

28 February 2010

### **The Purpose Driven Life – Part 3 – Formed for God's Family - Fellowship**

Readings: Acts 2: 42-47 John 13: 31-35

Last week, as part of our 40 Days of Purpose Campaign for Lent, we looked at God's first purpose for us, which is to get to know Him and to love Him. We saw that worship was far more than just coming to church on a Sunday. It was about offering our whole lives to God. If you missed the sermon, it's available on our web site or via the church office. Worship expresses our love of God and all he has done for us. It is to 'love God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength' as we learnt in last week's memory verse. Our Home Groups have been exploring more what it means to worship, to offer ourselves freely to God.

Today we're going to look at the second purpose that God has for us, which is '**we are formed for God's family**'. As we began our 40 Days teaching, we were reminded that God created us to love us. But to extend this, as does the writer to the Hebrews 2:10, "*God is the one who made all things, and all things are for His glory. He wanted to have many children share His glory.*" God wanted a family. That's why we're here.

Paul reminds us: "*His unchanging plan has always been to adopt us into His own family by bringing us to Himself through Jesus Christ.*" (Ephesians 5: 1) The entire Bible is the story of God building a family. It is an eternal family. It is through the loving sacrifice of Christ Jesus that we are adopted into God's family.

Now it gets more challenging. In his first letter, 1 Peter 2:17, he wrote "*Love your spiritual family.*" We must learn to love the people in our spiritual family. Your natural family is tied to this life but your spiritual family is going to last forever - in eternity we're going to be spending an awful lot of time with other believers, so it is important that we start learning right now how to get on together in love in God's family to which we are adopted through Christ Jesus.

I like the quote attributed to the late Bishop Geoffrey Paul: 'There is no way of belonging to Christ except by belonging gladly and irrevocably to all that marvellous and extraordinary ragbag of saints and fatheads who make up the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church'. Look around your own (extended) family – and if your family is like mine, we are a ragbag. The church is no different. There are parts of my family that I may not see for years but when we meet it's as if we were together yesterday. I have friendships like that.

As the family of God we have the one Father, so that makes us sons and daughters of the one Father and in turn that makes us brothers and sisters. We can say it to one another - Brother, Sister - even though it may be a strange way of address in our culture. We shouldn't be aloof and

critical of our Brother or Sister – she is God’s beautiful daughter, beautiful and unique to Him, even though she may be a real pain in the neck to me.

### **The second purpose of your life is fellowship - “Loving God’s family”.**

The Bible says this in 1 John 4:21. "*The person who loves God must also love other believers.*" No matter how difficult it may be, we have to learn to love other Christians who may be very different people from ourselves. I’m reminded of the Vicar who peered over his pulpit at his congregation. ‘I’m told I must love them – but I don’t have to like them’. We can see this in our attitude to our own children. We may not like what they do, we may not like some of their behaviour, but we don’t stop loving them. We are called to love one another.

In 1 Timothy 3: 14-15 Paul wrote "*I’m writing so that you’ll know how to live in the family of God. That family is the church.*" Paul links the two words ‘family’ and ‘Church’ together. The church is a family. It’s not a building, or an institution, or an organisation, or a club. There are popular misconceptions about church. Some talk about being ordained as ‘going into the church’. There was once an advert in the church press – ‘Are you 45 and getting nowhere? Why not consider the Christian ministry?’ Or ‘church’ is a denomination, like Church of England, Roman Catholic, or Methodist. Or church is a building – the church on the corner, in the village, a place of interesting architecture. I remember a curate at the church where I grew up telling us that the building we think of as the church is only there to keep the seats dry.

Church is not a place you go to. Church is a family you belong to.

### **I want to now explore four levels of fellowship found in God's family.**

**The first level is Membership.** We choose to belong to God’s family, the church. In Ephesians 2:19 it says, "*You are members of God's very own family and you belong in God's household with every other Christian.*"

The Christian life is not just a matter of believing. It is also a matter of belonging, and we must choose to belong. When you were born, you automatically became a part of the human race. You had no choice. But you have to choose to belong to the family of God, the church.

I hear some people say, “You don’t have to go to church to be a Christian.” That just doesn't make sense. The church is where you live out what it means to be a Christian. It's like saying, “I play football, but I don't want to be a part of any team.” A Christian without a church family is an orphan.

Or the illustration of the coal fire. Take one coal out, put it on the hearth, and it soon goes out, goes cold. We need one another!

Paul reminds us in Romans 12, verse 5, "*In Christ we who are many form one Body, and each member belongs to all the others.*" Jesus calls the church his "body." He loves the church. We are members together of the "Body of Christ". We belong to each other as God's adopted family. All the parts of the body need to work together if the body is to remain healthy. The body cannot have one of its members going off and doing their own thing. The liver can't go off on its own – an eye can't just go that way – the hand over there. We all belong to one another, need each other, are accountable to each other, work with each other.

Baptism - the joining ceremony of the church - is the entry point. Baptism is a visible sign of membership – adult baptism by immersion is very memorable, infant baptism might be more an opportunity for a family party. For others, confirmation is the important thing, when an individual stands and declares his or her faith. Baptism has a rich symbolism; it isn't simply getting wet, although we see in the running water the coming of the spiritual life – the sign of God's cleansing, accepting, and sealing.

Baptism is a statement that we belong to the wider church, the church which – today – claims over 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the entire world's population, some 2.0 billion people. Our Baptism expresses how we belong together in the body of Christ. 1 Corinthians 12:13 says, "*This is what we proclaimed in word and action when we were baptized. Each of us is now a part of His resurrection Body.*" It is a public way of saying, "I am part of a group of believers – 2 billion of them".

Romans 6:3 says it in this way: "*That's what baptism into the life of Jesus means. When we are baptised, it is like the burial of Jesus; when we are raised up out of the water, it is like the resurrection of Jesus.*" So baptism is a public way of saying together we're proclaiming we died to something; we live to something. We died to an old way of life; we're living to a new way of life.

Baptism is the commitment of a person's heart. The words of the Baptism service: 'Do not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified'. It's saying I'm not ashamed to tell the world that I believe in Jesus Christ and belong to his body, the Church, God's family here on earth. I am a member.

### **The second level of Fellowship is Learning to share.**

Genesis 2: 18: God said "*It is not good for man to be alone.*" In other words, we were made for each other. Life is not a solo act. All of us need friends. Today's reading: Acts 2:44 says, "*All the*

*believers met together constantly and shared everything with each other.*" Notice two key things here. "*met together,*" and "*shared.*" You can't develop friendships without meeting together; and secondly, you can't develop friendships without sharing. Obviously, the more frequently you meet together, the closer you're going to get. The reason why most people are lonely is that they don't make time for friendships. They are too busy working and doing other things. They are not willing to put the time into it. Friendships don't just happen. They happen because you choose to make the time for them. It is a choice. And you can't develop friendships without sharing. Acts says that the first Christians "*shared everything.*"

In the family of God we have to learn to share with other believers. It's wise to learn from the experiences of other people, especially in matters of faith. Other members of God's family are there to encourage and equip us to share fully in the life of God's family. Think of all the wealth of knowledge sitting here right now in this church family in this service, and how much we could learn from each other if we just made time to spend with one another, and share spiritual insights.

And we're to share our **homes**. In 1 Peter 4:9 it says, "*open up your homes to each other.*" It doesn't say only the really nice ones, or the ones with big rooms. God wants all of us to open our homes to one another because you cannot have real fellowship in a crowd. You can only get to know people in a small group, or one to one. At this service we can do some things together, but it is not the setting for really getting to know one another. It's when we "open up our homes to each other" that we really get to know people. For the first 300 years of Christianity, there were no church buildings. Instead they met in each others homes. Interestingly that was the fastest period of growth in the history of the Church. A friend of mine has been to Capernaum and seen the excavations – the tiny houses built around the Courtyard, with the wine press, the water supply, the toilet, the mill. If you'd met in one of those houses you'd have been nicely squashed in, and there wouldn't have been another denomination so if you fell out with your group, your church, you couldn't simply go up the road and join some other church.

This reminds me of those jokes about St Peter showing the new arrivals around heaven. On the tour, they find themselves by a high wall, and Peter motions to keep quiet. They creep along, and when they've passed beyond the wall, Peter is asked 'why? What's the other side of that wall?' He replies – 'oh they're the .... (whichever denomination you want to name). They think they're the only ones here'.

### **In Home Groups we're able to share our problems.**

We're not meant to face our problems alone. The Bible says, "*Weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice.*" - Share each other's troubles and problems. You know when you

share a joy, it is doubled; and when you share a problem it's halved – it doesn't seem so bad. Sometimes in a small group you fall about laughing and sometimes you're all shedding tears. A listening ear, or people just being there and prepared to pray for you can make all the difference when we are weighed down by the events around us.

It's in the small group that we really care for one another. This is a social dimension, as well as a Christian principle – we can only have close friendships with a small number of people. Jesus had the twelve – but within that, he had a closer relationship with just three. Home groups fulfil this function.

But it's worth thinking about the 'entry points' to church – what helps the community to 'get in'? The pluses of meeting in a small group are the ability really to get to know one another, closer friendships, sharing needs, pastoral support, caring in practical ways e.g. when our sons were born, our House group rallied round with cooking, cleaning, even some washing. The small group is better at social events and also where we can share honest feelings. A small group can be an essential part in the growth and nurture of a new Christian, where we can be challenged and encouraged and held accountable. We need Christian friends who can and do challenge us – else we can get very complacent, and can find ourselves lowering our standards. But let me remind you that the purpose of the Home Group is to worship, study, share, and care – it isn't to play politics in the church, or stab church members behind their backs.

That's why the Bible says this in Hebrews 10:25, "*Let us not give up the habit of meeting together. Instead, let us encourage one another.*" Encourage each other. And it says, "Don't give up the habit." I hope you'll never give up this habit some of you are starting for the first time this 40 days of Lent, because you're always going to need fellowship and encouragement.

### **The third level of fellowship is Partnership.**

The Greek word Koinonia is translated "fellowship" or "partnership." Partnership is realizing that you've got a contribution to make; that the family of God needs you. God did not bring you to St. Mary's to sit and let others do everything for you. That's not why you're here.

There's a story about four people named **Everybody**, **Somebody**, **Anybody** and **Nobody**. There was an important job to be done and **Everybody** was sure that **Somebody** would do it. **Anybody** could have done it, but **Nobody** did it. **Somebody** got angry about that, because it was **Everybody's** job. **Everybody** thought **Anybody** could do it, but **Nobody** realised that **Everybody** wouldn't do it. It ended up that **Everybody** blamed **Somebody** when **Nobody** did what **Anybody** could have.

God called you here to serve. We'll be looking at this more specifically later in Lent, but let me say here that God wants to recruit you make a difference in His church. In every family there are family responsibilities. You divide up the chores and you do your part. We are a Christian family, God's family. And every one of us has his part to play. In the New Testament it says 58 times that we are to serve one another out of love for one another. We pray with one another, support one another and we even have to put up with one another. That's love in action. Not just in words.

Listen to what the Bible has to say in 1 Corinthians 3 v 9. "*We are partners working together for God.*" "*Partners.*" We're partners working together for God. Paul once wrote to some people and said "*we're partners spreading the good news of Christ everywhere.*"

But in order to be a part, you've got to find your niche, you have got to find out, "Where do I fit in, and how I do I fit in?" Look what Ephesians 4:16 says. "*The whole body is fitted together perfectly.*" "*...As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole Body is healthy and growing and full of love.*"

Mother Teresa spent her life working with the poorest of the poor in Calcutta, India. And she was once asked, "How do you handle all the death and disease on a daily basis? How do you do the tough things when it comes to serving?" And her answer was, "Every person I bathe, every person I bandage, I imagine seeing the face of Jesus and I do it for Him." That's the attitude that's behind this. It's the attitude of Matthew chapter 25, verse 40, "*Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are the members of my family, you did it to Me.*"

We're doing it for Jesus Christ and not for ourselves – something I alluded to last week.

### **Finally, the deepest level of fellowship in the family of God is "Kinship."**

Kinship literally means your closest relationships, your closest family - your "next-of-kin". Kinship is treating and loving believers like they're family. You're completely committed to them. Acts 2:42 (in today's reading) "*They were like family to each other.*" God says "Well, we're not just like a family; we are a family."

Romans 12:10 says, "*Be devoted to each other like a loving family.*" The word "koinonia." is what underpins Acts 2: 42-47. It literally means being as committed to each other as we are to Jesus Christ; that is the deepest level of fellowship. Being as committed to each other as we are to Jesus Christ. That's kinship.

But it goes further. Many of you know John 3:16, "*God so loved the world,*" but you may not know 1 John 3:16, a verse that's just as important as John 3:16. "*We know what real love is because Christ gave up His life for us. And we ought to give up our lives for our Christian brothers and sisters.*" This is the deepest level of fellowship; sacrificing your lives for each other. It's the kind of love Jesus Christ had for you. He died for you.

In the Bible it talks about the fellowship of suffering but here in England, in Billingshurst, Christians know almost nothing about this level of fellowship of shared suffering. The shocking reality is that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century more Christians were killed for their faith than all the other centuries put together. In recent years Christians have been killed living in China, Nepal, Pakistan, Sudan, Northern Nigeria and many other countries. In St Mary's we play a small part in overcoming persecution inasmuch as we give to the work of The Barnabas Fund and Open Doors, organisations which speak up globally for those Christians who are suffering under Sharia Law and other regimes.

To summarise:

Christian family life is all about learning to love and obey God and learning to love and trust each other as members one of another. If you miss this, you have missed the second purpose of your life. Our life is not about accomplishments, rather it is about relationships. First to have a relationship with Jesus Christ, to know Him and love Him; second, to know His family and love them, because that's who we're spending eternity with.

Loving God is called "**Worship**," and loving each other is called "**Fellowship**." The Bible says this in John 13, Jesus said, "*Your strong love for each other will prove to the world that you are my disciples.*"

It wasn't long after Jesus' death and resurrection that the Roman Empire started persecuting Christians. They put them up on stakes and burnt them, crucified them, threw them to lions, skinned them alive and did other dreadful things to them. It was at that time, that one of the most famous secular historians, not a Christian, wrote this about Christians: "Behold, how they love each other."

What we want here at St. Mary's is to be known, not for our singing, not for our teaching, not for any attractiveness of this building, but for our love. We want people to say, "That's the place where they love each other," because that's what Christianity is all about, loving God and loving each other.

*Let's pray ...*

*"Father God, we want to be a part of your family and we want to learn to love our spiritual family just like you do. Forgive us for taking it casually. Help us to grow in the levels of fellowship, to really belong. Help us to learn to share and make time to develop real friendships, and to do our part in the family of God. We want to learn to love other believers like brothers and sisters. Teach us the meaning of real love. In your name we pray, Amen."*

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