

*May our hearts may be opened to God's word even as we ask that God's word may be opened to our hearts*

## **THE PASTORAL BODY**

Today we have designated Pastoral Care Sunday and many members of the pastoral care group here at City are taking part in our worship. There are many rules in the pastoral epistles about church community life and how pastoral care is to be administered. We don't follow many of these precepts (eg status of widows) which are culturally locked. Instead we have devised our own working methodology. When I became an elder I was told by one member of the congregation that they remembered a time from the Presbyterian days when all elders were required to visit their "list" in the week before communion and check everything was OK. Another departure from the epistles is that in the URC elders are men AND women and are charged with overall pastoral responsibility of the members of the congregation, indeed one of Tom's parting pieces for advice to us was to "encourage the congregation to come to Elders first with their pastoral concerns and it will make life easier for any new minister". This echoes the words we are receiving from Synod Elders who are making it clear that any new minister is to be part of a ministry team at City Church and indeed will spend a portion of her or his time elsewhere; that things have to change and that we cannot regard the vacancy as a period of coping, treading water, until a new minister is in place, but rather should look upon it as a time to sow and encourage seeds of growth towards a new vision for the church in which all of us are more active and involved in mutual support, worship and mission.

At City we already have a small pastoral care group which supports the work of the elders and dedicates itself to an array of responsibilities revolving around visiting the unwell and the housebound, as well as being a contact point for weddings, baptisms and blessings and, perhaps the most visible of all – a special welcoming role in the vestibule on Sundays to newcomers and visitors. This picks up on the precepts in our call to worship and indeed symbolises to two sides of the pastoral coin for a faith community: ministering within and having an open door to those who may come in from a wider orbit.

There is also a variety of informal pastoral care and support which continue, unseen, as quiet, good works in our midst.

What I want to try and show you today is that Pastoral care is not an added "option" it is fundamental to the well-being of our community

1 Corinthians 12 v 27 reminds us that we are the body of Christ. We are all as individuals vital little bits of the body. We must work together and we must minister to each other if the body is to function as a cohesive whole – whole, holy and holistic are all words with the same root. As St Paul reminds us, we need to recognise our interdependence and the fact that the needs of the one are the needs of the many, the wellbeing of the one is the wellbeing of the many.

As a pilgrim people on a journey, this is the way in which all come to walk more fully together in the light and to ensure that good works are manifest and by this God is seen more fully alive and at work in the world.

The church building, sadly, is one of those few places nowadays where people of all walks of life, all ages, of a wealth of diversity ordinarily come together and

particularly so in this place. And we should take advantage of that abundance and diversity to enrich one another.

We need to go out of our way to seize on such opportunities, good Samaritan style, because we never know when we may pass by that road again, when such an occasion may come again, if at all. One of the most important things we have for each other is the gift of our time. What better way to show that we love and care for one another than to stop the treadmill for a few moments and give of ourselves. And the best thing we can do with our time together is to create space in which there are opportunities to listen to one another.

And the best counsellor is not the one that gives advice, but first and foremost listens to the one who is sitting opposite, to try and understand, to see where they are coming from, so that we can actually hear what the need is before we jump in with what we think is the problem, let alone the answer.

We would do well to remember the still small voice of God. When we are silent and attentive we can hear and see many things, for then we listen and look with the heart.

It is not a coincidence, I feel, that so many of the more vivid stories of the life and work of Jesus in the New Testament, the ones we really remember and hold for us a truth on which to base our own living, are rooted in inter-personal encounter.

Whether we are helping each other with basic needs or supporting with something deeper and more profound, how can pastoral care best thrive amongst us?

City is a diverse church which welcomes and holds together difference. We are even a community of members and non members. All are welcome in this place and all are welcome to contribute, to give and to receive.

BUT

We are also a community in a state of flux

1. as individuals we change and grow: even the human body renews itself completely every seven years
2. as a community we change and grow. Communities on a journey change as individuals come and go, perspectives alter and focus sharpens in different directions. Our outlook and our emphasis are very different to what we were thirty years ago, twenty years ago, even seven years ago

This is an inevitable and necessary precondition of the wellbeing of the body: Far from regarding this as problematic we should see it as a wonderful gift: for growth is the only evidence of life.

Whether newborn, teenager, middle-aged or older, the newcomer to the family of the church community brings new potential strengths and perspectives to the vision of the body which we need to encourage and sustain for our spiritual wellbeing; for the wellbeing and future of the life and work of this church, and its witness in the city centre. What are strangers/angels if not those who bring a new message; something different for us to hear or see. They bring the gift of new life and new blood.

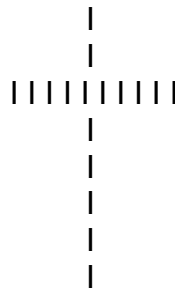
The words blood, blossom and blessing all go back to the same root. “Blessing is the spiritual lifeblood throbbing through the universe” ( quote Br Steindl-Rast from “A Listening Heart”) The river Jordan flows down from Mount Hebron as the perfect example of this blessing; it is life-giving water for parched soil. Along the shores of the Sea of Galilee into which it flows are a paradise of orchards and its clear waters are teeming with fish. From there the Jordan flows South into the Dead Sea. What a contrast! The shores are a desert, the water a salty brine, deadly for sea life. It is the same life giving water which flows into both lakes, but the Dead Sea does not pass it on. It holds onto it. And it stagnates. Blessings that stop flowing become a deadening curse.

It has always been a fascination to me and indeed one of the miracles at the deepest level of our faith that the more love one gives and receives, the more there is to give - and to receive.

Faced with the need to flow and grow, what is our firm foundation for this body of Christ in this place: The key is found in the gospel readings which reveal a two-fold approach in the two commandments:

1. God-centring
2. loving neighbour as oneself

Thus the individual becomes the axis of a cross which centres vertically (one-with-god) and horizontally (reaching-out-on-either-side-to-the-neighbour)



Our experience and our spiritual growth are tied one to another:

1. we each have a different perspective on God and sharing that enlarges our own understanding and perspective, thus helping us to centre more understandingly
2. our individual vulnerabilities and needs – if we are prepared to acknowledge and share them – create a climate in which we permit each other to grow in understanding and, by serving, manifest love and support in a way which puts each of us in touch with what it is to be truly human; in the way Jesus himself was, in the way he related to those who were drawn to him, to that enigmatic magnetism which emanated from a life centred so fully on God, which reached out left and right to those around, in dignity, respect and with a heart which valued the worth and potential of each and every individual, no matter what their circumstances - all of which we hope, this 21<sup>st</sup> century body of Christ here at City does even today.

So let us God-centre and reach out to one another on either side, and as we join hands build a net of love and mutual support in which to hold this world, not forgetting that the ends of the net are open, in invitation, ready to welcome the stranger and their new vision which will challenge us to bend the net this way or that and so keep those blessings flowing.

It is, is it not, wondrous, that we are a source of sustenance, discovery, comfort and support for one another and that in that very act of inter-dependency is the kingdom of God here on earth encouraged, piece by piece to slot into place and spread in love and witness. That is a gift worthy of thanks and praise to the One who creates and is the centre of all life, all love, all endeavour.

Stephen Best