

Fellowship with those different from ourselves

Over the last few weeks we have been exploring Koinonia-Fellowship, that special gift from God that we have of being one with the Trinity and with each other as we are in Christ. This is not the pleasant cuppa time we share after church, or even the chatter we enjoy as we meet on Zoom. Rather this is the deep unity in the Spirit we are blessed with that we are exhorted to preserve through the bond of peace. This is the unity we have as branches of the vine, connected to Jesus and with the same sap flowing through us. This is a unity that is closer than that of a family, we are brothers and sisters in the Lord – his Spirit flowing in us is stronger than family blood ties.

We have delved into how koinonia-fellowship may be thought of as in the space between us, the place where God's Spirit is pleased to dwell when we are at peace with one another, where God is welcome like the Dove which will only come into the place of peace. We have explored how this is expressed, affirmed and celebrated in the way Jesus provided for in sharing bread and wine, signifying his body and blood given for us to be in him. We have begun to look into how koinonia-fellowship is not just the state we enjoy when we are in Christ together but is very much worked out in what we do in that space between us. That space can be defiled, not by what we bring into it from outside, things of the world, but by what comes from out of our hearts, especially the words we say, the things we speak about other people. As we speak gossip or slander or with anger we defile that precious space between us where God's Spirit would dwell among us like a dove. It becomes like a place where raucous pigeons have been, leaving their mess and droppings. By guarding our mouths, being quick to listen and slow to speak, by being countercultural even in our readiness to speak only good about others, we are a witness in our koinonia-fellowship unity as Jesus prayed for us to be.

So today I would like to open up from our readings more of how we live the koinonia-fellowship we share, how we go about preserving it and witnessing to the world the difference knowing Jesus makes. As James says both in the passage from last week and in today's reading we are to do what the word says, not just hear it. We are to put our faith into action, not just speak it out. What the Bible says about koinonia-fellowship is wonderful but we need to live it not just grow in understanding what it is. Preserving it will show in our words and actions.

I want to look at what Jesus' actions and words illustrate and what the teaching of James points us to in the way we relate to one another in koinonia-fellowship. The issue today is that Jesus draws all sorts of people to himself, not just people like us. He calls every sort of person, with all their unique and different characteristics, into his koinonia-fellowship. As he says 'When I am lifted up I will draw all people to myself.'

I have had the privilege of relating with people of very many different ethnicities, from different countries and regions of the world and with very different cultures. I remember being full of joy one day while standing in the queue for a shared meal at church to realize that all those in front of me had skin of a different colour, and in fact that I was very much in the minority in having white skin – that I took for granted all those sisters and brothers in the Lord with such a rich diversity that the world would have considered difficult to relate to. It was also unusual in every group in the church, music teams, small groups, vestry, or whatever, to have more than 20% from the same country. I rejoiced in being led in sung worship by people from 3 or 4 different continents among the 4 on the team!

Now I come here and that is no longer part of my reality. Instead I have the pleasure of walking around our neighbourhood and meeting people I know whose life circumstances, and backgrounds are very different from mine, who have not had the advantages I have had and not usually coped very well with living in

today's world. Yet I have come to know them a little because they too seek God and his presence among us. We are in koinonia fellowship in Christ.

So let's turn to Jesus and to what the gospel reading says to us today. Jesus lived and ministered in a small region of the world that was a crossroads for people from different cultures. People had moved through and mixed in that area for centuries. As a Jew he still moved around areas that were Samaritan or Gentile, and the whole of Israel was under Roman control. But his message of the Kingdom of God was being brought to God's people who had been prepared over the centuries to receive and understand what he was bringing through his words and actions. Many of God's people were not prepared to accept this message as it centred on Jesus. And this message included that salvation and healing was for all the world through God's people. So while he is travelling through Gentile territory, people from Gentile cultures were hearing his message and seeking his healing and putting their faith in him. This is the background to what happens in the incidents related by Mark in today's reading.

Jesus was trying to keep a low profile as it was not yet time for his mission among God's people, and their opposition to it, to come to a head. However a Gentile woman who is desperate for her daughter to be healed, and has faith that Jesus can do that, comes to him. Jesus recognizes her faith and so uses her situation as a foil to show that he is the source of salvation and healing not just for the Jews but also for the Gentiles. He is not rejecting her nor insulting her in this. Rather she plays along with his message and goes away with her daughter healed. Jesus then performs his third Gentile healing mentioned in Mark – a deaf man with a speech impediment who then doesn't stop speaking of what Jesus had done. So much for his desire to lay low.

The gospel writers mentioned several prominent Gentile healings and particularly emphasized that Jesus commended their faith. Devout Jews of that time would have kept themselves apart from Gentiles and even in the early church it was a big step for Jewish Christians to accept that these people, who were considered very different, could really be saved and incorporated into God's fellowship without becoming like them in their religious practices such as circumcision, and only eating so-called 'clean' foods. The gospel writers therefore proclaimed that Jesus welcomed and accepted and healed all people, including those different from himself as a Jew.

James addresses the issue of how we relate to others by using an example from a Christian gathering. In this case the average person of the day would not be very well off. The person with fine clothes would actually be different from them but probably someone who could supposedly favour them or who they would like to be like. Meanwhile the poor person is more what a normal person could easily become if they had a few hard times, got sick or had an accident for example. James refers to the actions of honouring or dishonouring a person in this example but later he points to the actions of providing someone with what they need, sharing what one has with another who needs it rather than just giving them a blessing.

So what does this mean for us in our koinonia-fellowship in St Matthew's Dunedin? How does this help us understand and live out koinonia-fellowship here and now?

If we were all getting together as members of a sports club or because we all enjoyed knitting or motorbikes or something like that then we'd probably talk a lot together as well as sharing in the activities associated with our common interest. We might have food together sometimes. We might talk about other things in our lives too and help each other out with projects associated with our shared interest. Even beyond that – if someone had a rough time with sickness or something else we might join together to help them out. In a really good club we'd certainly enjoy getting together with all our mates. Some of us might become good friends and share a lot more of our lives because we find we have so much in common.

How is Christian koinonia-fellowship different from that? Do we come to church to be with our mates? Who do you see and relate with among those who come to our gatherings or among those who come in for the first time? The people like yourself? Or those who are different in ways that might even leave you feeling uncomfortable, or who might need your help in ways that require something of you?

God extends his love and invitation to koinonia-fellowship to everyone – the whole world – including those with whom we have nothing in common, who are very different from us, with whom we will even have difficulty relating easily. What James said to us last week about being quick to listen and slow to speak becomes much more important here. We are called to do a lot more listening to understand someone who is very different if we want to speak without putting our foot in it, without unwittingly discounting them. Our koinonia-fellowship involves loving one another as oneself – that means everyone matters, that we honour and respect everyone equally (and probably need to show that in different ways for different people).

It also means the world's values are tipped on their heads. One of the things our society values is so called 'Tolerance', tolerance of difference. Basically that comes down to either ignoring, being indifferent to those who are other than us or just relating to them on the surface – being polite – almost a form of non-relating. That is not being in koinonia-fellowship. Another way the world's way of relating is tipped on its head I think is illustrated by a lovely story I'd like to finish with.

In the year 258 the emperor Valerian was persecuting Christians. Saint Lawrence was one of seven deacons in charge of giving help to the poor and needy under Pope Sixtus II.

When the persecution broke out, Sixtus was condemned to death. As he was led to execution, Lawrence followed him weeping, "Father, where are you going without your deacon?" he said.

"I am not leaving you, my son," answered the Pope. "In three days you will follow me." Full of joy, Lawrence gave to the poor the rest of the money he had on hand and even sold expensive vessels to have more to give away.

The Prefect of Rome, a greedy man, thought the Church had a great fortune hidden away. So he ordered Lawrence to bring the Church's treasure to him. The Saint said he would, in three days. Then he went through the city and gathered together all the poor and sick people supported by the Church. When he showed them to the Prefect, he said, "This is the Church's treasure!"

The teaching from James points to us valuing these sorts of treasures – the ones we have to work at helping and honouring, who need our support, the unlovely, the afflicted. James asks us – do we treat those like us, or like we wish to be, differently from those whom the world looks down on or our society considers more of the outsider. Do we put our personal resources, our time and possessions, as well as our words into relating with these sorts of different people? James teaches that faith without works is dead. One could say koinonia-fellowship without this sort of relating is dead too.

To preserve the koinonia-fellowship God has invited us into we treat those among us who are most different from us with honour and respect, we look after them as if they were closest family, mattering to us as much as those who are our mates. That is what will cause those around us to say 'Look at how much they love one another' and to hear what we say about Jesus. That is koinonia-fellowship lived out in such a way that Jesus prayer is answered – that they may all be one ...so that the world may believe...

Song – Brother Sister let me serve you