. Paul reminds us this letter that we really don't have much choice in this, our passage in Ephesians instructs that we should live in unity with each other; treating each other with grace and loving one another as Christ first loved us.

Thornliebank is a Church of Scotland that is evangelical with a mix of contemporary and traditional praise, and this forms our identity. But surely this isn't all we are? May we heed Paul's lesson from Ephesians 4 and may we live and work to make our church part of the body of Christ. May we be able to say that Thornliebank is God's Church!

Amen

Let us pray:

(1865 words)