

Discipleship @ ABC Autumn 2021



Through September we will be looking at the key Christian values which we believe God is calling us to focus on at this time. By 'this time' we mean 18 months into a pandemic which has left people tired, stretched, fearful, exhausted and in many cases, bereaved. These values have come from the Big Church Conversation in July when the church gathered to discern God's will for us regarding our values, activity and the issues we face. We are grateful to God for guiding us in this way and therefore have great confidence in God's leading.

5th September **Faith in Jesus**
 12th September **Gathered in Community**

1. Passages Quoted

John 13: 34& 35
 Psalm 68:5&6
 Acts 2: 44-47

2. Questions

- a. Ashley cited four 'threats' to the Christian community, namely Isolation, independence, seeing church as a business or organisation and theology.
 - i. What did you think of this list and why?
 - ii. What other threats to community have you witnessed?
- b. Ashley proposed that being Gathered in Community has implications for our **Up** (worship), **In** (discipleship) and **Out** (mission) lives together.
 - i. How do you experience each of these elements?
 - ii. What other important aspects of being Gathered in Community would you want to testify to?

3. Prayer

And we are different – Walter Brueggemann

We are counted your people
 We are grateful to be called by you, and
 Glad for our special way of faith in the world.
 You have marked us and named us and signed us,
 and we are different,
 different memories,

different hopes,
different fears,
different commands,
different ways of being.

That difference we find glorious, but at times a burden too severe.

We yearn to be like the others,
like the others in power,
in money,
in freedom,
in certitude,
in security

like the others,
uncalled, unburdened, unembarrassed.

We come to you in that deep trial of difference and likeness.

Engage us our difference,
Give us courage for your different vocations,
and energy for our different hope.

In the name of your crucified, Easter One, so unlike all the others.
Amen.

4. Text of the Message in Full **ABC Values: Gathered in Community**

Last Sunday Andrew started our short series on the key Christian values which have emerged as being those we should promote and focus on at this time. This time as in 18 months through a world-wide pandemic where many have been seriously ill, some people have died, fear and anxiety has surged, relations and contact with people curtailed and uncertainty about the future abounds.

And we first looked at faith – faith in Jesus Christ – which is a pretty good place to start and sets the bedrock for all that follows. And this week we look at the second of these values which have come out of our conversation back in July and our deliberations as a leadership – so today we look at community. We act, work, worship and demonstrate Christian living as a community of faith.

Four threats to community

1. Loneliness.

According to the ONS levels of loneliness in Great Britain have increased since spring 2020. Between 3 April and 3 May 2020, 5.0% of people (about 2.6 million adults) said that they felt lonely “often” or “always”. From October 2020 to February 2021, results from the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN) show that proportion increased to 7.2% of the adult population (about 3.7 million adults).

And drilling down on the statistics –

- Those who are widowed are three to four times more likely to feel lonely
- 16-24 year olds are up to five times more likely to feel lonely during lockdown, (...and we thought they were all out clubbing!)

I wonder how would you have coped over the past 18 months without others around you?

Reflect on our response to the pandemic as a church and how much it majored on community - it's what the church does – supports, helps, aids those who are suffering – especially those who suffer alone.

One of, or perhaps the, greatest writer on the Jewish holocaust of the Second World War, Eli Wiesel wrote extensively about suffering and he is quoted by Christian writer Eugene Petersen on the subject when Petersen writes about the book of Lamentations. What he says may be surprising, when he actually challenges those who would isolate themselves in their suffer and not open themselves up to the love and care of the community.

Wiesel writes:

'How dare you wall yourself up in pain, such actions diminish you.'

Because vicar and Christian poet John Donne's was right, when he wrote:

***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.***

Isolation is obviously a threat to community.

2. Independence

A second threat to community is independence – living life independent of others. In our context that would look like being a member of the church – saying that this is your church – while remaining free from any significant engagement with it. And TBH – in some ways wouldn't that be great!

- It would spare us from commitment
- It would free us from any obligation to participate and help
- It would save us from having to engage with those who have different lifestyles, behaviours and approaches than us.
- And being independent we can remain in splendid, misplaced and arrogant isolation that we have got it altogether and there is nothing to be learned from those around us – (GAP) - I sometimes come across people who see the church just like that.

Whereas being in community means that I rub up against you and you rub off against me and... well... if we are talking personally – well let's talk about me! I have to deal with my inclinations to independence.

- I have to share
- I have to give
- I have to learn to listen and negotiate
- I have to address my delusions, my fantasies about what life is and how it should be lived.
- I have to have my misunderstandings corrected

And being in community – having this value commitment to community – that will, according to Matthew 18 - mean that I have to confront sin that I see in others and I have to acknowledge and deal with the sin that others see in me. It means that I know what it's like to feel rebuked and chastened.

So it means that although I would love to live 'in the flesh' as the Bible puts it – which means live as I am naturally inclined to, I have to face up to the immense challenge to live spiritually – which annoyingly I can only do with the help of you lot.

It means that I need you more than you can possibly imagine and probably more than I readily admit.

3. Church as a business, or an organisation

Community addresses *loneliness* and *independence* – it also profoundly contradicts the idea that we might describe us lot as a different kind of a group – like a business or organisation.

We may think this is obvious, that there is no way that a church could behave in such a way, but just as the pharisees and twisted the community of God's people to become an institution where rules meant more than people and laws more than grace – so to the church – any church – must be clear about what they are at root, for fear that other well-intentioned and quite possibly admirable principles and values usurp what the church must be.

Organisations and businesses live and die by growth, profit and 'success'. And to bring that about – my days in a merchant bank in the City tell me – requires visionary leadership, financial acumen, and probably an MBA or two.

When I came to ABC 10 years ago it was made clear to me from some quarters (and I think enough time has passed for me to tell you this now) that my role was primarily to 'restore the fortunes of ABC' and that was to be measured in attendance growth, financial assets and wider influence.

How would we performance manage the serial sinner, or the broken person who struggles to get through their own day let alone contribute to the community – or the super-performer who think that they have it all together and their pride means that simply cannot countenance that there is any other way than theirs.

Some of the most profound insights into Christian living is when I have seen the greatest person put themselves last and in doing so have enabled the least person to be put first.

And this obviously impacts finances - profit and loss, responsible accountancy practices, prudence, reserves and the like all have their place but they must never become the determining. For example:

There are good churches who hold reserves and who make appointments based on having funds available to pay for them.

There are good churches who choose to hold no reserves and who make appointments unsure of where the money will come from to pay them.

We touch on this when we hold a second offering on a Sunday and give the money raised to those in our community who are in need.

We touch on this when we commit to give away half of our reserves.

When we decide together to act both wisely and with great faith in the decisions we make.

There is much more I could say here, but we need to move on.

4. Theology

After *isolation*, *independence* and *seeing church as a business* my final threat to community is our theology - what we believe, what we teach.

Us evangelicals (the word simply means 'Good News' but it's shorthand for saying how definitive the Bible is for us) us evangelicals love our theology. Other traditions do of course have theology, but as evangelicals we pride ourselves in our Bible Studies daily Bible reading and preaching longer than the rest of them!

Our theology shapes us, it defines us, it has become the sole and ultimate determinant of truth and orthodoxy and because of that we are in danger of being unbiblical.

Some years ago I went to a conference in Westminster Hall run by *The Proclamation Trust* – a conservative evangelical organisation who originated in St Helen's, Bishopsgate – a church I used to attend every Tuesday lunchtime when I worked in the City.

Amongst the mix of plenary sessions and seminars at the conference I attended one session solely because I was so intrigued by its title. With a play on words '**See how they love one another**' (Tertullian) the seminar was entitled, '**See how these evangelicals hate one another.**' The seminar explored the reasons why, in our eagerness to maintain orthodox faith, we have managed to fall out with each other in chunks.

(Street evangelist Bridport. Tracts titled *Peace with God*. Smiled and told him I was a Christian. He asked further questions (caveats) Born again? Take up your cross daily? Washed in the blood of Jesus? I suggested that Jesus had simply invited me to Come and follow him. The evangelist shouted after me, 'I'm just doing what my master told me to do!')

As I said we are in danger of being unbiblical – that is because in making our theology our defining identity, we betray Jesus' teaching.

34 I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. 35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.' John 13:35

At times I hear people try and get out of this. They get out of it by citing their love for 'the church' or love for 'the Bible' – which kind of sounds like it should be the right thing, but the problem is that it's not what the Bible says. The greatest commandment – the commandment which is the determinant of your discipleship is whether you and I love those around us. Period.

In our evangelical zeal for theological orthodoxy – we can fail Jesus with our unbiblical behaviour.

The Up, In and Out of Community

Up: worshipping community

Our worship of God is what fundamentally defines us. In fact we have to worship, because without worshipping we cease to be who we are.

And the person we worship is Jesus. We are a community defined by who we gather around and worship – and we worship Jesus.

A few years back I was searching for an image who might helpfully demonstrate that we are not defined as a church by walls of a building or notices boards and the one which I landed on was this one.



No walls, no signs, but lots of people gathered around a well in the place where they found life.

And yes our worship is singing and it is praying and it is giving, but we worship God as we think as we act as we serve as we prefer others as we....

As a Christians we gather as a worshipping community around Jesus.

In: the life of community

The life of Community is the one which I imagine we are most au fait with.

Much of the New Testament – esp. the writing of Paul is riven through with community living. Some of it defining this community over and against the context they found themselves in and much of it addressing failures in the community.

The community which gets this right, shines/glows with the love of Jesus.

20 years ago I was invited on a retreat with some other ministers – I was very much the new kid – and I looked up to many of those who were there.

On the last evening there was an open time to share and be prayed for and as we sat in a circle...

About 8 years later I was leading some seminars with a group and in conversation with one person after they told me in tears of the financial crisis they were in. So what to do...

When Rob Peirson joined us a youth minister he has no home for three months so we took him in. When he eventually.... Eventually moved out to the Hub, Sandra said we really should keep a strong link and have him round for a meal each week. We did, on a Wednesday – a day when I usually cooked curry for tea. And having taken that step it seemed quite easy and natural to invite other odd unattached males on a Wednesday night as well and so Curry Night began – now about 5 years old – where 5-13 come round for curry – be family/community together – and that time then spawns more engagement and conversation and practical help and support.

And last month a girl we baptised a few years ago, a girl in her early 20's found herself really struggling with life and because of it in hospital. And we as a church – we visited her and she got stronger but she had no place to go when discharged – literally. And some emails and calls later a church couple opened their doors and their arms to take her in – perhaps for a while – until she will be able to move on.

God is - *A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows,
is God in his holy dwelling. 6 God sets the lonely in families,*

Out: Witness of community

Finally – the New Testament uses the word *Christian* to describe us 10 times and the word *witness* 50 times.

Witnesses are who we are as a Christian community. It's why we have missional communities here at ABC. We simply cannot contain our identity internally, but seek to demonstrate who we are as a community to the world around us. It is the most obvious and normal thing that our being community is a witness to those around us. But that witness may be positive or negative.

You will have read recently of the dreadful story of Gordon Newton – vicar West Yorkshire convicted of sexually abusing children.

In a statement read in court, Newton's wife said she had been left unable to work full-time and suffers depression as a result of his crimes.

And then the BBC website had this:

Previously a dedicated churchgoer, she said her husband's arrest and the subsequent charges had shattered her faith, which was now "non-existent".

I have been really trying hard to avoid quoting Acts 2 in this message – because it is such an obvious place to turn, but I can't resist any longer. The end of Acts 2 gives a brief description of the early Jesus-following community and what others saw in them.

*44 All who believed were together and had all things in common; 45 they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, 47 praising God and **having the goodwill of all the people**. Acts 2*

My grandmother - Esther Bacon was born in 1901.

*To live above with saints we love will be out theme in Glory;
to live below with saints we know is quite another story.*

Let's make it a really good story!