

Sermon preached at Scots

2 August 2015

Readings: Ephesians 4:1–16

John 6:24–35

It's interesting that one of the early metaphors that came to characterise the church was that of a ship. In most churches built with traditional ecclesiastical architecture, the place where the congregation sits is called the nave, which comes from the Latin word *navis* or "ship." Looking up at the ceiling (particularly when there are buttresses like at St Andrew's) is kind of like looking at an overturned boat. Even while the congregation is sitting still in the pews, the architecture itself invites the worshippers to launch out on a spiritual journey together. Here at Scots we are a bit different and while we have corners, perhaps we are more like the coracle, which is rounder and invites those on the inside the chance to rest while those on the outer part do the work of moving the boat on its journey. Using that image then, we are all part of the crew, some active, some resting, some in the steering area keeping direction. It is less of a hierarchical structure and more a sharing of the tasks by the whole crew. That requires a togetherness and oneness of purpose.

Now Paul understood that the life of the church is essentially *communal*, reflecting a relationship we all have as children of God, but he doesn't stop with that image. With his own imprisonment in the background, Paul emphasises an even stronger tie that should bind the Christian community together — the "bond of peace". That bond is defined by the virtues that Paul writes about in verse 2: humility, gentleness, patience, dealing with each other with love and being unified in the Spirit — all of which are keys to both healthy families and groups and healthy churches!

Church life is also *creedal*. As a community we have shared beliefs. Paul rattles off a litany of creedal elements we share as a community of faith:

one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God.

If such a way of being together centres a family or group around a common relationship or interest, then a faith community such as ours must centre our life and journey around a core set of shared values, or beliefs. These elements are things that unite us, not divide us. They keep us together. This "one" relationship we share through our baptism and faith in Christ unifies us so we are better able to respond to the call of Jesus to follow with him, to be "together" with him on a journey of faith that is not merely an individual spiritual quest but a group travel experience in mission. It's the kind of trip where everybody has a role and a responsibility, providing part of the resources for the journey.

But we must have the resources for this excursion. That's why the life of the church is also *charismatic*. The creedal community is a gifted church filled with grace. The word for "grace" is *charis*. Paul says that "each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift".

There's no doubt that God has graciously gifted our community with the skills to keep the ship of faith afloat on the seas of our spiritual adventure. That's what spiritual gifts are really about. God has ensured that this vessel has all the necessary hands on deck to make the journey. The church at its best is not a homogenous group crammed on a bus sightseeing its way through the Christian experience. Instead, God equips and gifts people of all different ages, stages and abilities as fellow travellers. The gifts listed in verse 11 are just a few of the roles that are needed to move the church forward in its journey and mission. It isn't meant to be exhaustive, but reminds us that the role of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers — be they "professionals" or laypersons — is to resource the body of Christ and remind everyone on board of their common destination, with a unified faith in, knowledge of and "maturity to the measure of the full stature of Christ."

The particular task of these gifted ones is: “to equip the saints”. The word “equip” is the same word in the Greek that is used of the disciples “preparing” their nets in Matthew. Other versions have the disciples “mending” their nets, i.e., making them serviceable or useful for the mission ahead. That is precisely the task of those who are pastors/teachers: to equip others, to prepare others, to mend others, or as Paul calls them, “the saints.”

The purpose of this equipping is that the saints, you, might be prepared “for ministry,” which in turn builds up the body of Christ, and this should continue “until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ”.

Paul continues to use the “ship” metaphor when he continues in the next sentence: “We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine”. Being together, we can’t be deterred by various and sundry holiday brochures that happen to flutter past our field of vision. We know who we are, we know where we’re going, we know why we’re doing what we’re doing, and we must not be distracted by other things blowing in the wind.

Finally, the Christian life is also a *caring* life. Christians speak the truth in love. In the verses following the text for today, Paul gets even more specific, offering a whole range of examples of how the church is a caring community, not a bitter community, or thieving community, or one nursing anger. He concludes by saying: “Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you”.

As an aside, notice that there’s no mention here of heaven as the ultimate holiday destination. The church really “arrives” when it functions fully as the body of Christ and everyone has a stake in the adventure. Properly understood, Christianity is the ultimate group project where-

being together is more of a requirement than an option. While being together works for small groups of people, living together as a larger community isn’t exactly the way that most people in our culture want to work or travel. Any kind of permanent tie to others, and particularly to groups like the church, is usually treated as optional. Sunday morning sports or shopping at The Base, for example, seem to win out over gathering together for worship.

But maybe that has more to do with how the church views itself than a person’s commitment. If we see ourselves as a static institution where people “come and sit,” wring our hands about attendance and giving, and offer the same old stuff week after week it’s no wonder that our people might see the church as just another in a string of weekly entertainment options.

What we must focus on is the “unity of the spirit” that pushes the church outward and invites people to use their gifts and engage in a great adventure in serving God. It’s God’s spirit, not our programmes, that binds us together as the community of God. Focus on the spirit, on the common destination we have together in Christ, and on making the church community a place where everyone is gifted and everyone belongs and you have a travel map for an exciting journey of faith that can’t get blown off course.

The “truth” that we need to speak in love is that Christ has chosen to work through each of us individually and all of us together as his body — an integrated whole that journeys toward God in worship and toward others as we go forward into the world. In order to function properly and be mobile, every part and every person is needed and wanted. We are that body. Let’s keep going in Christ!

The Word of Jesus is among us. Hear that Word