

Joined Together

II Samuel 7:1-14; Ephesians 2:11-22

“Geography has made us neighbours. History has made us friends. Economics has made us partners, and necessity has made us allies. Those whom God has so joined together, let no man put asunder.” Wise words from President John F Kennedy. They remind us, as if we needed reminding, that we are in so many ways better when we are together than when we are apart.

In 1624 John Donne, a Dean of St Paul’s Cathedral and one of Britain’s most thoughtful poets penned these words not as a poem but as a Meditation in his Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions:

*No man is an island,
Entire of itself,
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less.
As well as if a promontory were.
As well as if a manor of thy friend's
Or of thine own were:
Any man's death diminishes me,
Because I am involved in mankind,
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
It tolls for thee.*

The bell has been tolling in these last few days in the world of politics with their fractiousness and divisions. I look at the growing debacle at Westminster over the successive Brexit votes, and challenges about promises and fairness about the 'pairing' of MPs, particularly women MPs who are pregnant, which have allegedly been broken; I look at a Government party in disarray; I look at the Labour party unable to offer a serious alternative political solution; I look at the Liberal Democrats who opposed Brexit but mismanaged their MPs so that two of their senior number were not present at one of the significant vote; I look at the Scottish Nationalist MPs looking and wondering if a hard Brexit might provide a sufficient bounce for another attempt at an independence referendum in Scotland. I listen to them all, many of them decent, hard-

working individuals, yet still the continuing and weary sniping from every quarter. I watch the ongoing pantomime of President Trump, his utterly unimpressive performance in the UK last week, and his claim and counter-claim with President Putin and the CIA and his alleged 'misspeaking', and serious attacks from his own party about his lack of coherence and consistency.

I am left wondering and praying: where is our world going? Our world with all its beauty and possibility. Our world with all its brokenness and pain. Our world crying out for coherent, competent, compassionate leadership.

We *will* get through these times, I happen to believe that; but the gloom is deep, and the despair heavy.

When the global scene is in apparent chaos, maybe it is the local acts of kindness, the little step-by-step connections that we see in the places where we live and work and love, maybe it is there that, in God's time, hope will come. We are better when we are joined together.

Not only in politics but in our own lives, with family friends and work colleagues there may also be splits and factions. Ongoing debates within the Church of Scotland after the disastrous Strategic Plan from the Council of Assembly was thrown out in May underline that the Church is not always in a good place. And not only our denomination, or indeed faith family.

Yet we know that we are better when together, the world is better when we are joined together. How can we as individual Christians, help span divides and encourage people to work together? How can we inspire ourselves to speak out within the Church, within our families, workplaces, community, country and world and say, with conviction, that we are better when we are joined together.

Our reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians is one that we ought to have in our repertoire. In these verses Paul describes the, "shocking nature of the Church."ⁱ It is disappointing that it rarely takes too long for the Church to forget the radical nature of its life together. Paul is not impatient with the Christians he writes to, but he is insistent, "So then, remember..."

Remember the times when you were on the outside, when you were left behind, or excluded, or forgotten, or ignored. Remember when someone reached out the hand of friendship, or love, or forgiveness, and drew you in.

Remember the time when you were the one who felt there was no hope, no future, and no point, and someone reached out the hand of friendship, or love, or forgiveness, and drew you in.

Remember the time when you were filled with doubt, or fear, or recrimination against yourself for what you had said or done or thought, and someone reached out the hand of friendship, or love, or forgiveness and drew you in.

We've all been far off. We've all been distant from our faith and its practice. And we have all, each one of us, seen that hand of friend, or stranger, of enemy, of friend, of Christ Himself reaching out to us to draw us in. We are joined together. Because Jesus sees us not simply as separate units, but as one body; not only as unique individuals, but as a connected community.

The dividing walls of hostility and suspicion, of name-calling and finger-pointing, of exclusion and intolerance are broken down again and again by Jesus. When Jesus joins us together through His mercy and love we become one new humanity. We forget that at our peril. We ignore that at our cost.

Paul says, in these verses, that too often the image of the dividing wall of hostility that we build up too easily is the dominating one in our communities, in our country, in our world, in our families, in our workplaces, and, may God forgive us, in our churches and faith communities. Encampments form, and the dividing wall of hostility is reconstructed in spite of our best intentions. Instead of 'Jews' and 'Greeks' it is now right or left, nationalist or unionist, remainer or brexiteer, orthodox or progressive, fundamentalist or liberal. We fall into the habitual battles, dreaming of the day when 'our side' is finally triumphant.ⁱⁱ

Last year I was invited to take part in a service in a Church which had gone through tough times. Some had left over the same-sex issue, some wondered where the Church of Scotland was heading in its work with other faiths, and in its pronouncements on ecology, social justice and what was perceived to be its views on politics. I've rarely been in a congregation so divided.

It couldn't even agree with itself on most of these issues. After the service a woman came up to me. Hard-faced, mouth and eyes narrow, body language aggressive and defensive at one and the same time. "Here we go", I thought.

"I wasn't sure that you should have been invited here," was her opening line. "I listened to you tonight, and then I looked at you. And I thought to myself, 'I'm looking in to the face of an enemy, but I'm finding the heart of a friend.'" She shook hands with me, and went off. Now, it wasn't what you would call a ringing endorsement, and based on that exchange I don't know that I should expect calls any time soon to resolve the Brexit issue or other areas where global peace is under threat. But that hand reached out to me, and my hand reached out to her. And Jesus Christ joined us together, even if only for a brief moment.

It was a start.

There are divisions and barriers in our world. Where do we start? There are divisions and barriers in our country. Where do we start? There are divisions and barriers in our Church. Where do we start?

The outstretched hand, bridging the divide, breaking the barrier down, and welcoming each other in.

In the months that lie ahead I hope in different ways our Church, this Church, you and me together, might look again at the community and parish we are called to serve. There might not be massive divisions and fall out here, but there will be some. More importantly if we are not only to survive as a congregation but to thrive as a congregation we are going to have to start reaching out our hands to those who are beyond. When it comes to being an inclusive Church, or any kind of institution, there is a difference between saying, 'you can come', and, 'you're invited!' If we are going to work at joining together with our community we are going to have to realise that often we want people to come and join with us in what we're already doing. We have in mind what we want or how we expect things to look and be done. Except joining together with others and sharing with others automatically changes how things will look and be done.

If we are to be joined together with those who are not already here, if we truly want the participation of others in what we do, then we too will change, just as they might change, when joining together happens.

How do we extend the invitation for others to join with us? We say each week, 'all are welcome' on so many of our invitations, but are we too passive, only expecting those to respond who are already 'pre-approved'? Who are the people who are afterthoughts to us? There's a difference between, 'you can come' and 'you are invited'.

Paul's radical thinking reaches over the reticence, and the suspicion, and even the hostility. Paul talks about the Church with Christ as its cornerstone and foundation, but wants us to wonder for whom is this space created?

For them, and for us, so that there is, at last, only us. People who live together in this kind of welcoming, open space, find that God will abide with them too. Reconciled, resilient and united with God. Joined together.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ Edwin Searcy, Feasting on the Word, Year B Vol 3, p255

ⁱⁱ ibid p257