

Christian Community

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Preacher: The Rt. Rev. Mike Hill

[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. May we bow our heads and pray together before we look at God's Word together. Father, I pray that you would take my feeble words and in the power of your Spirit, change them into life-giving words.

Father, we pray that this morning, even in this extreme heat, Father, you would be able to send down your fire upon us. Lord, that we might be the people that you call us to be in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Amen. So a verse from Ephesians chapter 4, Paul says this, as a prisoner for the Lord there, then I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.

The German theologian Jürgen Moltmann, in an interview that was done just a few months ago, he's a very elderly man now.

He's been a very influential theologian, though I would suspect most of you have never heard of him. Moltmann said this, he said, the opposite of poverty is not wealth, it's community.

[1 : 31] Let me say that again. I want you to lodge that thought in your mind as I proceed with this talk. Come to think about it, I don't think in the Jewish council of Sanhedrin there was much talk about social mobility or anything like that.

But somehow that early Christian community lived in an amazing way that we read in Acts chapter 4 and verse 36, check it out if you don't believe me, that there were no needy persons among them. Why was that? Because they were living in community. What does it mean to live in community?

Well, a community is a people group, but not all people groups are communities.

Because a community is defined by one really important aspect, and it's this. It's defined by the fact that when we are in community, we start to take responsibility for one another.

When one of us weeps, we all weep. When one of us rejoices, we all rejoice. When one of us is in need, we respond faithfully to that need.

[3 : 05] Some of you are sitting there saying to yourselves, well, hang on, that sounds a bit inward looking. That sounds a bit like cozy Christianity, if ever I heard of it.

Except that God expects Christian community to spill out into the community around us. Tim, I think, used the phrase when he prayed for us just now.

To serve the community. The Christian community will never be content to just serve its own needs. It will have its eyes open to the world.

I think it was William Booth who said, was it not, that he always had an open Bible, but also an open newspaper. So let me ask you a question.

Do you think the church of God creates community? Or do you think the church of God works best where there is an existing community that it can kind of latch on to?

[4 : 13] Don't shout your answer out, but just think about that for a moment. It's a very critical question in its way. Well, the research, I think, is probably a bit counterintuitive.

It's what the research, and to be truthful, the research is not what you would call, you know, there are not huge volumes of it. But what the research tends to point towards is that the church does best where there is an existing community that it can work with.

In a previous life, when I was the Bishop of Buckingham, I had the privilege of having Milton Keynes within my jurisdiction. In Milton Keynes, miraculously, the church in those days, that was in like 1972, was actually invited to be a part of the Milton Keynes Development Corporation.

And boy, did they milk it. They made sure that there were allotted land to build churches in every second grid square in Milton Keynes. They applied funding to Milton Keynes to make sure that in every other grid square there was a full-time clergy person and it was ecumenical.

So very often there were four or five full-time clergy working in an ecumenical parish, which consisted of two grid squares in Milton Keynes. Probably top-end 7,000 people.

[5 : 44] Let me tell you, even today, Milton Keynes is a massive red mark on the accounts of the Diocese of Oxford.

Very few of those churches have reached what you might call a critical mass that's needed to run a church in the 21st century. Very few of them have even 100 members, never mind the 150 members that most church growth people would consider.

Why was that? Well, it was trying to create church, community *ex nihilo*. That means from nothing. The church has always done better, though in our time it's not doing particularly well at the moment. But the church has always done really well when it can fasten on to an existing community. You know what people tell me about Clevedon? They tell me that what they like about Clevedon is that sense of community.

That should make us open our eyes, start to breathe a little more heavily, and let our heartbeats become a little quicker, unless you've got a heart issue. Okay.

[6 : 59] So, does the church live in community today? Well, researchers have looked at Christians over the years in terms of three sorts of Christians.

One is what they call committed Christians. Those are people who regularly attend church, regularly give of their income, regularly pray, regularly can give some evidence that their whole lives are based on the leadership and the guidance of God.

Then there are what researchers call cynical Christians. Those are people who were Christians and are now no longer Christians, sorry, are no longer involved with the church, though they would still claim to be Christians, but the church has put them dramatically off expressing their faith.

Frighteningly, they are a growing number of people, and we can be critical of them, but of course, really what we ought to do is look in the mirror and ask ourselves as a church, what is so wrong with us that people who are once on fire with for the Lord will no longer come anywhere near us?

And indeed, if you get them on the subject of church, you will start to imagine that they've had a sudden attack of Tourette's syndrome or something. The third kind of Christian proliferates in the Church of England.

[8 : 28] They're called cultural Christians. They're people who generally subscribe to the idea of church. They may send their children to church schools.

They may even attend church on a relatively regular basis. They may even give some of their money to the church. But actually, they have never appropriated, they've never made their own the message of the gospel.

The thing about committed Christians is this.

Their research consistently shows that in any one church, 20% of the membership of that church falls into the committed Christian delineation.

80% do not, for different reasons. That means that in most churches, 20% of the people provide 80% of the money, 80% of the horsepower, 80% of the gifts, 80% of just about blooming well everything.

[9 : 55] While the other 80% passively watch on. I want to say to you, I know some of you, and I know that some of you are very committed Christians, and I thank God for that.

But I will thank God even more, when the 80% of our church, that actually allows the 20% to supply all the horsepower and the money, etc., etc., step up, and make it 21%, 22%, 23%.

And I want you to think about that, because I'm going to ask you, at the end of this message, whether or not you're prepared to stand up, not literally, well, maybe literally, to stand up and say, from today onwards, I am going to put myself in that 20% bracket.

Because unless we do, we will never start to be the church that God calls us to be. I don't know how much you read your Bibles, but I do know this, that if you read the Acts of the Apostles, you would realize this, you would realize that that church functioned as a community.

Here's a novel idea, Acts chapter 2, verse 44, I think it is, where the writer tells us, Luke tells us, that when someone was in need, they would sell their possessions to meet that other person's need.

[11 : 16] Friends, we're a long way away from that. Can you imagine a day, when we could put our hands up in church and say, there are no needy people amongst us, because we live as a community, and we take responsibility for each other.

When somebody weeps, we weep. When somebody rejoices, we rejoice. When somebody is in need, we respond generously. Firstly, so, we come to Ephesians chapter 4. I'm sorry for a long introduction. Okay, this tests your forgiveness level. Ephesians chapter 4, verses 1 to 16.

What Paul is doing there, is doing something really important for us to pay attention to today. He is giving a thumbprint of what the church should look like.

And he has three things that he says there, conveniently for my message. The first thing is, he says, unity, unity is critical.

[12:32] The second thing he says is, slightly ambiguously, is that diversity is important. And the third thing he says is, if we're getting this right, we're going to grow up.

You know, I know a lot of members of churches are, you know, middle-aged to elderly, and that's great. But don't assume, because you're middle-aged or elderly, that you're mature.

Some of the most childish people I know are old. I may be one of them. So, unity. Paul says, endeavour, endeavour, endeavour.

You've got to put effort into the idea that the church would be unified. Of course, Paul didn't know about ecumenism. He didn't have a clue about Methodists or Baptists, because they'd not been invented at this stage.

Paul was talking about us, the local church. He's saying, the way it's meant to work is like this, that where there are differences amongst you, Jesus has given you the resources to offer forgiveness to one another.

[13:51] This is not a place where we excel in trolling each other on social media. This is not a place where we gossip behind people's backs, although we've invented a language for doing that, haven't we?

Isn't it great when you hear one Christian say, I just want to share with you about Harry, when basically what they're going to do is some character assassination attempt. Now, Paul says, we've got to work hard at unifying.

Now, the trouble is, that it'd be easy if we were all the same, wouldn't it? Come on to this, we're all very different. We hold different opinions.

I mean, in my view, some people's opinions are bonkers, but it's their opinion. And what I mustn't do, said Paul, is fall out with them. Paul uses a very interesting analogy there.

I don't know if you noticed it in the first four or five verses. He uses the analogy of God the Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

[14:59] And just as these are one and all one, but they are separate, different, so they work together in unity. It would be unthinkable that the Holy Trinity, you know, that the Holy Spirit would do a bit of muttering about Jesus or vice versa.

So we're called, literally, to love one another with agape love. That doesn't mean I can feel good about everybody in church, but it does mean I can want the best for them.

I can set my heart to want the best for them. Second thing is, slightly ambiguously, the diversity of the church. Paul says in Ephesians 4, round about verse 7, he said, to each one of us, grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.

The scholars think that what Paul is talking about there is the gifts, the charismata, the gifts of God's grace. Here's the truth.

If you are a believer, if you cross the line and accepted the gospel, then God has given you spiritual gifts. And let me tell you that one of the reasons why a lot of people are frustrated in churches is very simply this, that they don't know what their spiritual gifts are and therefore they can't exercise them.

[16:26] So church, to them, can feel all push, all shove. No freedom, no liberation to exercise my gifts.

We have different gifts. Paul makes that clear in Romans and in the Corinthian literature. He makes it very clear. There's lists of gifts there. I don't think they're meant to be exhaustive lists, but there are lists there.

And what Paul is saying is, though we all have different gifts, we're supposed to work like a body. You remember Paul uses that phrase a lot, the body of Christ.

And he says, when a body's working healthily, all its parts work in unity. Some of you at the age, I'm one of them, you know, I'm starting to realize that my body's not quite as in unity as it used to be.

But nevertheless, that's the ideal. that when we offer our gifts to serve one another and to serve the world, then the church becomes what God intended it to be.

[17 : 36] So a church where there's no relational unity, a church where half the membership don't have a clue what their spiritual gifts are. By the way, not all spiritual gifts are weird.

If you're sitting there and your weird meter is starting to flicker with talks of spiritual gifts, let me just reassure you, it's not like that.

Some of those gifts are very basic gifts. You know what Paul says is a gift? If Catherine was in here, she's not right now, she'd be very pleased to know that the gift of administration is written down there.

That's not spooky, is it? That's kind of down-to-earth, everyday, necessary gift for the successful running of any organization. Paul says, leadership is a gift.

That's not spooky. I mean, there's been more stuff written about leadership in the last 30 years than just about any other subject than non-fictional literature. So we're supposed to be a place where we get on together despite our differences, and in fact, what we need to do is to learn to celebrate our differences.

[18 : 49] I don't know what you do, you know, when somebody comes up and verbalizes an opinion that you think is, you don't think much of.

I have a friend like this and she constantly is saying things that I think are just loony. Right? She's not a Christian. And if I even try and scratch the surface of why she would conceivably think this, she goes ape, starts shouting, listen, we can't be like that.

Relational unity is critical to an effective church. and trust me, I can tell you that the one thing that messes up a church just about more than anything else is where bad relationships exist.

Up and down this country, I can only speak about the Church of England because it's the only one I got real experience of. Up and down this country, there are churches where two or three people cause mayhem and nobody loves them enough to challenge them.

Notice the way I put that. Nobody loves them enough to challenge them. Diversity is important because God made us different and gave us different gifts and what we're supposed to do is bring those gifts, offer them to Jesus and see the ministry of the church go.

[20 : 23] And finally, maturity. I know you're all too humble to admit that you might be mature.

And it's very difficult to assess other than maybe the people who love you enough to tell you the truth might give you an angle on that. But Paul says this is really important that we don't end up being the kind of people who become captive to wrong-headed ideas in society and in the world and in the church.

I used to speak on a speaking circuit with a former bishop. Not even sure whether he's still alive. He was the bishop of Durham. He was very controversial.

Some of you will remember that he articulated the belief that as a bishop he no longer believed in the physical resurrection of Jesus. Don't ask me out.

I ended up on speaking platforms with him. And I would speak about the church and the future and he would speak about faith and the future.

[21 : 34] Incidentally he thought very passionately that 9-11 changed everything. I don't know if he was right about that but it interested me that he would say it. I tell you what I really loved about this man.

I never saw him speak when he didn't break down in tears and say that the cost of discipleship for him was crucifying.

And the reason that impressed me was I thought wow that's exceptional to hear that kind actually the cost of discipleship for every believer should be crucifying.

It should cost us. Jesus didn't assume there would be some brothers and sisters within the new community of Christians who would pay that cost and some who would just get away with it.

No. All of us should bear that cost. So where's all this leading us? Well I want to say this and I don't often feel I have a prophetic word to the church but I do want to say if ever the church you and me needed to be a true community in the light of COVID it would be now.

[23 : 01] there are a lot of bereaved a lot of lonely a lot of empty a lot of angry a lot of emotionally tied up people in our community who desperately need to be set free and what they don't need at this stage in their life is a church that would put them off forever.

Remember Nietzsche in one of his novels writes about the madman who was sitting on the steps of the church screaming God is dead God is dead God is dead and the people went up to him and they said to him why do you think God is dead and his answer was very simple he said because I went to church I think it was Oscar Wilde who said a cocktail party is a social device designed to help people not meet each other wouldn't it be a tragedy if a church was a place where people were put off from meeting with God church is not going to set you free friends God is going to set you free and the reason we need to live truly as community let me tell you as a church in Bristol where 150 of them have actually moved out of their homes and lived together in community I'm not asking you to do that though you might consider it I'm saying community starts where we start to take responsibility for one another and it continues where we start to take responsibility for the thousands of people in this town who are not in church today and what will make the difference is when those of you who are what Dan Postieski calls decaffeinated Christians that is your Christianity is designed not to keep you awake at night when you the 80% decide to step up and become part of the 20% so the 20% is no longer 20% it's 21% it's 22% final word David Putnam in his unbelievable book I don't think he's a Christian and he's looked at a lot of evidence in America but he says that what's true in America is true in the western world the book is called Bowling Alone it speaks of the phenomenon that ten pin bowling which was designed as a game to build social capital is now undertaken by people who just go to the bowling alley on their own and bowl balls down I've seen that golf course friends two of them around Clevedon I've seen so many people playing golf on their own Partnum is saying that in western society social capital is breaking down and covid pandemics accelerate that process here's the prophetic word if there ever was a moment for the church to step up and truly be community it would be now so I ask you I plead with you those of you know you're in the 80% bracket are you going to step up are you going to help this local church be the local church that God called us to be friends I join with St. [27 : 18] Paul in urging you urging you pleading with you begging you let's try living a life worthy of the calling we've received in the name of our amazing God Father Son and Holy Spirit and the people who agreed woke up and said together Amen to be a John