

KNEC 14th September 2014

JOHN 13 : 31 – 38

JOHN 17 : 20 – 26

I am going to be thinking today about unity – not about the referendum on Thursday 18th September, not the unity of Better Together. If anything I think our prayers and thoughts today about national unity should be focused more specifically on Friday 19th September and onwards when a discordant and divided nation will require to come together again to work towards a united future whatever shape that will take.

No, the unity I want to focus on today is unity within the body of Christ, within the church.

Our readings are some of the last words spoken by Jesus as recorded by John – Jesus had taught his disciples many things – about repentance and forgiveness, healing and prayer, sin and judgement, sheep and goats, kindness and generosity

Jesus was coming to the end of his short ministry, he had a precious short time left with his disciples, he knew that within a few hours he would be arrested and tried and crucified. He knew that his disciples would be in distress, in disarray, would deny him and be lost and confused. He also knew that these very men would require to take his message of salvation to the world, making new disciples of every nation, baptising in his name and sharing all that Jesus had taught them.

What did Jesus want to underline at this time, what did he need to instil into their hearts, what would all future believers need more than anything? What words did Jesus want his beloved little children to hear just after he told them that he was leaving them and they could not go with him – **Where I am going you cannot follow now, but you will follow later.**

He spoke to them about two things – love and unity.

A new commandment I give you. Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another. John 13 :34

John 17 : 23 Jesus prays to God - May they (all believers) be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. And the love you have for me will be in them.

If we turn these thoughts around, it follows that if we do not have love for one another, people will not recognise us as followers of the Lord Jesus, people will not be drawn to him.

And if we are not united and we show disharmony and strife in our relationships, then people will not see the love of Jesus.

I was at social occasion with a group of people who all go to the same church. The conversation came round to church and these people had a total down on others within their church fellowship, about the ministry team and other individuals in the congregation, what they did and didn't do, their shortcomings, little short of character assassination! Now, it was the kind of conversation that can sadly happen when people get together but there was a young woman in the group who wasn't a Christian and didn't go to any church and she expressed her surprise and amazement to me afterwards. She said that it was the sort of conversation she might have heard in the school staffroom when the headie and management staff were not present but not what she expected from a group of Christians speaking about their brothers and sisters.

You see, as Christians we profess our faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus is our Lord and our Saviour and our treasure and our joy. Do our lives reflect that? People want to know our faith is real, that we are true believers, that we really are disciples of the awesome Son of God.

If we do not have love in our hearts for our brothers and sisters, if we are divided and lacking in respect and humility, then this will be a stumbling block to non-believers who come among us.

Jesus understood human nature, he knew that all sorts of things would get in the way of our love for one another, he knew unity would be hard to achieve. And I am not referring to lack of unity as seen in the many denominations of the Christian church, that is another story altogether, I am referring to relationships within church families.

I spend most of my working life trying to repair damage from broken family relationships – husband and wife, parents and children, brothers and sisters

I know that I am not going to get very far with a couple when I hear a woman refer to her husband as “Mr. Smith.”

And I was puzzled just last week when a woman kept referring to “Mrs Ferguson” until I stopped her and asked who this was and she said it was her mother, now called Mrs Ferguson!

When the Christian name or the affectionate name is replaced with formal title, that is another brick in the wall of disunity and mistrust.

I speak to children who live with one parent, usually mum, and who are not encouraged to have a relationship with their dad. These children have often been encouraged not to say daddy but to refer to him as Dave or Alan or the Man or even The Bad Man. Distance the relationship, another brick in the wall

Family arguments might start over something trivial, tempers rise, communication breaks down, there is a rift, no-one can remember any more what it was actually about but it has a profound effect on future generations. Most families probably have branches that have broken off, moved away, become estranged. Both of my parents had a brother called Robert, no other siblings. Both Roberts fell out with family members and I have heard nothing of them since I was a child. One Uncle Robert had at least five children and I am always sad to think of all the cousins and their children that I have never met. They actually grew up in West Lothian and I sometimes wonder if our paths might have crossed.

We have to work at not allowing such disharmony in relationships in our lives and within the church. Of course we can have disagreements, debate is healthy, we will not have the same views on everything. Some of us are men

and some are women, we view life differently! We all have different personalities and experiences. If the polls are correct then half of us here will cross the yes box on Thursday and half will cross the no box.

Many of us will have been in different churches over the years where they did things a different way. Some people are extraverts and thrive on change and excitement and a bit of chaos. Others are introverts and more reflective and measured. Of course we don't agree all the time. But love and grace must underpin all our conversations.

By this shall all people know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another.

John thought very deeply about this word disciple and he concluded that a disciple is someone who has been born again, not just someone who has joined a church or a Christian movement or even stood up and declared "I am a Christian!" No, a Christian has been miraculously changed by the holy spirit into a person with a new heart of love for the Father and for Jesus and for fellow believers. Jesus also spoke at other times about love for our enemies but at this point he is talking about love within the church fellowship.

And John is captivated by this concept, so much so that he wrote a letter about God's love, the New Testament book we know as 1 John. He wrote

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God (4 : 7)

We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers and sisters (3 : 14)

And so Kirknewton and East Calder Church – my little children – in these difficult days this is what Jesus is calling for among us. **“Just I have loved you, that you, here in Kirknewton and East Calder – love one another.** Serve one another humbly, just as Jesus washed his disciples feet. Sacrifice your time for one another, love the youngest and the oldest and the weakest and the most needy and those who are easy to love and those who are hard to love. Be forgiving and learn to love the person to whom you have borne a grudge or who has wronged you in the past.

I am reminded of the final verse of Graham Kendrick’s song The Servant King – maybe we should have sung it today –

So let us learn how to serve and in our lives enthrone him

Each other’s needs to prefer for it is Christ we’re serving.

I will finish with these words from Colossians 3 – **Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts since as members of one body you are called to peace.**