

**Martin White. 5<sup>th</sup> October 2008.**

**Community on a mission**

**John 17: 20-23**

There were two hunters in the snowy wilderness of Canada.

One goes out to collect some wood, when, all of a sudden a 9ft Grizzly bear stands up to its full height from behind a fallen tree. There is a mad, hungry look in its eyes and dribble coming from its huge teeth.

Straight away it starts running towards the hunter.

He drops the wood and starts running through the snowdrifts towards the log cabin and starts yelling to his friend “Open the door! Open the door!”

His friend looks out of the window, sees the huge bear gaining on his friend and rushes over to the door. In his panic, he is fumbling to open the lock, but he manages, and throws the door open as his friend is 10ft away, with the snarling bear just a couple of feet behind him and gaining fast.

The hunter dives towards the open door, then, at the very last second, sidesteps, grabs the bear, and then, using the momentum, shoves the bear through the doorway and pulls the door shut, shouting to his friend inside “You deal with that one, I’ll go and get another!”

I heard someone say once “The man in the cabin is a pastor; the man outside is an evangelist!”

Every year there are lots of books written with titles like “How to really grow your church” or “Why your church should be more evangelistic.”

In some of these books, there is a trend towards taking either one camp or another; either your church is pastoral, or it is evangelistic.

And this often comes with some criticism – “Your church is really evangelistic, but no-one really gets built in; once you join the church it’s quite hard to make friends.”

Or “Your church is really nice and friendly and everyone remembers each other’s birthdays; but it never grows” or, as one of the books I read says; a river that’s not going anywhere is a swamp!

One book I have read says that there is a disease that a church can get, which it calls “Koinonitis” (taken from the Greek word “Koinonia” which means “fellowship”) where everyone is so ‘together’ as a family, and so close, that it loses sight of the Mission to share the gospel and see people come to know Jesus; and even if anyone new did come to the church, they would feel so much of an outsider that they could never become part of the fellowship. The book says the only thing to do with a church like this is to shut it down.

As I’m doing this series, I have been aware that what I am saying about community and hospitality and fellowship could be seen as being out of balance.

Maybe people have thought “Last year he was talking about evangelism; now his latest thing is fellowship; I wish he’d make up his mind!”

Maybe some people who are great at evangelism have thought “When’s he going to finish with this fellowship stuff so we can get on with the real job of evangelism?”

And maybe some people who are a bit nervous of doing evangelism, but like eating have though “This is great!”

Actually though, the two are not separate, and they certainly shouldn’t be in competition.

We’ve looked for a few weeks at the Early Church; this was their experience:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. **And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47 NIV)**

When I was a teenager and had no church involvement, a friend took invited me to a church youth group.

I remember going to this old Baptist church hall and seeing about 60 young people playing really rough games – one called “murder-ball” which was their own invention!

Every week there seemed to be injuries – nose bleeds, the occasional broken rib! But this group of people was different to anything else I had ever seen in my life. They genuinely cared for each other – and for me.

They belonged to each other.

There were different nationalities together there – Ugandan; Pakistani; Brazilian; a woman who had lived in Nepal.

There were some loud, confident people and there were some very quiet, shy people – like me. And everyone was made to feel part of this group.

It took me a few more years to become a Christian, and even more years to really understand the Gospel. But seeing this group of people really being a Community – and inviting me in; being devoted to fellowship – and sharing it with me; was an overwhelming experience.

I had never seen anything like it before – anywhere else.

And it was the thing I was longing for.

I used to live for the Saturday night youth group – and count down the days until the next one.

And long before I understood about Christianity, I had decided “I want what they’ve got.”

When you see a group of people who are devoted to one another and devoted to Jesus, it is an irresistible thing.

Of course **“the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”**

Sometimes we can think of unity as a good thing to do – it's better than disunity!

Probably we've all heard the accusation that the Church is fragmented and divided, when we've been talking to people about our faith.

Some of us may have also experienced disunity among Christians first-hand and may have some scars from this.

We all know that disunity is a bad advert for the Church.

Someone said once that:

**“Disunity amongst Christians breeds atheism in the world.”**

But I'm not sure we really get how important unity among Christians is to Jesus.

The night before His crucifixion, Jesus prayed – and we get a glimpse of things that were really close to His Heart in John 17.

He glorifies His Father; He prays for His disciples and He prays for everyone who will believe and follow Him (including us!)

What He prays is this:

**"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me." (John 17:20-21 NIV)**

One of the main things on Jesus' mind the night before His crucifixion was the unity of His People – “that all of them may be one.”

He doesn't pray specifically for fellowship or community – He doesn't specify **how** we are to be one; but I believe that what the Early Church in Acts 2 was doing – and what I saw in my friends in the youth group at Carey Baptist Church, was acting out what Jesus prayed for.

I don't think it is enough just to not have disunity; I think to do what Jesus prayed for, we need to chase after unity; to be a community of believers devoted to fellowship and breaking bread together; to live out what it means

to be God's Family; a Body and One New Man in Christ (as well as dealing with anything that might cause disunity)

And if we can do this, then that will be a sign to the World – pointing to Jesus:

“...that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us **so that the world may believe that you have sent me.**”

I wouldn't have used these words before I was a Christian, but when I saw true, devoted fellowship for the first time, I knew that God must have sent His Son.

When I saw people devoted to fellowship for the first time, I longed more than anything to be added to their number.

I couldn't have put it into words, but what I saw was a community under God's Blessing.

In Psalm 133 it says this:

**How good and pleasant it is  
when brothers live together in unity!  
...For there the LORD bestows his blessing,  
even life forevermore. (Psalm 133:1,3a)**

This is very poetic and the full psalm talks about 'oil running down Aaron's beard'. What it means is that God blesses unity.

We are a more diverse church than most; there are sure to be real challenges as we build a community – a family 'devoted to fellowship'. It's not going to be easy – there will be many things we could get offended by, lots of things we may not understand about the way different ones of us behave. There will be many times when we could allow disunity or prejudice or language barriers or misunderstandings to creep in.

But I believe that God is giving us grace as a church at the moment to press on into Godly, blessed unity and a new level of fellowship.

I believe that God is calling us on, and we are growing beyond just being a church where there are lots of nationalities together...and we're pleased to be

in the same church as others, and we like them, but it doesn't go much further than that.

I believe that God is calling us to an active unity, where we are devoted to fellowship across nationalities and backgrounds.

And I believe that as we grow in this, we will increasingly see the fruit of this in evangelism.

I believe that God is calling us towards the example of the Early Church – and as we devote ourselves to fellowship and breaking bread together, as well as the Apostles' teaching and prayer, then we will see Him adding to our number daily those who are being saved.

The World is longing to belong; and we are called to be an excellent, devoted, open fellowship that welcomes them in.

#### Community and mission:

1. What is the best example of fellowship you have seen?
2. How does Christian unity demonstrate that God sent Jesus?
3. How can fellowship help you/community groups/the Crown be more effective in mission?