

Working Together

Richard Dawson

Sunday 19 October 2014

John 5¹⁶⁻²¹

1 Corinthians 6¹⁻⁸

We all must live with others. It's a basic requirement of society. How well we do that varies considerably – from one person to the next and, if we're really to be honest about it – from one day to the next. Sometimes we find it easy to be with others. At other times we can't stand it or them. Sometimes we're easy to live with and... at other times... let's face it – we make it hard for others! Today we struggle more I think with living together. Our culture has made an art form out of forming shallow and very temporary relationships. Our heroes are generally self-made, strong, independent loners who rescue those around them then disappear. But the Church has resisted this from the beginning. Our heroes throughout the Old and New testament are flawed characters, people who know they are weak and need help and people who look to God for that help and people who work both for and with the community of God's faithful people. The Church has always understood that it needs to stand **together** if it is going to survive and that single challenge, that challenge to '**be together**' has proven one of the most difficult and perplexing tasks throughout the last 2000 years. How to be together – what '**together**' means. These questions plague us even today.

Today I want to take us a step further in my investigation of the idea of being together and begin to look at the relationship between our community and something else which lies at the heart of our faith... **mission**.

I want to do this for a number of reasons but one good one is that often the two seem to be in conflict. I don't know how it feels for you but it seems to me that half the time we're being told we need to be out there with the Gospel – in mission. But another half the time we're being told we need to focus on being the Church, on growing community here – on discipling those who are with us – on deepening **our** fellowship. What's it to be? Is one more important than the other? Should we be doing both? Can we do both?

I believe Jesus has some important things to say about this and we'll look at those in a minute but first let me say this, Mission is vital for Community. Indeed, Mission is Life for community. Without mission we die and, in fact, I would go so far as to say that without mission any community dies. Let me illustrate this with a story...

A thousand years ago, a group of Vikings led by Erik the Red set sail from Norway for the vast Arctic landmass known today as Greenland. It was largely an uninhabited island. The Norse colonies that grew from Erik the Red's Vikings in Greenland were law-abiding, economically viable, fully integrated communities, numbering at their peak 5,000 people. They lasted for 450 years—and then they vanished.

We think of Vikings as seafaring raiders. They thought of themselves as farmers and cattle-raisers. Owning and eating cattle was a status symbol. After Greenland was deforested for homes or pastureland and the fertile but thin soil was grazed into oblivion, Greenland's wind and water began to carry away the topsoil, and the Norse people began to starve.

Fishing would have been a simple and effective way to feed themselves. Yet all archaeological evidence suggests that the Norse would rather starve than eat a fish. Why would a society that was sitting on top of the richest food source the ocean has to offer nearly starve to death? In his book *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, Jared Diamond argues that when societies fail, it is typically due not to some cataclysmic event but to something much simpler. Societies fail **because they turn inward**, fail to think and dream outside the box, perpetuate their cultural model at all costs, and merely try to hold on and survive.

And that's exactly what happened to the Vikings in Greenland. They had a cultural taboo against eating fish. It simply wasn't done. So when archaeologists looked through the ruins of the Western Settlement, they found animal bones left in the debris, they found the bones of new-born calves, meaning that the Norse, in that final winter, had given up on the future. They found toe bones from cows, equal to the number of cow spaces in the barn, meaning that the Norse ate their cattle down to the hoofs, and they found the bones of dogs covered with knife marks, meaning that, in the end, they had to eat their pets. But not fish bones, of course. Right up

until they starved to death, the Norse never lost sight of what they stood for.

What killed the Norse community in Greenland? A lack of mission. They could not and, indeed, would not 'go outside of themselves' for an answer to their problem. They did what they'd always done and they were so determined to do it that they didn't just die in community – they killed it.

A spirit of mission would have made all the difference. A willingness to look outside themselves, outside the cultural norms that defined their society; outside the narrow confines of the way they'd done things for 450 years and longer would've not only put them in touch with a food source that would've saved them but possibly a way of life that would've enabled them to redeem some of the damage they'd inflicted on the land.

But isn't mission just telling people about the Gospel or feeding the poor perhaps? It is that but it is also much much more. Christian thinkers have, for years now, realised that when the Bible speaks of mission it refers primarily to two things

1. It refers to God's mission. It refers to **God's act of** reaching out to Creation with a redemptive love that heals and restores and renew. Mission is first and foremost God's work and **our mission** is to somehow get involved in that.

] It refers to the **outward direction** of God's love – the fact that what God does in mission essentially is to move out from Himself with love towards Creation, towards us! So mission is about **going out, thinking out, moving outside of ourselves.**

Indeed, the very word ‘**mission**’ comes from the Latin *missio* which is formed from the root word *mittere* meaning to be sent. And if someone is sent it means they don’t stay where they are. They move, either literally or, and it’s likely this has to happen before people move physically, they move in their thinking – they allow their thinking to be changed.

And this is precisely what the Viking culture in Greenland could not do. They couldn’t think outside the square. They couldn’t leave their precious idea of what was normal and what wasn’t and so... they died. **Their community died because of a lack of mission.**

Jesus understood this about community. He understood that community depended on mission and He understood it because his community with the Father depended also on mission. Having healed many the Jews begin persecuting Him – not because He is healing people but because He is doing it on the Sabbath. Why is this so threatening to them? Quite simply because by doing this Jesus challenged their interpretation of one of the Jewish Laws about not working on the Sabbath and it is these Laws which form the basis for their understanding of community. So by healing on the Sabbath Jesus is inciting anarchy and He is raising the possibility that the people are going to question their authority. Soon they themselves might be outside a community.

For Jesus, however, the justification for what he is doing revolves around community – **His community with the Father.**

“My Father is still working, and I also am working.”

Why Am I healing on the Sabbath? Answer. Because this is what I see my Father doing. Dad and I are together in this. We are a **community!** And our community revolves around doing this stuff. **This is what we do!**

He understood that as He participated in the mission of God, in the things He saw God doing, community would form around Him and so He did what He saw God doing... and the community of the Church was born. It was born, however, out of a determination to go out – to look out – to love.

So what about our community? What's the challenge? Two things are clear I think.

Firstly, if we don't commit ourselves to mission our community will, like the Vikings, simply run out. So much depends on looking outwards. So much depends on committing ourselves to an outward facing life. And it's not just because we have a duty to preach the Gospel that we need to do this. It's to create and to preserve community. Community depends on mission.

But the second thing we need to keep an eye on is how much we treasure what we have here. It's perhaps all too easily to dismiss church as a bit of a second rate community. It's not as fulfilling as being with close friends in an intimate and fun setting. It's not as exciting as participating in something we love like biking or tramping or climbing or surfing or going to the movies or clubbing or travelling or going to a concert of some sort. It's not as stimulating, at times, as a good night watching TV and it's not as

relaxing as a good book. So why come? Why keep knocking ourselves out to come to church?

We do it because we believe in the future; because a major part of our faith is to have hope and hope expresses itself above all in an active hope **in others**. And not just any others but others who believe as we do, in the grace, mercy and love of a loving God. How do I express my hope in you? How do I show you that I believe in you; that I trust you; that I have some confidence in you and your beliefs? There are many things I could say in answer to this question but the main thing, I think, is that I choose to **be with you!** I choose to **keep your company;** I choose to **give my time to you and with you.**

When we marry we say a lot of lovely things to each other at the altar, about love, about help, about faithfulness, about commitment but if you drill down to the actual meaning of these promises; if you ask yourself again and again what does this really mean it boils down to this – **'I chose to be with you!** I chose to keep your company; to stay with you; to favour your presence with mine and of course this is precisely what God does for us in Jesus. In Matthew 1 the Name given to Him is Immanuel – God **with** us!

This community sets out to do that – to imitate the wonderful coming of Christ by committing itself to **'be with'** one another and in doing so to demonstrate to the world the wonders of God's love. We need to treasure this way of being friends. We need to hold on to it for being together is at the very heart of God's redemptive plan for the world.

We don't come together primarily because of what this does for us. We come together because being with each other illustrates more than anything else the love, grace and mercy of our God.

Can I ask you to take this more seriously over the coming year? Can I ask you to see how important it is that you help us to be together in the coming year? Can I ask you for a new commitment to this witness to the world?

Our mission is to think outside the box – we won't survive as a community unless we do that. But if we don't '**come together**' here – what have we got to take out there?

There is an old Hasidic Jewish tale about a rabbi and an abbot of a monastery who often took walks with each other in the woods. Each of them looked forward to these special times because each found in the other a sympathetic listener to the problems faced daily in carrying out his respective religious responsibilities. One day the abbot confessed that there had been a rash of conflicts in the monastery. He told how the monks had become petty and were constantly being mean to each other. "As a matter of fact," said the abbot, "unless something changes, I fear the fellowship of the monastery will fall apart and nobody will want to come and be a part of our community." "This is very strange news," responded the rabbi, "especially since it is widely rumoured that one of your monks is the Messiah."

When the abbot returned to the monastery, he reported to the brothers the incredible thing the rabbi had told him. Everyone was abuzz about this news and everyone wondered which of them

might be the Holy One. Each looked upon the other with an inquisitive manner. Each wondered whether the brother he met in the daily round of work could be the Christ, living among them. It is said that in the days that followed, all bickering and complaining ceased. Furthermore, the spiritual life of the monks was quickly raised to a brilliantly high level. And word of the love and of the quality of life at the monastery spread far and wide. Instead of declining, the fellowship of the brothers grew in number and increased in spiritual depth. And all this happened because of a rumour that suggested, "the Messiah is among you!"