

A greater fulness

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[0 : 00] If we could turn to John chapter 17 and verse 20 for our first reading, which will be found on page 1089.

And our Lord Jesus prayed. I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

The glory that you have given me, I have given to them, that they may be one, even as we are one, I in them, and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them, even as you loved me.

Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me, because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. I have made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.

[1 : 36] The second reading is from Ephesians chapter 4, verse 1 to 6. I, therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit, in the bond of peace.

There is one body, one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope that belongs to your call. One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all in all.

Good morning, everyone. Ernest, thanks very much indeed for reading for us. Please do keep Ephesians open, and let me pray for us.

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. Heavenly Father, we pray as we look at your word this morning.

We pray, please, that you would indeed lighten our paths. Please would you help us to understand your word. We pray that as individuals and as a local church, we would be shaped by it.

[3 : 08] We pray for your mercy on us this morning, for Jesus' sake. Amen. Well, if we were out in Brockwell Park or Dulwich Park this morning, interviewing people, asking the question, what do you associate with the church?

I imagine the answers would be fairly predictable. Old hymns, old pews, old buildings, perhaps for some old people. A beautiful backdrop, perhaps for a wedding or something like that.

But in terms of real life, in terms of Monday morning life, largely irrelevant on its way out, a hangover from the past.

And yet, if we ask God the same question, what is his view of the church, we get a very, very different answer indeed. Far from being a hangover from the past, it is a signpost to the future.

The church is, if you like, the plausibility structure which demonstrates that God's master plan for his world is on track. We've seen that plan lies at the heart of Ephesians.

[4 : 24] Just to click back to Ephesians 1, verse 10. Here is God's plan. Chapter 1, verse 10. God's plan for the fullness of time to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

But you say, where is the evidence? Where is the evidence that God's plan for a whole new world under the rule of Jesus Christ is actually on track and going to happen?

Well, exhibit number one. Jesus rose from the dead, never to die again. He is now seated in the heavenly places.

Chapter 1, verse 21. Far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come.

And if you're here this morning, and if you're not yet convinced that Jesus did indeed rise from the dead, never to die again, then I'd love to chat further afterwards.

[5 : 30] But exhibit number two, as we've seen over the last two weeks, is the church. As in the church, people who, humanly speaking, would have very little to do with one another are brought together under the rule of Jesus.

Just look around this room this morning. So many different sorts of people, different backgrounds, different nations, different personalities. Or think of the church across the world, made up of people from a vast number of nations, and yet all living under the rule of King Jesus.

And so although the media, of course, loves nothing more than to publish figures of declining church attendance in the UK, and undoubtedly the traditional denominations are declining as nominal Christianity collapses in this country, and good riddance we might say as well.

Nonetheless, throughout the world, the very existence of the church across cultures and across nations demonstrates that God's plan is indeed on track.

It means, of course, it's no small thing to be a Christian. It is to be on the right side of history. It also means that actually the quality of our shared life together, and that is what the second half of Ephesians is all about, the quality of our shared life, is vital.

[7 : 01] You'll see three headings there on the outline. First of all, the need for unity. The need for unity. Verse 3.

Eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Notice, will you, that if we put our trust in Jesus, we are not called to create unity.

Look at the verse again. We're not called to create unity. We are called to maintain unity. Because it's unity that the death of Jesus Christ on the cross has already achieved.

Unity with God and unity with each other. Just turn back to chapter 2, verses 14 to 16, and the summary of what Jesus' death accomplished.

Chapter 2, verse 14. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

[8 : 22] Notice there, Jesus died on the cross so we can be forgiven our sins and at peace with God. In other words, the problem of our vertical alienation from God has been dealt with, now at peace with God.

And notice too, that by bringing those who trust in him under the rule of Jesus and into his kingdom, he's also dealt with the problem of horizontal alienation from one another, bringing peace.

As Paul says, through the death of Jesus, God has made a new humanity out of a divided humanity. And as John reminded us earlier, we are a divided humanity.

If you were here this morning looking in on the Christian faith, this is the very heart of the Christian message, that through the death of Jesus Christ, it is possible to be reconciled to God and reconciled to each other in a word, united, regardless of human distinctions of class or race or background or language or culture or wealth or personality or any of the other kinds of things which naturally divide us, one in Christ, with people across the world.

Hence, chapter 4, verse 3, not a call to create unity but a call to maintain unity, the unity we have in Christ already.

[9 : 56] You see, what message does that kind of unity lived out then send to the watching world? It speaks volumes, doesn't it?

Volumes. Just cast your mind back to the Football World Cup in the summer. How did the England team manage to reach the semi-finals for only the third time in their history?

Well, it was the unity of a team that was so often commented upon. Here is Oliver Kay writing in the Sunday Times, in the age of the overindulged football superstar, England looked more like a team than they have done for years.

The squad has strong characters, Harry Maguire, Harry Kane, Jordan Pickford, but no overbearing alpha males. And the credits went to Gareth Southgate for the way in which he trained and managed his team to act as a team as he implemented his strategy.

People noticed. And in a far greater way, you see, what would it have demonstrated in first century Ephesus as Jew and Gentile met together in church?

[11 : 10] As they perhaps went round to each other's houses to share a meal? As they met together, the great divide, the great divide of the first century world between Jew and Gentile overcome in Christ?

People would have noticed. It would have demonstrated that Jesus Christ is Lord, that his master plan is on track to bring people under his rule.

A signpost to the future day at the end of time when everyone will have to bow the knee to King Jesus. By contrast, what would it have demonstrated if in first century Ephesus the church was divided actually along all the same kinds of lines of division as Ephesian society?

Jew, Gentile, rich, poor, educated, uneducated, young, old. Each group only relating to those like them. What would that show?

Well, it would make a complete mockery, wouldn't it, of God's plan to unite all things under Christ. He would have given the impression that Jesus wasn't really Lord at all.

[12 : 24] So the need for unity. Notice, not an end in itself, but to demonstrate that Jesus is Lord. To demonstrate that God's master plan for all time is on track.

But secondly, the need for the right kind of unity. Verses four to six. There is one body and one spirit just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call.

One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all. Now, what I wanted to see is that the Bible doesn't hold to unity at all costs.

It is not any kind of unity. Rather, it is the right kind of unity which reflects the fact that if we have put our trust in Jesus Christ, we are already united in him.

As with our first point, the key lies in what we've seen in Ephesians already. Look back to chapter 2 verses 19 to 22. As Paul says of those who have put their trust in Jesus, verse 19, so then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.

[13 : 55] Built on the foundation, the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone in whom the whole structure being joined together grows into a holy temple in the Lord.

In him, you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. In other words, true Christian unity is creedal.

It is based on what we believe. I take it that's the point Paul is making in chapter 4 when he speaks about one Lord, one faith, one baptism and so on.

It's the kind of unity Jesus himself prayed for in that reading from John chapter 17. He had in mind those who in time would believe in the message of the apostles, the same message that is foundational to every genuine church.

In other words, when we talk about unity, it's not the strength of our love for one another, the strength of the feelings we have for one another that meshes us together over time.

[15 : 06] Rather, it is our shared belief in Jesus, our shared belief in his gospel, his master plan. That is the point of our unity. That is where unity lies.

Which is why, of course, the local church can be a place of such very deep unity. Because although we're all so very different, actually we are united in Christ.

Perhaps as a Christian group in your office or as CU in your school. But actually, to be honest, as you look at the others in that group, they're really a bit of a mixed bunch.

And perhaps there's no one you really feel you can relate to. Perhaps no one you really think you have that much in common with. And you find yourself wondering, well, is it really worth going after all?

Well, in which case here you see is the reminder that actually at a much deeper level, there is unity in Christ. And then actually as you work together for the progress of the gospel, a whole assortment of different people, but nonetheless working together for the progress of the gospel in school or within the firm or whatever it is, it sends a very powerful message to the world, a world where there is so much disunity and so much division that Jesus is Lord and that his plan for all time is on track.

[16 : 33] It's true of church as well. If you're looking for a church to join, well please don't decide to come to Grace Church simply because there are lots of people here who are just like you and who you think you will get on with.

And if you're thinking of leaving Grace Church, please don't leave simply because there aren't enough people who are like you. Our unity is in Christ. It is much, much deeper simply than any

superficial similarities there may be between us in terms of personality and background and so on. And of course that in turn sends an extraordinarily powerful message that God's plan is on track. But notice it also follows that if someone claims to be a Christian but doesn't hold these fundamental truths, then actually we aren't by definition united with them.

Just as perhaps someone arriving at Heathrow Airport on an international flight might claim to be a British citizen, but if they're not a British citizen, then however much they stand in the immigration counter demanding and insisting that they are, demanding their rights of citizenship, they will be denied because they don't have a common citizenship.

In the same way, it's not those who do hold to the one true gospel who cause disunity in the church, it's those who don't believe it or who move away from the one true gospel who cause disunity.

[18:18] It's why the New Testament warns us to stay away from them. But of course they're not always easy to spot, are they? So in the Church of England for example, you may well know that there's often much talk about people and churches coming from different traditions.

And yet the language of different traditions is so often in practice code for different gospels, different fundamental beliefs.

In fact there was a good example of that this last week for those who followed or at least followed part of the funeral of US President George Bush. When the Reverend Canon Jan Naylor Cope led the prayers, this is the way in which she opens the prayers in the state funeral.

She began, Our Lord Jesus Christ who said, I am resurrection and I am life. Now what is wrong with that?

No the. No the. Jesus didn't say, I am resurrection and I am life. He said, I am the resurrection and the life.

[19:36] Now it's a pretty small word, isn't it? The, three letters. But actually it makes all the difference between having a big Jesus who says, I am the resurrection and the life.

I am the only way to resurrection life in this world and the next and a very small Jesus who is simply one of many ways to God.

And therefore anyone listening to those prayers would have to conclude that Jan Naylor Cope believes actually in a very different Jesus to the Jesus of the Bible.

Yes, she is ordained. Yes, she is on the staff of a cathedral. But actually she demonstrated that she is not in fact a Christian. And therefore of course it means that genuine followers of Jesus are not united with her.

And of course there are many others who do similar things with core gospel truths. So you see we mustn't be naive. If you're a new Christian or looking on the Christian faith, don't assume that any old church will do.

[20:50] And when the day comes when you're moving away from Dulwich, when you're moving a house looking for a new church, be discerning. Ask the question, what is the gospel as you look for a new church?

What is the gospel that's being preached here? Look at some of these words in Ephesians chapter 4, verses 4, 5, and 6. What do they mean when they talk about Jesus being Lord?

What do they mean when they talk about faith? Or hope? Or even the gospel? Do they mean the same thing that the Bible means by those things?

So the need for unity, secondly the need for the right kind of unity, thirdly walking in unity. Verses 1 and 2.

I therefore, prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you've been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

[22:02] Remember, will you, that Paul is addressing the whole church here. He's not saying you individually walk in a manner worthy of your calling, but you corporately. After all, put a whole bunch of sinners together in a local church, for example, as we are, and I take it we need these qualities in abundance.

And yet, wonderfully, the gospel gives us the resources we need. And again, the rest of Ephesians, I think, helps us to see this. So just flick back to chapter 2 and have a look at chapter 2, verses 8 to 10.

Ephesians 2, verse 8. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. Here is the glorious truth that we are saved and forgiven, not by anything that we do, but simply as a gift, because Jesus died on the cross for our sins. I contribute nothing, therefore there is no room for boasting. My good works count for nothing. It's so unlike, isn't it, I don't know, the tennis club, or the golf club, where anyone can join, but it's conditional on how good a player you are.

[23 : 39] And of course, from the very moment you've paid your subscription, everyone knows what your handicap is, everyone knows exactly where you are on the league table of players, and inevitably there's resentment, as those at the top of the table sort of strut around the clubhouse as if they own the place, and those who assume that just because they're the best players, they have the right to determine and to tell everyone else how the club should be run.

There is, in other words, a pecking order of first class, second class, third class members of the whichever club it happens to be. That, of course, is a toxic recipe for division and quarrels and disunity and so on.

Well, in a far more significant way, can we see that if any percentage of my salvation, if any percentage of my standing before God is due to my good works and my religious achievement, then there's always going to be different grades and classes of Christians in the church, a toxic recipe for division and quarrels.

But the glorious truth is I contribute nothing. Now, that is personally, of course, a very humbling thing. But the implications for our unity together are very, very wonderful indeed.

It's why the gospel of justification by faith alone through the death of Jesus is not simply something I need to believe at the point when I put my trust in him, but actually I need to go on holding to it such that I am shaped by it, so that we corporately are shaped by it.

[25 : 32] Verse 2, so that with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love. Humble, because we've been humbled and we know that we have nothing to contribute to our salvation.

Gentle, because we've been gripped by the gentleness of the Lord Jesus. patience, because we have experienced his great patience, bearing with each other, because he does say with us as we trip and stumble through the Christian life.

Isn't this the kind of church you want to be part of? It's very counter-cultural, isn't it? Very, very counter-cultural indeed. Indeed.

We live in a culture where it's normal, I take it, to be opinionated, aggressive, ambitious, for oneself and for others, to have sharp elbows where we kind of elbow people out the way, even if it's very kind of superficially gently in a nice middle-class way.

And it's not just on programs like The Apprentice, it's in real life. Instead, we're to walk in humility, a humility which recognizes the value of others, not pushing my agenda, not arguing my case, in gentleness, gentle with the words I use, the opinions I express, the comments I make, patience, patient with those we find trying, patient with those we find irritating, patient with those who take time and energy.

[27 : 13] Patience is very easy, isn't it? with people who are just like me. But the whole point of church is, church is full of people who aren't like me. Slow to take offense, quick to apologize, not being defensive, bearing with each other in love, a mutual tolerance of those who are, or perhaps with those who are simply very different from us.

Humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another. It speaks, doesn't it, of being involved. It speaks of being involved in one another's lives.

It makes a nonsense, doesn't it, of the idea that somehow you can be a Christian without actually being committed to the local church. It makes a nonsense of the idea that you can be a Christian and just remain on the edge of church life, or even that we can quietly avoid those we don't really get on with.

And it's obvious, isn't it, just as we look at these characteristics in verses one and two, it's obvious that a church like this will be able to maintain its unity and togetherness.

We'll be prepared to let things happen, which may not be to our liking, but actually which we know others will want, and which will be for our good together as a church.

[28 : 39] We'll be willing perhaps to lay aside our own small hang-ups for the sake of others. Whereas, you see, what's the reverse of all these things?

What happens when petty jealousy and rivalries take over? If you reverse these qualities, what do you get? Well, you get pride instead of humility. You get bitterness instead of gentleness. You get sharp tongues instead of patience, and hatred instead of bearing each other in love. And of course, a church like that makes a complete mockery, doesn't it, of the idea that Jesus Christ is Lord and makes a complete mockery of any suggestion that God's master plan for his world is on track.

Walk in unity. Let's have some time for reflection, and I shall lead us in prayer. I urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.

Heavenly Father, we praise you for this glorious reminder that in Christ we have been reconciled to you through the death of the Lord Jesus, that we've been reconciled to one another.

[29 : 59] Thank you for this whole new humanity you have created that is the church. Thank you for this future day when all things will be under the rule of King Jesus.

And we pray, Heavenly Father, please would you help us as Grace Church Dulwich to live in a manner worthy of the calling which we have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.