



The Avenue Uniting Church

Sunday 13th November, 2022

Paul's Blessing...

2 Corinthians 13:11-14

Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the GOD of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of GOD, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

I sometimes find myself out of step when a church group says together "*The grace...*":

You know the one: "*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of GOD, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, now and always, Amen.*"

Not because I'm being a smart Alec (I hope!), or because I'm trying to make a point, but because I forget and say what comes naturally to me. And then I catch myself hearing what others are saying. It's just one word different, no big deal really. Or maybe it is.

When others say the word '*fellowship*' I have for quite a few years said instead the word '*communion*'. Now I'm not the only one, there are several of our Uniting Church liturgies that do the same. But it's not the usual form of words, not what we've '*always*' said – well '*always*' in recent decades, anyway!

Initially, years ago, it was because I reacted against the 'blokishness' I heard in the word *fellowship*, and wanted to avoid it.

I'm quite conscious that there are terms we use, in the life of the church and in general conversation, which can be quite exclusive. I'm aware that I don't use "*fellas*" in mixed company, and I hate mixed gender groups being called "guys". "*Hi guys, how are you?*" Just don't!

But that's not actually why I prefer "communion" over "fellowship", when I share in "*The grace...*" I'm ok to use it elsewhere. My difficulty with it here is that this is an act of blessing one another – of wishing something for each other in the name and grace of GOD.

And for me, *communion* is a much deeper expression of the blessing that I wish for others than *fellowship*. Now I'm happy to recognise that this might sound like pedantic word games to some or all of you, and at one level I'm ok with being pedantic. But I think there's more to it than that. I happen to believe that what we say matters, and that it not only reflects how we relate to each other but also shapes it.

To help me explain what I'm talking about, and why I'm focusing on this one word, I want to take us back to another word, a Greek one: "*koinonia*". (The pronunciation varies, "coin-o-nia" or "coin-own-ya" are the two most common).

"Koinonia" describes a deep, close, mutual relationship, as does fellowship, but it goes beyond that. It also includes understandings of participation, sharing in, a gift jointly contributed.

Perhaps most importantly, koinonia has a specifically spiritual character, which distinguishes it from other forms of fellowship. That doesn't mean it's better, it just means it has its own life and purpose. Koinonia describes a group and the relationships with in it, but also prescribes a way of being, a character, by which the group and its people are to live. Koinonia was understood as reflecting the unity of GOD in its life and relationships.

Equally important, I believe, is the notion of 'communion' as a verb. I mentioned that koinonia has the sense of participating in, of contribution to the whole, and sharing in the life of the whole. To be part of koinonia is an active thing. Very early manuscripts of the New Testament talked of it as "*the sharing in the Holy Spirit*". Whereas such activity can be part of fellowship, it is the nature of communion.

This is important when we come to the way in which ‘communion’ is most commonly used in church life, in the meal that gathers around bread and wine at Christ’s table.

I love that this is called “Holy Communion”. It is indeed a holy moment when we enter deeply into communion with GOD and with each other. It is a holy moment that reminds of who we are, and whose. We are a people of GOD. You’ll note that I say ‘a people’, rather than ‘people’.

That moment of Holy Communion invites us to be truly one, united in conviction and experience of GOD with us. This moment and this dynamic changes us. We are changed in the action of communion, in receiving the bread and the wine, in participating in the stories that surround them.

The bread and the wine are not communion in themselves. They are part of the means by which we enter into communion, and participate in the holiness of Jesus’ way. In receiving them together as a people of GOD, we open ourselves to an experience of the life and grace of GOD.

Their purpose, like the stories, is to help us live sacramentally in that moment, and to renew us to live sacramentally in all moments. As the 17th century monk Brother Lawrence puts it, they are to help us ‘*practise the presence of GOD*’

Our gospel reading today, from Luke 22, reminds us again of how important it was to Jesus, to eat the Passover meal with his friends. It was a moment of sacredness for them, even in the midst of his and their brokenness. It was a moment when brokenness was met with grace and compassion.

What we do in that one particular moment in church is about participating in the life of communion, the life of holiness in the midst of all life. It’s about refreshment to live the way of communion every day, and to find GOD there...

My choice of the blessing from 2 Corinthians 13 is deliberate, and not just because it’s the wording I wanted. It comes at the end of a letter which shows a deeply fractured relationship between Paul and the Corinthian church. The way of communion shouldn’t be idealized, it can be REALLY hard work. The way of grace can be deeply demanding, especially in situations of conflict. Sometimes I’d find it easiest to withdraw, even if I wasn’t an introvert! The risk of putting ourselves out there in relationship can be crippling, as well as rewarding.

I love that at the end of such a troubled letter, Paul still manages to offer a blessing. Perhaps his blessing is made through gritted teeth – but it’s made!

Holiness is to be found in connection. Our calling as people of faith in the way of Jesus, is to reflect that truth. ‘Holy Communion’, the practice we do together in church, is part of that, but not all. Our common purpose, our calling, is holy communion, a sacramental life in which the grace of GOD is seen and experienced - even when we’re not sharing the bread and wine!

To use the language of communion, for me, is to allow the sacredness of our gatherings as a people of faith to go with us, and shape us, in all of our living.

Even beyond that, it is participation with GOD in the dance of life and holiness that goes on each day. This is what makes me want to wish you ‘communion’, to offer this as my blessing to you in GOD’s name. It may sound like word games, but I don’t believe so!

So...

**May the grace of our lord Jesus Christ, the love of GOD,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all, evermore. AMEN**