

Look left, look right, look around you – Who do you see?

This is the first of our summer series, “look left, look right, look around you”. It’s about the “love people” part of our strap line – it’s about looking around at each other and those around the church community and learning how to see, serve, love, care for, challenge and forgive one another.

The church community is more than a social club or a therapy group. The unique element that connects us together is that we are recipients of God’s grace and forgiveness in Jesus Christ.

The church community is a precious, special, eternal, indispensable ingredient of our redemption by God. In this series we will be looking around us to discover and experience this extraordinary thing, so often taken for granted but so craved by the world in which we live. This hope for the world – community through Jesus Christ.

This is not Facebook friendship! Here’s a recent letter to the Oldie, from Peter White, Holbrook, Derbyshire,

Dear Sir,

I haven’t got a computer, but I was told about Facebook and Twitter, and am trying to make friends outside Facebook and Twitter whilst applying the same principles.

Every day I walk down the street and tell passers-by what I have eaten, how I feel, what I have done the night before and what I will do for the rest of the day. I give them pictures of my wife, my daughter, my dog and me gardening and on holiday, spending time by the pool. I also listen to their conversations, tell them I “like” them and give them my opinion on every subject that interests me ... whether it interests them or not.

And it works, I already have four people following me: two police officers, a social worker and a psychiatrist.

Perfect! Facebook is not “Life Together” as Bonhoeffer called church community. We can learn what it is through reading scripture. Let’s look at:

1 John 3:16-24 (the Message X 4)

16-17 This is how we’ve come to understand and experience love: Christ sacrificed his life for us. This is why we ought to live sacrificially for our fellow believers, and not just be out for ourselves. If you see some brother or sister in need and have the means to do something about it but turn a cold shoulder and do nothing, what happens to God’s love? It disappears. And you made it disappear.

18-20 My dear children, let's not just talk about love; let's practice real love. This is the only way we'll know we're living truly, living in God's reality. It's also the way to shut down debilitating self-criticism, even when there is something to it. For God is greater than our worried hearts and knows more about us than we do ourselves.

21-24 And friends, once that's taken care of and we're no longer accusing or condemning ourselves, we're bold and free before God! We're able to stretch our hands out and receive what we asked for because we're doing what he said, doing what pleases him. Again, this is God's command: to believe in his personally named Son, Jesus Christ. He told us to love each other, in line with the original command. As we keep his commands, we live deeply and surely in him, and he lives in us. And this is how we experience his deep and abiding presence in us: by the Spirit he gave us.

John was one of the disciples who spent the most time with Jesus. In many ways he was probably Jesus' closest friend and his writing about Jesus is softer, more relational but in many ways challenging. He describes this amazing person who transformed his life and the lives of all who met him and, who through his death and resurrection transformed and rescued mankind.

He affirms Jesus' divinity, recognising that he is God as well as man.

And his writing is also quite robust – challenging our behaviour as we give our lives to God.

The Gospel of John, these 3 letters and the book of Revelation almost certainly all came from John – even if he didn't actually write down the words. He had a bunch of people gathered around him who learnt from him and wrote it all down.

Verse 23

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This really resonates with the Gospel of John and you can imagine John as an old man, sitting in his armchair with a pipe in one hand and a pint of bitter in the other, telling the stories once again about his friend Jesus who did these amazing signs but whose final command to us before his death & resurrection was to love one another.

It's a recurring theme – love one another. Look left, look right, look around you – and love one another.

John wrote it because Jesus said it but he repeated it again and again because it needed repeating. Men and women are prone to falling out with each other. It is bad on a world stage, it is bad on the local stage and it is still a tendency, even in church.

How? What draws us together enough for us to love one another?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that *Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ*. (Life Together page 10).

What he meant was that in our natural, sinful state, we are separated from God and we are separated from each other. And if you look around, that's stating the obvious – just watch the news. He was writing before the 2nd WW and watching the increased intolerance of the German leaders (Hitler and his cronies) and their persecution of Jews and gypsies and others - and how this split the church of the time.

Without Christ we are lost in our sins. God's offer of salvation comes to us through the life, death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus, as a man, one of us. His salvation leads to restoration of our relationship with God whom we can call our Father - and to the restoration of our relationship - one with each other.

Jesus told us to love one another. To do life together. To build community together.

Psalm 133:1, *How good and pleasant it is when brothers (and sisters) live together in unity!*

The miracle and the challenge of the gospel in this is that it is Christ in us who ministers to Christ in each other. My faith is only expressed fully when I am with you. It is Christ in you by the Holy Spirit who speaks into my life, challenges me, tells me of God's work in you, gives me cause to celebrate and pray.

This ministry of the Holy Spirit between and among Christians is a miracle and the desire of nations and the power to transform our world.

We take it for granted. We think, shall we bother going to church on Sunday morning or shall we go shopping or lie in and read the paper? Shall we meet with our small group to share life or shall we get in Thai and watch a film?

But for many others - they would love to be in the company of other Christians – the elderly who can't get out, the ill who are stuck in bed, the lonely who know no one, those without transport, those working overseas in some form.

It is like different ingredients of the cake sitting on the kitchen surface, separate, doing their own thing but never mixing together, going through the heat of the oven together to make the cake.

Look left, look right, look around you – is a series which is looking at how we live together as a community of faith. How we take these ingredients and mix them up and then bake them!

- How we celebrate Christ in each other
- How we serve each other
- How we care for each other
- How we challenge each other
- How we do life together and have fun together
- How we become the body of Christ in Leeds
- How we start on earth what will be made complete in heaven

Because the community through Christ and in Christ is:

- An astounding thing. The diversity is extraordinary (ages, ethnicities, social groupings) and found nowhere else.
- A precious thing – source of life and the presence of God – *where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I with them* said Jesus, Matthew 18:20.
- A valuable thing – many are desperate for it, let's not take it for granted.
- A necessary thing – without it we are unfed and unsustained, a coal dying outside the fireplace, a flower wilting for lack of nutrients.
- An eternal thing – when you become a Christian you join an imperfect community which has 2000 years of history, and which will exist for eternity. One day when Jesus returns it will become a perfect community forever.

We know that the building isn't perfect, we can't find anywhere to park, we clash with the person in our small group, someone says something insensitive when we are trying to be vulnerable. But Jesus calls us on to an eternal destiny, travelling together and on this journey he reminds us, love one another.

Verse 16-17 *This is how we've come to understand and experience love: Christ sacrificed his life for us. This is why we ought to live sacrificially for our fellow believers, and not just be out for ourselves. If you see some brother or sister in need and have the means to do something about it but turn a cold shoulder and do nothing, what happens to God's love? It disappears. And you made it disappear.*

John doesn't say – Senior pastors – know what's going on in everyone's life and fix it. John says, see each other and do something about each other's needs. One of the evidences of the redeeming power of God in our lives, of Jesus Christ in us, is the way we care for each other.

This is widely recognised in our society at these times of austerity. People know that if you extracted the church from charity and social work in the UK it would simply disintegrate. Millions of man hours and millions of pounds given as we serve and care for one another. We'll talk more about that in coming weeks but today we are thinking about people within the church family, the body of Christ.

Look left, look right, look around you – who do you see?

I wonder who you know already in this congregation. Many people are away and we have visitors as well. But do we know each other at all? This is our family after all. This is the community of people who are Jesus Christ to me and you.

Try a few exercises:

1. Do you know the name and birthday of everyone in your small group? Can you find something out about each of them that you can pray for every week?
2. Try and remember who was sitting in front, behind, beside you - last Sunday – how many did you know? Their name? Something about them? What they need prayer for?
3. Next Sunday, make it your business to find this out for everyone around you.
4. On Sunday - don't sit at the edges – i.e. the sides and the back – but get central so that you are physically (and emotionally) amongst the family. Let visitors and guests sit at the edges so that they aren't forced into the middle where they don't know anyone.
5. Check out the address book on the website and see how many people you know in your post code area – for example. Offer to babysit or make them a cake or mow their lawn!

Many of us are very busy but sometimes we allow that to push down the priority that Jesus gives us – to love one another. So look left, look right, look around you – who do you see?

David Flowers
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