

Ephesians 4:1-3

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Date: 28 January 2024

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[0 : 00] Well, good evening, and it's been a real joy to be with you guys this Sunday. Thank you for your welcome.

I want to speak this evening from Psalm 133, that very short psalm that was read earlier, so perhaps you could turn that up. And I want to speak about a really important subject in all our experience, which is the subject of harmony or unity, and its opposite of strife and fighting and war. And I want us to think this evening about why we enjoy peace and harmony, and where peace is to be found, and what we're to do about it.

We're going to look at this very short psalm, and we're going to pull back a little bit to a wider camera angle to think about this from the whole Bible. You'll see at the top of Psalm 133, it says, of David, and King David knew, on the one hand, he knew the joy of harmony.

He knew about friendship. He had a tremendous, very close friend with a man called Jonathan, and he knew what it was to have a really, really lovely, harmonious, loyal, kind friendship.

[1 : 24] But he also knew the misery of strife. He knew what it was for King Saul to rage against him and try to kill him. He knew what it was for his son Absalom to betray, rebel against him.

He knew what it was for a friend to betray him. And so it's not surprising that he should write a song about the joy of harmony and peace. David came to the throne.

When he came to the throne, a deeply divided kingdom, full of strife, like many parts of the world today and at any time in human history.

And he knew something of the joy of the kingdom becoming united under one king. But towards the end of his reign and his life, he made some terrible mistakes.

And he was told that the sword would never depart from his house, his dynasty. And he began to see something of the misery of strife again. One old writer says that the best people to write about peace and harmony are people who have felt the misery of strife and disharmony and war.

[2 : 38] And David was certainly one of those. You'll also see that at the top of the psalm, it's called a song of ascents, which probably means it's a collection of songs.

It goes from Psalm 120 through to Psalm 134. And it's probably songs that pilgrims sang when they went up to Jerusalem for things like the festival of Passover in the Old Testament.

And this little collection from 120 to 134, it's a beautiful collection of psalms. And it begins, Psalm 120, with a psalm about the misery of strife.

So in Psalm 120, the psalmist says, I've lived too long amongst those who hate peace. I'm for peace, but when I speak, they're for war.

So it begins with this song about the misery of strife. So it's very appropriate that right near the end, 134 is a very short one at the very end, but 133, very near the end, you should have this lovely little song about the beauty and the loveliness of peace and harmony.

[3 : 48] So I want to ask the question first. You'll be thinking it's going to be a really short sermon because the psalm is only three verses and you're wrong because it's not.

So put your seatbelts on. The first thing I want to ask is the question, why is peace and harmony such a pleasant thing? So you'll see at the very beginning in verse one, behold, look how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell together in unity.

Think about that in just a moment. Now, in one sense, when David says, look, it's a good and pleasant thing to have unity and peace and harmony, you think, well, yeah, of course it is.

I don't need to come to church to be told that. Everybody knows that. There's a proverb in the book of Proverbs, chapter 17, verse one, which says, it's better to have a bit of dry, a bit of dry food with quietness than a house full of feasting with strife.

And you all know that, don't you? You know, if I give you a choice, you can go to something like a family reunion where the food is fantastic. It's a big celebration and somebody's splashed out a lot of money on amazing food.

[5 : 02] But it's a really unhappy gathering because people are sniping at each other and lying about each other and being unkind to each other. And I say you can either go to that or you can just sit with two or three good friends and have baked beans on toast.

Which would you prefer? And the answer is, if you're sensible, you'll say, I'd rather the baked beans on toast where there's peace and harmony. We all know that. It's kind of obvious that that's the case.

And so David says it's good and it's a pleasant, it's a desirable thing. And the word translated pleasant, it was used to the friendship of David and his friend Jonathan.

And to dwell in unity means to live together. You can use it of relatives or friends living and farming together. It can mean to sit over a meal together.

It could be used of a broken nation where there's been civil war mended, all sorts of ways. But the question is, why is it good and pleasant and why do we enjoy it?

[6 : 03] Because we all do. We all know that. I mean, you have to be really perverse to prefer strife and war to harmony and peace. And the Bible's answer is very, very simple but very profound.

And it is that God is one. One of the most famous little sentences in the Old Testament, what is sometimes called the Shema, after the sort of Hebrew word for hear.

And it's in Deuteronomy chapter 6. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And it's really fundamental in the Old Testament and the New.

There are lots of gods and goddesses in the world, but there's only one real God who genuinely and objectively and substantially exists.

And the New Testament says the same. Jesus quotes that with approval. And again and again and again in the New Testament, God is one. Romans chapter 3. Galatians chapter 3. God is one.

[7 : 05] 1 Timothy chapter 2. There's one God. James chapter 2. You believe that God is one. That's right. And in all the Christian creeds, we've said the Nicene Creed, one of the oldest.

I believe in one God. And lots of others, creeds and confessions of faith, we say we believe in this one God. There's just one God. God is one.

And the point of this is really, really important. That you and I are hardwired to find our peace and harmony and our joy only when we bow down together in worship of this one God.

And it means that the universe is not made to be like a kind of riotous school playground. You know, the kind of school playground where it's everyone for himself.

And the bullies here and the bullies there are slugging it out for control like gang warfare. And it's a miserable place. It's always fighting and sniping. And the world is made to bow down in worship to the God who is one.

[8 : 13] And therefore, the verse in Deuteronomy goes on, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind. This is the reason why we enjoy it.

So if you say to a friend, or perhaps you're here this evening and you're not as yet a Christian, and you say to yourself, why do I prefer peace to war?

And as I say, you think that's a silly question. It's not a silly question. And the answer is because we live in a universe where there is one God. And therefore, we're built for harmony and peace rather than strife.

That's why it's a good and pleasant thing. And that then raises the question, where is peace to be found? If it's a pleasant thing, where is it going to be found?

Now look in this psalm, because there are a couple of little pictures that David uses here. And I'm just going to unpack them. They're not super complicated, but they're really helpful.

[9 : 14] First of all, he says, verse 2, it's like the precious oil on the head running down on the beard. And you think that's weird.

If you're a man here and you have a beard, I think it's unlikely that you pour oil on your beard and you're pleased if it comes...

I mean, come and see me afterwards and say if you do. But in our culture, we don't generally do that. The nearest we get is sort of aftershave or something, or perfume for a lady.

And we like that, because hopefully it gives a reasonably decent fragrance. But the point is that this is... It's something you used to do in those days.

If a man was at a party or a dinner, one of the things a generous host would do is to offer him some sweet-smelling oil, pour it over his head, and it sort of goes down his head and his beard.

[10:17] You think, yuck. But in those days, they thought, oh, this is lovely. This is nice. It replaces the nasty smells there might be in the room with a nice smell. And it's a happy thing.

But it's not just any old beard. Look how he goes on. The beard of Aaron. Aaron was the brother of Moses in the Old Testament. And he was the first high priest of the people of God in the Old Testament, which means he was the man and his job was to bring people into the presence of God. That's what a priest did in the Old Testament, brought people into the presence of God. A priest was like an in-between person, a mediator. And the picture of the oil poured on Aaron's beard is a picture of the Holy Spirit.

It's a picture of the Spirit of God coming down from heaven, poured onto the head of this priest, going down his beard. And the picture is of lots of it.

It's running down on the collar of his robe. So there's lots of it. It's a picture of lots of lovely smelling oil. It's a picture of lots, as it were, of the work of the Holy Spirit coming down.

[11:34] Now, what does all that mean? You read the New Testament and you discover that everything that Aaron was, and the Old Testament priests were, is fulfilled in a better priest, a great high priest who genuinely brings us into the presence of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, who offers himself as a sacrifice.

And so this picture finds its fulfillment when Jesus, who is the man upon whom the Holy Spirit comes without measure, there's no limit to how much of the Holy Spirit's work there is in the life of the Lord Jesus on earth.

And he is the one who is the source. You find this beautiful unity that David is singing about in Jesus Christ.

We'll come back to that. Now, the second picture at the beginning of verse 3, it's like the dew of Hermon. Mount Hermon is a high mountain in the north of the Promised Land.

And the point about it being high is that there's always dew there. It's a hot country, but it's high enough for there always to be dew there, and plentiful dew.

[12:48] And you read the Old Testament, and dew is often associated, like rain, with life and things growing and food. And, you know, if there's no dew, if it's all dry, then there's no food and there's death.

But this dew is abundant. It's the dew of Mount Hermon up in the north. But it's falling on the mountains of Zion, which is another name for Jerusalem, the place where God's dwelling is. The tabernacle, the tent where God dwelt, later the temple where God dwelt in the Old Testament. And everything about Zion in the Old Testament is fulfilled in Jesus.

Jesus Christ is the greater than the temple. Jesus is the great high priest. Jesus is the sacrifice. Everything about Zion finds its fulfillment in Jesus.

So you look at those two pictures, the oil of the Holy Spirit of God coming down the beard of the priest, and the dew coming down.

[13:56] They're both coming down pictures, coming down on Zion. They're both pictures which the New Testament, you read them with New Testament spectacles on, and you think, this in the end is talking about unity that comes to us in Jesus Christ.

He's the priest. He's the fulfillment of Zion. And the New Testament teaches this kind of thing again and again. In John chapter 10, Jesus says he's the good shepherd.

He lays down his life for the sheep and he's going to gather sheep from other sheepfolds so that in the end, he says, there's going to be one flock and one shepherd.

In other words, the work of Jesus is to bring a broken humanity together into one flock, one shepherd, a place of harmony and peace.

In John chapter 12, Jesus says that when he is lifted up from the earth, which is a way of speaking about his crucifixion, he's going to draw all kinds of people to himself.

[15:01] John chapter 12, verse 32. And the cross of Christ, where the Lord Jesus Christ dies for sinners, is a kind of magnet and men and women and children all over the world, all through Christian history, have been magnetised and drawn to the cross of Christ because it's a place where we gather whether we're clever or not, whether we're rich or not, whether we're powerful or not, whether we're successful or not.

It's a place where complete no-hopers can gather at the cross of Christ. A long time ago, in the 1950s, there was a man called Doug Hammershagott. He was the second Secretary General of the United Nations. And in 1954, he said publicly that the cross of Jesus is the one place where nations can be truly united nations. Isn't that remarkable? I'm sorry to say I can't imagine the Secretary General of the UN saying that today, but it's true. The cross of Jesus is the one place that can bring a broken world together. And these pictures in this little psalm, this beautiful little song, speak about that. We live in a very broken world. You read the Bible right from Genesis chapter 3. [16 : 23] The whole thing breaks. The Tower of Babel in Genesis chapter 11. Human pride scattering. And you and I see this and we know this in every scale of life.

We know this. We've prayed this evening for Nigeria, a troubled country. You can think of countless others like that. It's not difficult, is it, to think of Syria or Libya or Yemen or Ethiopia. You just go around the world. Troubled, troubled nations, broken. But we also know it on a small scale. And I'm quite sure that represented here this evening, there'll be people who know something of the pain, as I do, of a broken relationship.

Maybe someone in your family and there's a broken marriage or a broken relationship between parents and a son or a daughter or between people and their parents. And one way or another or broken relationships in a workplace. And you and I know what it is to live in a broken world. And the New Testament says that what this psalm pictures for us is a beautiful coming together and harmony that comes in Jesus Christ.

[17 : 49] And Paul's letter to the Ephesians says that one day God is going to gather the whole created order under one head, even Christ. So there'll be one good government, one place of harmony, sometimes called the New Jerusalem.

And the New Testament also teaches that the Christian church is in some measure a kind of taster of that.

And I'm guessing that a number of you here will have experienced something of the beauty and the loveliness of a Christian church, of this church, as my wife and I have experienced in the church to which we belong in Cambridge.

Something of the loveliness of this unity and harmony that comes in Christ. And some of us, I'm sure, if your family or your wider family are not Christians, you'll know that extraordinary experience that you meet a fellow Christian and you have this sense that this is a brother or sister in Christ and that actually there's a closer link with him or her than there is with some of your non-Christian family.

It's an extraordinary thing, isn't it? But it's true and many of us know that. Having said that, the Christian church is always, in Bible imagery, a kind of mixture of Jerusalem and Babylon.

[19 : 20] And no Christian church on earth is perfectly Jerusalem. Until the new Jerusalem comes down from heaven, from God, and it is the perfect place of peace.

Until that day, a Christian church will always have something of Babylon in it. And so that raises the question, therefore, how should we respond to this?

If we love peace because God is one and if peace is to be found in Christ, how should we respond?

The song ends at the end of verse three there on Zion, at that place where the blessing of God comes down, the Lord has commanded the blessing, life forevermore.

God in heaven, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit has declared that the place where men and women gather in Christ is a place of eternal life and of harmony and peace.

Now how should you and I respond to this? Here are some suggestions. First of all, don't settle for anything less. This world is full of attempts to make harmony without Christ.

[20 : 33] And sometimes, in some measure, there is some measure of harmony. People who aren't Christians know what it is to enjoy friendship. Sometimes they have good marriages. Sometimes they have happy family lives.

We all know that. Sometimes a country may be reasonably stable without Christ. We all know that. But ultimately, the kind of peace and harmony that really goes deep and lasts is only found in Christ.

And therefore, don't devalue. Don't settle for anything less. Second, you and I need to remember that we can't create this. In the language of these pictures, it comes down.

It comes down on Aaron's beard. It comes down, the dew coming down, as it were, from Mount Hermon in that sort of picture. language. It comes from God.

And we can't create it. And therefore, we thank God when we experience it. When you and I, if we go home this evening after a Sunday in which we've experienced something of the joy of belonging to the family of Jesus Christ, and maybe we've experienced something of a kind word, and perhaps of forgiveness or encouragement or whatever it may be, we should thank God for it.

[21 : 50] It's a wonderful, wonderful thing. Third, it's probably just worth saying, don't be more narrow than Christ is. It's possible to be too broad so that we're not really Christian in unity.

It's also possible to be too narrow. And in Christian history, there have always been some circles which say it's not enough just to be in Christ. you need to be a particular sort of in Christ person. And it becomes too narrow. John Bunyan is supposed to have said, I will not make membership of my church more difficult than Christ makes it in his.

My wife and I were received last Sunday into membership in the church we've just joined in Cambridge. And it was lovely. We were asked to make promises. They're very simple promises. Do you believe in God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

Yes. Will you live as a Christian? Yes. We'll live as Christians. Will you come under the authority of the elders of the church and seek the peace and the purity of the church?

[22 : 51] Yes. Very simple promises. Didn't have to promise to be any special sort of kind of Christian. Just to be a genuine Christian. So don't be more narrow than Christ is.

And lastly, be eager. In the language of our second reading in Ephesians 4, eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

And the New Testament has lots and lots of encouragement to Christian people to be men and women of peace. Jesus said, blessed are the peacemakers. In Matthew chapter 5, the apostle Paul in Romans 12, if possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

2 Corinthians 13, live in peace. 1 Thessalonians 5, be at peace. 2 Timothy 2, to the pastor, pursue peace. The letter to the Hebrews, chapter 12, strive for peace.

You get it again and again and again in the New Testament. Be men and women who are eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. And that means things like this.

[23 : 56] Avoid party spirit. Party spirit is the sort of thing that says, I don't just want to be a Christian loving and following Jesus, knowing God the Father as my Father, seeking to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

I want to be in a particular little subgroup and we will think of ourselves as the inner circle. We're the ones who are in and other people are out and we don't like them.

So don't do that. Run away from the love of prominence. There's a nasty character in one of the short letters of John at the end of the New Testament called Diotrephes.

We don't know anything about him except he loves to be first. He's the sort of person who just, he wants to be, if someone else is up at the microphone as I am at the moment, he wants to shove them out of the way and he wants to be up there with them.

Wants to be first. And that sort of person is a menace in the life of any church. When I was a local church minister and we'd have elections and I would say to the church slightly mischievously, perhaps I shouldn't say this, but I would say to them, look, it's not, you know, you can vote for whoever you like, pray, but if you were to ask my advice, I would say, and that I would give it anyway, I would say, you want someone who doesn't want to be elected.

[25 : 33] And that's really helpful because it kind of sifts out the power among us who really want to be in the positions of power. Be willing to forgive one another.

We need to forbear with one another and forgive. We need to be gracious. That New Testament reading in Ephesians 4, humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love, being eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

So, I hope that that's persuaded you that this little song, Psalm 133, so very short, has so much in it.

Why is it good and pleasant? Because God is one. That's the world we're hardwired to live in and we'll never find our joy except worshipping, barring down together with this one God which is why it's such a joy on Sundays like this to join with brothers and sisters and to do this.

Where is it to be found? It's found in Christ. It's found in the place of the great priest. It's found in the place of the forgiveness of sins and it's never going to be found properly anywhere other than that

but it is found in him and you and I should be so thankful for it, should value it and treasure it and be eager to maintain that unity and the bond of peace.

[27 : 02] And it's a funny old thing, you come as a visiting preacher and I'm assuming that you guys do that and various people have said to me how lovely it is belonging here and that that's exactly what's happening and how, what are united and someone was saying to me just before this evening's worship service just how much this church is like that in which case go on being like that and if you find if you move somewhere else, some other part of the country and you belong to another church, be a peacemaker, one who seeks the unity, seeks to maintain, eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

It's a wonderful gift of God and it prepares us for the new Jerusalem, that place of perfect harmony. even as we feel the pain of a broken world, we thank God that in the Lord Jesus Christ, one day, the broken world will be brought together in him.

Let's be quiet for a moment and I'll say a prayer before we sing our final hymn. Let's go.

Thank you.