**Week 4 – Becoming a new community (6- 12 March)**

What is the aim of loving one another? We have already considered a number of aims, such as responding to God’s love for us, obeying Jesus’ commandments to love one another, and being the recipients of joy. This week’s theme is about also becoming a new community that demonstrates what God is like and reflects the image of the trinity.

1. What do you already know about the early church as a community? Take a little while to brainstorm all you know.

**Jesus’ Teaching**

We have previously looked at some of Jesus’s ministry with his disciples in John’s gospel. Other significant instances of Jesus forming them into a community can be found among the gospel accounts.

1. What do we learn about Jesus’ expectations for his new community of followers from the verse below?

**Matthew 5:19** – “*Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.*

**Matthew 12:49-50** *- . . . pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers!****50****For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.*

**Matthew 18:1-5** *At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’****2****He called a child, whom he put among them,****3****and said, ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.****4****Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.****5****Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me’.*

**Matthew 18:21** - *Then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, if another member of the church[*[*f*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+18%3A10-35&version=NRSVA#fen-NRSVA-23747f)*] sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’****22****Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times’.*

***Mark 10:43-45*** *- ‘. . . whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant,****44****and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.****45****For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.’*

***John 13:3-14-16*** *- ‘. . .if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.****15****For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.****16****Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master . . .*

**The Early Church**

It is believed one of the reasons the early church grew so rapidly was in part because it attracted such a wide spectrum of society, from all walks of life. Because these groups of people loved one another it made them inherently appealing to others. Indeed one of the true meanings of ‘church’ is to be found in the degree of love demonstrated in these groups of people.

The writers of the epistles use familial and endearing terms when addressing their recipients: such as ‘beloved’ , ‘brothers and sisters or ‘dear friends’, showing the depth and nature of their love for one another. The epistles also contain explicit instructions about loving one another and how to do this.

1. Do you regard the members of your church community or organisation as ‘beloved’, ‘brothers and sisters’ or ‘dear friends’? If not, which terms would you use?
2. What do we learn from the verses below about the apostle’s expectations for these new communities of faith?

**Romans 15.1-*7*** *- ‘We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. ... May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Jesus Christ, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.”*

**Ephesians 4.32**  *- ‘So then, putting away all falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbours, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin.; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labour and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouth, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.’*

**Philippians 2:2**  *- ‘… make my joy complete by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others*.’

**1 Peter 1:22** - *. . .love one another deeply from the heart.*

**1 Peter 2.17** - *‘Honour everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honour the emperor.’*

**1 Peter 3.*8 -***  *‘Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called – that you might inherit a blessing.*

1. Look at your answers to Q2 and Q4. Which of these aspects of community life do you see happening in your own church community or organisation?
2. What challenges you? In which areas could we grow more in our love for others in your church community or organisaton?
3. What could you do as an individual ?

**For Further Reflection**

The New Testament provides a great deal of information about this new community, from the descriptions in the book of Acts to the letters written to the various churches or groups. There was even a special word for this community: *koinonia*, which is sometimes translated as ‘fellowship’. In Greek, *koinonia* denotes a close relationship (like marriage), an association, partnership, sharing or a common bond that unites people. As you may know, there was also a special word for the love that bound them together – agape (*pronounced ag-a-pay*).

The accounts of the early church in Acts speak of a very special community that worshipped God together and loved and supported one another and welcomed outsiders. Perhaps the best examples are found in Acts 2:43-47 and 4:32-35.

Perhaps the best known example of instructions to a community of Christians about loving one another can be found in 1 Corinthians 13. Although often used to describe a quality of love at wedding ceremonies the intended context was about love within the church. St. Paul goes to the extraordinary lengths by constructing this chapter in Greek poetic rhythmic form to underscore how the fractious and factious Corinthian Christian community should behave with one another, and why love is so important. Compared with all the things they were at odds with one another, or concerned, about, Paul points out their greatest concern should be their love and care for one another. You may find it worthwhile to look up and read this chapter afresh. Sometimes it is thought-provoking to insert your name, or the name of your church community, in place of the word ‘love’ in verses 4-6.

If you would like to look up some more examples: Philippians 2:2, 4:2-3, Colossians 1:4, 1 Thessalonians 5:26, 2 Thessalonians 1:3, 1 John 2:7-10

A New Testament scholar, E.G.Selwyn, examining 1 Peter, found some similar patterns of words in the text across different writers of the epistles. Among them were words that referred to taking off and putting on, which in Greek are *deponentes* and *induentes*. These words were followed by lists of behaviour that people were supposed to remove or put on. Selwyn speculated that the writers had borrowed from a common source of baptismal or catechetical teaching that prepared adult candidates for Easter baptisms and admission to the early church. At the baptism itself candidates would exchange their old clothes for new white gowns and Selwyn thought this would be a reminder of all they need to remove and all they needed to put in order to become members of the Church, as they died and rose again with Christ in baptism. Of note, what they were reminded to get rid of was everything that could damage or destroy the church’s *koinonia* and *agapeic love* and everything they were to put on would enable *koinonia* and *agape* to grow and flourish. The passage from Ephesians 4, which you read above, has some elements of this possible formula, as does 1 Peter 5:5: ‘… and all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another.’ (See Colossians 3:5-16 or Ephesians 4:25). If Selwyn is right, then this formed an important part of the preparation to become a baptised member of the early church, and the writers who quoted from this material were also reminding them of this earlier baptismal teaching.

The gospels were written later than many of the epistles and it is possible that the writers were also thinking of particular current issues in the Church when they were putting together these accounts. One potential example of this is Matthew chapter 18. It contains some important instructions about how to deal with one another when things go wrong. We use this teaching in our diocese as the basis for trying to resolve difficulties and disputes. The parable Jesus relates about the unforgiving servant (verses 23-35) is very telling for it suggests that whatever we may feel someone owes us may pale into insignificance with the amount God has forgiven each of us.

There is a story about St John who as a very old and frail man would be carried into church in Patmos. As he passed each of the rows, or however people were seated, he would utter the words “love one another”. 1 Peter 2:9-10 describes how the addressees – a mixed grouping of people, many of whom might not have known each other very well because they were likely exiles – had been formed into an entirely new group together (see 1 Peter 2:9-10). 2nd century Tertullian famously quoted a pagan opponent who noted: ‘See how much these Christians love each other.’ The 39 Articles, which form part of the Constitution of the Anglican Church of Australia, are closely based on scripture. Article 28 reminds us that Holy Communion is intended to be a ‘Sacrament of our Redemption by Christ’s death’ and ‘a sign of the love that Christians ought to have among themselves one to the other.’