

Acts 19:1-7

Belonging

Family and Friends

There are some people who prefer their own company, there are some who have no family and few friends who would appreciate company but perhaps the restrictions placed on us for the 9 or 10 months have brought home to many of us the key part that family and friends play in our lives. Frankly, we are not the same without them. Not being able to meet freely with loved ones has been one of the hardest things we've had to bear. There's no doubt that many of us wait with eager anticipation the restrictions being lifted entirely and being able to mix and meet freely with friends and family. We possibly underplay the significance that simply gathering together in Church has for some people. Naturally, worship is important but so too is meeting together with other believers – and for some, it is THE one point in the week where they know they are going to meet folk whom they know and who care. Someone said to me just before Christmas “I didn't realise just how much I had been missing Church”. We talk, sometimes rather glibly, about the Church family – but deep down there is a connection there among us – to some we might appear to be a motley collection of folk, with seemingly little in common, yet God manages to bring us together and bless us – and make us a blessing to others. We've tried to maintain fellowship in “lockdown”, and I take my hat off to those who have been on the phone keeping in touch with some, others engaging in practical support tasks where they discover a need; there have been the attempts to bolster up fellowship and teaching by various means – doing our best to get to grips with technology and various openings. Quite a few will have been reached, including some who wouldn't be comfortable

crossing the threshold of the Church, almost certainly some we will have missed. But there is something wonderful about the thought that present in the building or not, able tap into worship materials online, on the phone, in print or not, God binds us together as his people, as sisters and brothers to Jesus and to one another. Yes, of course, we could do better but let's not underestimate the significance of being part of the fellowship of the Church – not just Old & St Andrew's, not just the Church of Scotland, but the Church of Jesus Christ throughout the world – bound together in Jesus – our faith kept alive by his Holy Spirit.

Baptism

At this time of year, churches often think about the baptism of Jesus. At the time, John questioned whether Jesus should be baptised. Why? Because he didn't need to be made clean, didn't need to repent. But Jesus said, go ahead let it be so for now. We'll do what God requires. It's true that the Church does have some rules about baptism – there ought to be a connection and the opportunity for ongoing fellowship – but really like so many things – it is more about what GOD does than what we do. Some congregations have experimented with online communion – we did have an informal attempt at that on Maundy Thursday but I still have a hankering for real in person communion – though I suspect that aspects of that will never be the same again after this virus. However, I have yet to hear of a minister baptising a child remotely with the parents putting the water on the baby's head – for me that would be a step too far – as much as anything else because it makes the baptism in the context of the worshipping fellowship of God's people nigh on impossible to deliver. But the issue does raise questions about what REALLY matters in baptism. Jesus gives me the impression that his own baptism wasn't just what John planned, not your regular baptism of repentance and change of direction, since Jesus was going in God's

direction and was without sin. Nevertheless, it was as though Jesus was taking a further step to associate with his people, to bond with other believers, to stand in solidarity, in fellowship with those who wanted to honour God. The Christmas Story didn't end when Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus left Bethlehem. Our Christmas story doesn't end on 12th night. Jesus remains Immanuel, God with us, today and every day. Baptism is important but frankly baptised or not, we belong to Jesus, belong to one another if we trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and his love and forgiveness.

Holy Spirit

Paul was surprised when he came across believers in Ephesus who had never even heard of the Holy Spirit, but he didn't get too worked up about that. I suspect that many in the Church of Scotland don't give a lot of attention to the Holy Spirit. Given that the Spirit is God's promised gift to believers, Jesus' legacy if you like, to draw us to himself, to equip us to live out our lives as Christians and to share in his mission - it isn't something we can just ignore. But let's not cast it up that some people don't make much of the Spirit or even talk about the Spirit at all. No pointing fingers on this one please. Certainly, no name calling and making out one way or the other that anyone is beyond the pale because of their views on the Spirit – yea or nay! The Spirit is of God, intended as a blessing for us, so it would make sense to give him the place which Jesus wants for him – but maybe Paul's solution is wise – don't bang on drums, no theological inquisition, rather a gentle and kindly response – with some low key teaching that encourages inclusion, acceptance and belonging. I find it helpful to remind people that the Holy Spirit is not some weird and esoteric spiritual being but is the Holy Spirit of JESUS – and that in whatever ways possible the Spirit seeks only to honour Jesus, affirm him and facilitate our worship and service of Jesus. There can't

be any other agenda for the Spirit but to do the Father's will and serve Jesus and his purposes. So no driving a wedge please between Son and Spirit.

God and belonging

God seeks to draw us and all his people to himself in love. Jesus is at the heart of all that – he is central to Gods' plan and purpose and, if we are going to be part of his plan we will need to make Jesus central to our lives too. His Spirit is there to help us with that. Our belonging – is really only possible in and through Jesus and his love and forgiveness. There is a temptation in many a congregation that we get to thinking that what matters is ONLY the bonds of personal friendship that have grown up and which have become important to us. Don't get me wrong, these are important and are part of God's blessing to us. But they are not ALL that matters. For Jesus' blessing to us is of an open fellowship – his blessings are for ALL who love and serve him, all who trust him. Nearly every congregation of every denomination will have some rules about who can be members and what rights, privileges and responsibilities that entails, but we need to remember that all of that is secondary to our belonging being IN JESUS. It is GOD who gives us our belonging (to him and to one another in the Church), through JESUS his Son who freely gave his life that we might be forgiven and who accepts us freely in love and binds us together in the power of the HOLY SPIRIT. We probably experience fellowship and belonging through the Church, but it is the gift and blessing of God – and as such isn't ours to ration or withhold from others who may not dot the devotional "I"s or cross the theological "t"s as we do. Paul's approach with the Ephesians is instructive – affirm what we have in common, try to reduce the significance of our differences and seek improved understanding with grace – with a view to improving and deepening fellowship rather than allowing differences to divide.

Mission – the imperative

Belonging, fellowship – establishing, nurturing and expanding our belonging and fellowship becomes of heightened importance when we realise that God uses all that for mission – to reach out to others and help them to share in Jesus’ love too. Divided and troubled by differences that are of no interest to the wider world simply puts people off – not just us, our congregation, the Church in general but JESUS. Our divisions and differences, what will seem like petty squabbles to many not involved, drives people away from seeing the significance of the good news of Jesus, puts them off exploring the possibilities of faith for themselves. Mission is our priority – so anything that helps to further it is good, anything that detracts from it needs to be fixed or rejected. Belonging is a gift and blessing of God – we can and should enjoy it and be grateful for it – but it is not ONLY for us – it is intended as a blessing for “all people”. Just as Jesus was joy to the world at his birth, he is to be joy to world today and tomorrow. Our fostering and appreciation of belonging to Jesus and to one another ought to open up to our neighbours and the wider world so that they can share in God’s blessing and so that his mission of love and grace is advanced.

May the Lord bless you. Amen.