

Sunday 13 September 2020: To a Future of Community

A sermon preached by the Dean of Melbourne, the Very Revd Andreas Loewe, at St Paul's Cathedral on the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost.

Readings: [Exodus 14.19-31](#); [Romans 14.1-14](#); [Matthew 18.21-35](#)

During this pandemic, and especially during the last six weeks of 'hard lockdown', I have come to realise how often I have taken being with other people for granted. Of course, I would see a dozen or so colleagues at work. Of course, I would have the chance to walk through the Cathedral and talk with visitors, or shake the hands (remember that?) of worshippers and visitors at the end of my working day, at Evensong. Before Covid, I would estimate that I'd have 30 or so face-to-face conversations a day. Some would be only a few minutes long, others might last an hour. Now I have eight hours of Zoom meetings a day. They are not the same. Because we have to work harder to create and maintain community, when we don't have the privilege of meeting together in person.

In our second lesson, from his epistle to the Romans, our patron St Paul reminds us that we can only ever grow together, in community. Paul tells the Romans that as Christians 'we never live to ourselves'. As Christians we always live in community: we never are alone, but belong to one another and to Christ. And that should give us hope at times like these, when we find ourselves isolated from one another, and long for shared community. Spiritually we still belong to one another and to Christ, even though we are unable to meet in person now.

And just as we have come to realise that building community remotely – through the medium of a screen, or at the other end of a phone line – is hard work, so Paul tells us that we also need to work hard in order to earn the privilege of belonging together in the first place. From our mutual belonging together flow a number of obligations for the Christian community, Paul tells: the obligation to be generous in spirit and support one another through our means; the commitment to be welcoming to those who are different from ourselves; and the responsibility not to judge one another. Paul spells out these three obligations so clearly because unity and belonging is not a natural state of being for humans. We have the tendency to define ourselves by allying ourselves with some, and separating ourselves from others. Belonging is hard-earned: we have to work together in order to maintain our Christ-willed unity, Paul knows.

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Our second lesson concludes Paul's appeal to the Roman communities to forgo their divisions, which we have been reading as our epistle readings these past four weeks. Christian identity, Paul tells, is defined by our shared allegiance to Christ. We pledge that allegiance at the moment we are baptised. Our belonging is life-long, and life-giving and extends beyond death, Paul explains: 'whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord' (Romans 14). And our belonging together was bought at great cost, Paul reminds us: 'Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of the dead and the living'. That is why maintaining our unity, especially

in times of separation, is such costly business; and draws on all that we have, both our material and spiritual gifts.

The simplest way in which we make visible our unity, is when we share our resources to build or re-build community. When we work together to build up one another, when we share our resources to enable our Cathedral community to weather the effects of this pandemic, and when we plan together for the re-building and re-imagining of our programs and ministries once this pandemic is over, we shape and build community. In the past six months some of you have committed to increasing your giving. Some of you have decided to make a regular monthly 'Covid donation'. Thank you for your sacrifice to help us maintain our community.

As we look to the coming year, and as we are in the process of discussing with our regular members our tentative first plans for re-booting ministries in 2021, we continue to rely on the gifts and talents of us all to help our Cathedral community to re-emerge strongly from the financial and social impact Covid19 has had on us. In our giving of self and of our money, we can demonstrate our belonging together. By our sacrificial giving and sharing our resources with one another, we can enable this magnificent place of worship to buzz with life again after this pandemic. We each have a part to play in rebuilding our ministry in the coming years. 'Contribute to the needs of the saints', Paul put it earlier in Romans, and 'hold fast to what is good' (Romans 12.9, 13). Generosity and shared support, is lived out community.

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A second way in which we can express the unity of the body of Christ, Paul tells us, is by welcoming people into our community who are radically different from ourselves. In the case of the Roman Christians this included people who had very different views on fundamental principles: what to eat and when to keep the weekend. Instead of rejection and uniformity, Paul instructed them to exercise a ministry of acceptance and unity.

Welcoming people who are different from ourselves is a hallmark of Christian community. In the chapter after our second lesson, Paul insists: 'Welcome one another, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God' (Romans 15.7). In welcoming one another, we live out the welcome we ourselves received in baptism: complete acceptance by Christ of who we are – regardless of our race or language, gender or sexual orientation, social background or length of discipleship.

The kind of welcome that proved to be a stumbling block in Paul's time, was that of gentile Christians: pagan, rather than Jewish believers. Yet the same 'unacceptable welcome' of the first century radically transformed the Christian community. In the chapter following our lesson, Paul explains that 'Christ has accomplished through me to win obedience from the gentiles, by word and deed'. And points to 'signs and wonders by the power of the Spirit of God' among the Christian churches of the Mediterranean as proof of that truth (Romans 15.19).

I can't quite believe that it really has been seven years since we put our 30-foot 'Let's fully welcome refugees' banner on the South spire. Many of you will recall that when we first displayed our banner, we did so out of a sense of outrage that our government had proceeded to establish offshore detention centres on Manus Island and Nauru. At the time, I hoped that we might sway public opinion by our action. But so far, we haven't succeeded in persuading the Australian government to abandon its policies. The transformational impact of our refugee banner was not a shift in policy. Rather, it was the renewal of our own Cathedral community.

Ever since we put up that banner, our congregations have been transformed. Remember, how many more migrants and refugees began visiting the Cathedral and asking us why we were welcoming them, when so many were not? Our public advocacy led us to the establishment of new and the strengthening of emerging ministries. Through that intentional welcome to migrants and refugees – by our public advocacy and free English classes; through teaching, worship and Bible studies in basic English; through shared meals and by providing a place of safety and friendship – you, our congregation, has visibly changed. Today, you come from all nations and all age groups – we're a growing community of more than 25 nationalities – and that is something for which I give thanks.

We make visible our sense of belonging together, we build community, when we go out to welcome people who are different from ourselves. 'Extend hospitality to strangers', Paul tells us earlier in his epistle to the Romans, and 'love another with mutual affection' (Romans 12.9, 13). Welcoming those who are different to ourselves is lived out community.

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The final way in which we may make visible the community we enjoy in Christ, is by inviting people to walk with us; rather than exclude and condemn them. 'Who are you to pass judgement?', Paul challenges us in our second lesson. Who are we to judge fellow servants of Christ? Christ himself will judge our sisters and brothers, not we. Paul affirms: 'it is before Christ, their own Lord, that they stand or fall'.

And in the light of that knowledge, we have to radically rethink our natural tendency of ruling fellow Christians 'in' or 'out'. 'Each of us will be accountable to God', Paul tells in our second lesson, 'therefore let us no longer pass judgement on one another'. Instead Paul encourages us: 'let us resolve never to put a stumbling-block or hindrance in the way of another'. It is by walking together and learning from one another, that we can both grow, and enable one another to make better judgements.

At the beginning of each act of worship, we remind ourselves that our Cathedral stands on the lands of the Kulin nation, sovereign lands never ceded. The first peoples to settle Narm, the place what we now call Melbourne, more than 60,000 years ago. When the first British settlements were established, the Kulin nation had their lands taken and were moved to

reservations. There, they were deprived of their language, culture and spirituality. The two principal reservations in Victoria were run by the Anglican Church, and I find it humbling that so many Indigenous People in our state still identify as 'Church of England' today. Indeed, so important was the place of faith among First Nations People that, among a recently rediscovered list of aboriginal placenames for Narm or Melbourne, the Cathedral features as its own placename – Geeburr.

At the same time, I am deeply ashamed that we have inherited a legacy that has, for more than 150 years, judged Indigenous Christians to be of less worth than white Christians. I am saddened that many Australians still find it so hard to accept that Indigenous Lives matter. I am disturbed by the seemingly haphazard destruction of Indigenous cultural sites in the interest of making money from mining operations and am offended by the continued lack of support experienced by First Nations communities – especially in remote areas. Just as I am profoundly troubled by the consistently high number of Indigenous deaths in custody. Rather than walk together, we have chosen (and systemically continue to choose) to segregate and exclude, destroy culture and community. In Paul's words, we have 'despised our brother and sister'. And yet faith remains central for most First Nations Australians.

Over the past five years at St Paul's, we have deliberately chosen to walk together with Indigenous People. We spent time listening and learning to make better judgements. That listening has been profoundly unsettling. It has brought up issues of deliberate persecution, ongoing systemic discrimination and exclusion. For the past couple of years, we have donated the equivalent amount of our land tax to further collaborations with Indigenous artists. At the moment we are working with Wathaurong artists from Geelong to create a permanent art installation in the Cathedral to pay tribute to the people on whose land we gather, the people who gave our Cathedral the name 'Geeburr' more than a century and a half ago. A visual acknowledgement that is many years overdue. When we open again, we hope to display an Indigenous Map made from cast glass that charts the living water at the heart of our diocese – the Birrayung or Yarra, and the Bay – with Geeburr, our Cathedral, at its heart. A piece of art that will have pride of place in St Paul's, and which will serve as a visible reminder of our obligation to work for reconciliation and reparation that our epistle reading calls for.

We all grow, when we choose to walk together, not apart from one another. When, instead of judging and excluding one another, we allow ourselves to be enriched by our diverse identities and our shared faith. 'Hate what is evil; let love be genuine', Paul put it, and 'live in harmony with one another' (Romans 12.9,15). When we walk together, when we come together, we live out community.

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At every stage of our life as Christians: 'we are the Lord's', Paul encourages us in our second lesson. We never live to ourselves. We are given life and community through Christ, who gave his own life, 'so that you may belong to one another', Paul tells. As people from many nations, we can trace special bonds of belonging from Ascot Vale to Argentina, Carlton to China,

Collingwood to Colombia, and East Melbourne to England; from Geelong to Germany, Glenroy to Greece, and Ivanhoe to India and Indonesia; from Mentone to Malaysia, Middle Park to the Middle East, Northcote to Norway, Nunawading to New Zealand, and Parkville to the Philippines; from Surrey Hills to Sri Lanka, Somerton to Sabah and South Yarra to Scotland; from St Kilda to Sweden, Sunbury to South Korea, and Southbank to Singapore. Our communion here at St Paul's spans the globe, and is a precious gift from Christ. And maintaining it is costly, and will require all of our God-given gifts.

As we discern God's will for us and our future ministry once this pandemic is over, it is my prayer for you and for me, that we may be enabled to build and strengthen our communion in the way we support one another through our gifts and generosity of spirit; that we may refrain from condemning one another and instead listen and learn from one another to make better, Christ-like, judgements, and that we may extend our communion in the way we reach out to and include those who are different from ourselves. 'If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all', Paul put it, and encourages: to strive to 'overcome evil with good' (Romans 12, 18, 21). By promoting peace, by giving of ourselves, and our riches, by repairing what has been broken and reimagining that which has been curtailed by Covid, we build community.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.