

Sermon	St James
Use Ephesians 4, 1-16	5 th Mark of the Healthy Churches Initiative

One of the TV programmes I used to like watching was 'The World's Strongest Man'. Each week, competitors from around the world would seek to show their strength by pulling a bus or train along a track, or lifting cannon balls, or carrying tractor tyres or lifting x number of people. It was unbelievable to watch their strength, thinking about the dedication they'd put into building up their bodies, the self sacrifice, the commitment, enlarging their muscles, to make them big and strong.

This morning, in our reading from the letter to the Ephesians, Paul says that each of us should be body builders. But don't worry, we're not unveiling plans for a gym over in the Church House for the clergy to use before

morning prayer; don't worry about wearing a leotard; the body we're building is the body of Christ - the church.

You see, we are called as a church to not only to tell the good news of Jesus Christ, to share the Gospel, and to show the relevance of our Gospel today, but to work towards growing his Kingdom here on earth, in this place. Our message is not about being a moral upstanding people living a good life, but to be compassionate people, full of life and light, giving energy and life to others. But it is even more than that, we are also called to embody the very presence of God, by the way we live our life, by the way we relate to our fellow human beings. This fifth mark of the healthy Churches is all about operating as a community.

You see God is not a God alone, but rather the communion of three persons. God is one Lord, one spirit, and one God. St Paul argues that in the same way the

church should celebrate unity in diversity. A healthy church should always celebrate its diversity. Faith leads us into the divine communion. However, Communion with God, is also at once a communion with those who have faith in the same God. Community is not an “added extra” to faith, but is fundamental to it.

No matter how you look at it, Church is born in the form of gathering – a gathered group of people, gathered wherever they may be – whoever they may be.

The very act of being together, of worshipping God, of declaring His glory, and enjoying his presence – these are sufficient to make us his people. But the purpose of this community flows from its nature. As we gather, as we worship, as we come to know God, we find ourselves drawn into his purposes for the world. We begin to want what he wants. You align yourself with Christ, becoming “Christed”. We are transformed to be more like him. Our

ways of walking through his world are changed. Our actions flow as an expression of our nature. You see mission is not a departure from worship, but an outworking of it: what we do expresses who we are.

But a key word is this idea of community – for things to flow from a community – the community must operate as a community. This is very different to how a club works – where the attention is on communicating norms of behaviour that make someone acceptable, or not, and the contribution members make to getting the task done. But churches can not be a club – because on one level we are not interested in norms of behaviour, and completing a task – what we are called to be is so much more, and to do it, to be a disciple requires more than anything else a changed heart. For a church to be healthy, the 5th mark that we consider today we have to operate as a community. Communities that have a focus on valuing

people for their own sake and their distinctiveness. They put a high value on establishing and maintaining good personal relationships. And in large churches- this can a particular challenge.

Let us never forget, that as humans, we value relationships and by our very nature we want to belong,

This shows itself in healthy churches in three particular ways:

Firstly, healthy churches are concerned about Relationships. They are aware of and take care about relationships. Not just relationships between two people, but in building up a sense of community and belonging. One measure of this sense of community is the large number of people who are involved in different aspects of the life of the church. Different people, using their particular gifts and personality, for communities

recognize and release gifts rather than squeeze people into roles they do not fit. But perhaps there is a health warning needed – because we must be careful not to be so busy using our gifts that we forget about our own spiritual and faith journey. We all need to feel cared for, and nourished as God’s people. Let us not forget that we are called to be “a child of God”.

Secondly, in healthy churches its leadership, lay and ordained work as a team to develop appropriate expressions of all seven marks of a healthy church. The style of leadership needs to be an enabling one that affirms people gifts, and the contribution of all. It is encouraging. Leaders of churches who operate as a community, see their role as enabling the ministry of the whole church, rather than doing the ministry for the whole church themselves. They celebrate the gifts of others – thank God for them.

Thirdly, healthy churches are highly participative. Those whose faith is real want to do something about it and with it. Good healthy churches make that possible. We encourage lay ministry – it seen as a good thing. We are all on our faith journey, and all our faith journeys are valued equally. You see, twenty or thirty years ago, evangelism was seen as something to be done by an “expert” – the rest of us would get on with other things. But such a view is clearly wrong – helping somebody on that faith journey is a matter for everybody, everybody in our Church Community. We as the church, as a community are in it together, so to speak. It is the Church and our community that has become the evangelist – and it is that which has strengthened our whole sense of community.

St Paul reminds us that each person in the church is like a limb of the body. Just as we cannot manage without the

heart or the head, so we can not manage without each limb of the church. No part is greater than any other, though some may have prominence at one time over another. All parts are needed if the body of the church is to be healthy.

As we have seen we each depend upon one another for the smooth running of the church. For the conduct of worship, for the smooth running of a funeral or wedding, many people are involved. Each one is dependent on the other, so that their task is carried out smoothly and effectively. Indeed the church cannot be called a community if the work is done by only one person.

You know Sheldon Vanauken, the American author and long time friend of C S Lewis wrote this “The best argument for Christianity is Christians”.. There joy, their certainty, their completeness”. And yet we can also be the best argument against Christianity.

We are called to be living and loving community by God?

We are called to show mercy in our lives and gatherings,
so that the poor and the needy find the love they so long
for us?

The Church, Leslie Newbigin suggests, should be called to
be an “explosion of joy” in its community.

That it should be so; I agree

That it can be so; I believe;

That it might be so; I pray.