

# Together *part 2*

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**Colossians 1:17 - Matthew 22:34-40 - Romans 1:16-25**

We began last week to look at how central the notion of **'being together'** was for the Gospel. We are made to be... **together**. Yes we're individuals, yes we stand before God as creatures loved by God in our singleness; yes we need to respond to that love with our unique heart and soul but... who we are is as much a function of our relationships as it is of our individuality – indeed, if you think about it our individuality only counts **in relation to others**.

The context of our Faith is a social one. We are created by a social God – a God who exists as a tri-unity – a society of three persons. We are made by this social God to be **in society with God; to be in relation with God**. We are **born** out of the consummation of a special society – that of a man and a woman and we are born into another special society – that of a family unit. The family unit works within a greater society, perhaps a tribe, perhaps a city, perhaps a nation but from a faith perspective we are meant to work within a society – that of the faith community, the Church. In all we do and are, as Christians, a key concern is what I am calling our **'togetherness,'** our relatedness. The **issue** and the problems that come with this are not related to whether or not we should be **'with others'** but

that our whole context is distorted by sin. Indeed one of the classic analyses of the Romans passage notes the threefold development of sin here: vv 19–23—sin against the truth of God; vv 24–27—sin against nature; vv 28–32—sin against others all of which constitute fundamental and very important relationships.

Malcom Muggeridge the famous atheist reporter who was converted late in life once said this,

**“The depravity of man is at once the most empirically verifiable reality but at the same time the most intellectually resisted fact.”**

This side of the Fall every relationship must now deal with the selfishness of the individual; the blindness of people to their own faults and to their need of others; the propensity of people to be corrupted both by power and by lust and the weakness of our personal commitments to one another. We are weak people and we must face up to and admit to our weakness if we are going to come **together**. Despite the Fall, however, this remains a key goal of the kingdom of heaven – a fellowship, a **togetherness**, which binds us lovingly to God and to one another.

The question is where do we start? How do we apply ourselves to **togetherness** in order to grow in it? This morning I want to give you a theological answer to this. There are other ways of

coming to it but indulge me and let me start here with that verse from Colossians which was read for us this morning

**<sup>17</sup>He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Col 1)**

Christ works to hold all things **together** – this drawing of all things to Himself is the ultimate goal of salvation and so when we open ourselves to a relationship with Christ this is what we will find Him doing with us – drawing us **together** with all things. We can see Christ working through four foundational relationships around which our ‘togetherness’ is built but let me begin by saying that we should be careful here not to imagine that the outworking of these relationships is pristine or perfect or complete or even nice. Jesus started a community with 12 disciples. Presumably He looked for 12 men who would do the job; who were a good fit and who would help Him in mission. What He got was a bunch of rather slow, rather dull men who right up to the last just didn’t get it! Think of it – James and John the ‘Sons of Thunder’ end up after three years wanting Jesus to destroy a village for rejecting him – the very opposite of the Spirit He has been leading them by. None of them can get what Jesus’ mission is and one of them ends up betraying Him to the authorities. Finally, Peter the erstwhile head of the disciples and presumably the one who showed the most promise ends up also betraying Jesus publicly. What does this tell us? It tells us that we cannot idealize Christian community. It will be messy. It

will be difficult. It will fall over occasionally and largely because we are messy and make mistakes.

What we are looking for, however, in togetherness are signs of the kingdom – a deep love and compassion breaking out; a surprising generosity being demonstrated; a spirit of self-sacrifice and humility and a deep joy. As G K Chesterton was fond of say

**“The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried.”**

So four fundamental relationships – these are what I want to examine today and the first at least in the Bible is our relationships with Creation. God has made us to be a community with Creation. It’s no coincidence that one of the key results of the Fall as we have it in that reading from Romans is a complete breakdown in our relationship with Creation such that we end up replacing the Creator with what has been created.

**<sup>22</sup>Claiming to be wise, they became fools; <sup>23</sup>and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.**

**<sup>24</sup>Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, <sup>25</sup>because they exchanged the truth**

**about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! (Romans 1)**

Paul here is specifically talking about worship of animal spirits and nature spirits thought to inhabit places like mountain tops and hills and rivers and the sun and sea. That Christians find the Presence of God in nature is quite another thing. God is present in and through Creation and when we see Creation through the eyes of God we are seeing it as it truly is. But Creation itself is no god and the key to a proper relationship with Creation is always to look to the Creator – to understand Creation through the Creator.

If we look at our passage from Matthew today we can discern three further relationships through which Christ works.

The first is our relationship with God.

**<sup>36</sup>“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” <sup>37</sup>He said to him, ““You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’**

We have to believe that this is where the power of togetherness originates. This was and remains the primary command. Love God and please note what kind of love this is. It is a committed love; a boots and all love; a give it all you’ve got love. Christ is the key to understanding this love. His life is its message; His

death is its power. Christ is both the message and the medium of God's love but also the key to our loving God for as we receive Christ so we receive the power to love.

The second key relationship in this passage is that with our neighbour. We are to, "**Love your neighbour as yourself.**" This, in fact, contains two vital areas of connection. The first is clearly with our neighbour. We are to love others; we are to work to develop connection with others. We are to be a people who relate well to others, who are generous, thoughtful and forgiving of others. However the standard for this is found in the second part of the command which reads "**as yourself.**" How are we to love others? How are we to relate to them? We are to love them as we love ourselves. So the prior requirement here is that we love ourselves – that we are **together** with ourselves. And this is perhaps the greatest challenge in this age for there are many who remain alienated from themselves; who do not respect themselves and who are fundamentally unhappy with who they are.

From a Christian point of view this is to be expected. The Fall brings about a fundamental collapse of our self-image which has continued to plague humankind. The disease this produces is two faced. On the one hand it produces or can produce a deep inner loathing, a lack of love for oneself which may manifest in depression, anxiety and anger. On the other hand it can also produce incredible arrogance since because of our self-

alienation we fail to see the truth about our limitations as people and so we become arrogant, self-righteous and abusive.

In his classic book 'Anam Cara' by John O'Donohue notes this very problem and points to the beginnings of a solution

**'You can never love another person unless you are equally involved in the beautiful, but difficult, spiritual work of learning to love yourself. There is within each of us at the soul level, an enriching fountain of love. In other words, you do not have to go outside yourself to know what love is.'**

What is this source of love within? I want to suggest that this source is actually the Spirit of Jesus – the Holy Spirit. Jesus is confirmed time and again as the one who loves us and who died for our sakes. He is the true lover of our souls. He brings to us the love of God and that love is present within each of us by the Spirit of God. If we can learn to recognise that love and press into it we will begin to hear the living Word of God speaking love to us and this is so important because He is the truest source of love we can know. God uses parents and friends and others to begin uttering His words of love to us but sooner or later, to really know love, we will need to become aware of the Spirit of God speaking love to us and through this come to know that we are lovable and so love ourselves.

Rick Warren was once trying to express how much God loved a huge crowd of about 5000 inmates in a jail. Nobody was paying attention except a couple of hundred people right up front. He was standing on the ground with no stage, just a microphone, but the microphone could be heard through the entire yard. He pulled out a \$50 note, held it up, and said, "How many of you would like this \$50 bill?" Five thousand hands went up. He had everybody's attention. Then He crumpled it in his hands, tore it a bit, and said, "How many of you would still like this \$50 bill?" Five thousand hands went up. He then spat on the \$50 bill, threw it on the ground, stomped it into the dirt, held it up, and said, "How many of you would like it now?" Five thousand hands went up.

Then he said, "Now for many of you, this is what your father did to you. You've been mistreated. You are abused. You are misused. You were told that you wouldn't amount to anything. You've done a lot of dumb things to. You sinned. You've done some crimes, and you're paying for them. You've been beaten. You've been torn. You've been dirty, but you have not lost one cent of your value to God."

The key, I believe, to Christian discipleship is to know God's love for us. When we come to really understand that we will not only love ourselves but we will love others as well and, of course, we'll love God. The key to knowing this love is the Person of Jesus Christ. As we allow Him into our life we find the power

and the motivation to love. To Love Creation; to Love God; to Love others and to Love ourselves. Can I challenge you then to open your life to Jesus. This is where 'togetherness' starts and finishes and it's also where we learn to love.