



Yorkminster Park

BAPTIST CHURCH

Our Vision - Dynamic Fellowship

Sermon preached by The Rev. Kerr Spiers on Dynamic Fellowship

In this church we have a Vision Statement which the congregation adopted and accepted some time ago. This Vision Statement is to provide us with our guidance and our direction for the worship, mission and service of the church for the next century. Over the past few Sundays we have made the Vision Statement the basis of our preaching at Sunday morning services. The purpose of the church is set out broadly in the Vision Statement:

We are a congregation who have established a place and a presence to worship God, proclaim the Kingdom of God and make the love of God in Christ known.

That is our primary purpose and it is our belief that this purpose can be implemented in various ways and we've set these out in five different ways: worship, spirituality, teaching, mission and fellowship. We have spoken about four of these over the past few Sundays. This morning the implementation channel of the Vision Statement that I want to speak about is the remaining one. The theme this morning is fellowship.

One of the ways in which we express our purpose as a church is in fellowship. We've described fellowship as a congregational lifestyle which respects those who are on a spiritual quest; which welcomes children and young people to a warm spiritual home and family; which cherishes the elderly for their experience and wisdom. It is a church in which ethnicity is submerged in the new humanity of faith which includes people of all languages and cultures and nations; and also in which the Gospel is preached in its spiritual and social application. That is what we understand by fellowship in this congregation as it has been set out in the Vision Statement.

The word "fellowship", I suppose for some of us, has a kind of wary ring about it. It has perhaps some negative connotations to it as we've heard it used. For example, I used to hear about people being "suspended from the fellowship" because of various misdemeanors. They were regarded as being unworthy of the company of the saints. Fellowship can be used in a somewhat exclusive or elitist kind of way as, for example, when the members of Oxford or Cambridge Colleges are described as the "Fellows" of these colleges. That gives them entry into a tight-knit and somewhat exclusive academic community when "fellow" or "fellowship" is used in that way.

There is also a way in which it was used in the past, in a somewhat stilted British way of speaking, when one person would say to another: "My dear fellow, it behoves me to inform you that you are grievously mistaken in the affirmation that you are making." "My dear fellow" – there is a touch of patronage about it.

So "fellow" and "fellowship" when used in these ways may have been somewhat off-putting to some of us. However, both the word and the idea can be reinstated and rescued from these partial uses of it. We can see it not as a word that describes an elitist company from which we are excluded, as it were, but rather

Our Vision - Dynamic Fellowship

Continued

the description of an experience that many modern people, ourselves included, are seeking and aspiring after in order to find some kind of broader fulfillment in our lives.

There is a well known American journalist, Studs Terkel, who is not a man at home in modern technology. He speaks disparagingly about "men and women who sit side by side, planets way from one another, staring into their terminals". Then he says something which explains his dislike of this kind of technology. He sees it as the enemy of what he calls community, a destroyer of conversation, a threat to the real meeting of person with person in the flesh and blood of life's experience. Finally he says: "I guess a sense of community is what I am looking for."

A "sense of community" – aren't there many people who are looking for a sense of community? Someone has said that we live in a world in which there is much proximity but very little community. That is to say we live in a world where people are often physically near one another, but have no sense of knowing one another. I'm sure there are many reasons for this, very many heavy sociological reasons that we needn't go into this morning, but the upshot of it all is, I think, that there can be many disconnected lives. People who live out their lives with a sense of isolation, not a sense of belonging to any fellowship or community. What is lacking in these lives is a sense of belonging with others in a community. I think it's very interesting that there has been a great revival of interest in our day in the ideal of people of kindred mind and spirit, who share the same lifestyle, coming together in a residential complex and without interfering with their private lives, nonetheless, having a shared sense of belonging in a community in which they share together. Just down the road from here shortly there will be the beginning of construction of that very kind of community. I think if you were to trace that community back to its source, you would finally find yourself in the Christian New Testament.

Some of us during this past winter have been studying the Acts of the Apostles. This is the book that is really the diary of the experience and the actions of the earliest followers of Jesus Christ. If there is one thing that is clearer than anything else when you read the Acts of the Apostles, it is that for them Christianity, among other things, was a sense of belonging together, of sharing in a community, of being part of a fellowship. There they were in Jerusalem, a comparatively small group of men and women who had found and who were following the way of Jesus Christ. What the Acts of the Apostles says about their lifestyle is this: "They continued steadfastly in the fellowship". In other words, they hung in there. They had a sense of belonging together. So much so that for some time, probably quite a short time, they took this to what you might call, extremes. They actually shared together their money, their possessions and their homes. That is to say they shared a common life together, these earliest disciples of Jesus as they were beginning to formulate a Christian lifestyle in the story as we have it in the Acts of the Apostles.

I would like to stay in the Acts of the Apostles for a moment or two this morning because there are some wonderful illustrations in it of the meaning of this sense of fellowship. They echo down the ages, speaking their message even into a modern church situation like ours, as we struggle with the Vision Statement and ask ourselves what is the meaning for us of sharing the common life, of belonging together, of being in a fellowship?

Take for example the story in the Acts of the Apostles of Peter and his experience of the need to make this sense of belonging more inclusive than he had previously thought. Peter had been born and raised a

Our Vision - Dynamic Fellowship

Continued

Jew. For him, initially following Jesus became what you might call a conversion into a kind of Christian Judaism. He became a Christian Jew. He thought initially that the message was for the Jews only. Then one day he was staying in a village on the Mediterranean Coast and he received a call from a Roman centurion, a soldier, a Gentile, a non-Jew. He received a call to come to this man and to explain to him the message and the meaning of Jesus Christ. To cut a very long story short, he went to this other man's home; he satisfied himself that the Roman centurion and his household were bona fide followers of Jesus Christ, though they were Gentiles, just as much as he was. On the basis of that he discovered that he had to rethink the whole idea of fellowship, of community and of belonging. He had to draw the map more widely. He had to make the circle bigger than he had ever dreamed it was. He had to extend and expand his understanding of the fellowship. Isn't the extension of the fellowship to new people – isn't that a basic characteristic of any apostolic New Testament gospel church? Of course it is. It gets down to small gestures and small actions. When we have coffee and conversation in this church, for example, it's good to go and speak immediately with people that we know and we've known for years. But we must always remember the people on the periphery. The people who walk for the first time into the Friendship Room at our invitation to share coffee and conversation so that they are not left tapping their fingers somewhere on the outside of an in-group, but that the fellowship includes them.

If this church ever had any kind of isolationist stance about it, I'm sure that has been broken down in the last few years in terms of our relationships with the community of Churches on the Hill. This is another example of the extension and the expansion of our sense of belonging and our sense of fellowship. We go to these other churches now and recognize a whole lot of other people. They come here and they recognize us. They all work together in things like Out of the Cold and in the Food Bank and in other ways. This is the modern extension of the fellowship, the sense of belonging together, of being Christians, corporately as well as individually.

Come back to another episode from the Acts of the Apostles to illustrate something else about the sense of fellowship. There is this great story about Paul meeting members from the Christian congregation at Ephesus for the last time. Paul had said he was passing by for the last time and he would like to meet with them at a place called Melita, which is, I think, a city down on the Aegean coast. He spoke to them when they gathered together, pastorally and gently, and he commended them to the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Then it says this in the Acts of the Apostles. Please listen to this and relate it to the idea of fellowship. It says: "When he had spoken this, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship". A very poignant description of a very poignant occasion. The subtext underlying it all is the quality and the depth and the meaningfulness of the fellowship that these people had had with the great apostle Paul.

When I read that passage from the Acts of the Apostles I am very much reminded of the hymn that we sometimes sing, written by John Fawcett: "Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love, the fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above." I do not believe for one moment that Christians should live their lives in a kind of religious ghetto. I don't believe that necessarily we should be on the church premises every night of the week. I believe that we should have a meaningful and creative life out there in the world with our friends coming from many different points of view, theologically and perhaps religiously. All of that. But nonetheless I think that when we come to church we should find within the church community a higher kind of sense of belonging, a deeper sense of fellowship. The church should yield a rich experience of community. The fellowship should deepen with the passing of time and in its

Our Vision - Dynamic Fellowship

Continued

deepening it should become more precious to us, both in terms of the human fellowship that we offer and which is offered to us, and in terms of our sense of that human fellowship being transcended by something deeper and higher, the very presence of the Lord himself. Therefore this fellowship that we have becomes enriched so that sometimes it expresses itself in tears. Sometimes tears of sorrow and sympathy for those whom we love within this fellowship. Tears of joy and tears of celebration as we share in the good things that happen to each other. As the Letter to the Ephesians says in the passage that we read this morning: "It is with all Christian people, it is with all the saints, that we experience the length and the depth and the breadth and the height of the love of Christ which surpasses all knowledge."

Back again to the Acts of the Apostles. When we were studying it during this winter we came across something in the group that I had never actually quite noticed before, that had never quite registered with me. Towards the end of the book of the Acts of the Apostles there is the story of Paul making his way from Jerusalem to Rome to stand trial before Caesar. He makes his way by sea and land to Rome. He has a shipwreck along the way and various other hazardous experiences, but he gets near to Rome. He gets to the toe of what today we would call Italy. He is a prisoner in the hands of a platoon of Roman soldiers. However, when he approaches Rome something rather wonderful happens. He looks out and he looks away down the main highway, the Appian Way, along which he is travelling to Rome and he sees something. He sees a group of people who are coming towards him. When they get near to him they identify themselves to him and he identifies himself to them.

The explanation is this, as the Acts of the Apostles sets it down: "And so we went to Rome and the brothers there had heard that we were coming and they travelled as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet us". I don't know how far out of Rome the Three Taverns and the Forum of Appius are, but along that way the brothers, the fellowship, some of the Christian congregation from the church in Rome went out to meet this man, whom they had never met before. Then it says this: "At the sight of these men Paul thanked God and was encouraged". What was the reason for his thanksgiving? What was the reason for his encouragement? That he was embraced within the fellowship of the Christian congregation in Rome, some of whom had come out to meet him and say: "Paul, welcome. Whatever you need we will try to supply and we will stand with you." Paul was so moved that he got down on his knees and he thanked the Lord for such a fellowship.

So now can we gather up what this diary of Christian fellowship is and set it side by side again with our Mission Statement. The Acts of the Apostles says that church for us should be an experience of belonging and that fellowship has to be extended so that it is as inclusive as possible of all the people who stand on the ground of faith with us and want to follow the Lord. People of every nation, kindred and tongue, as the Book of the Revelation puts it. That fellowship becomes an increasingly deep experience with others, expressing itself in emotion, in joy, in empathy, in sadness and in congratulation. That fellowship will become for us in our lives a fortifying experience, a comforting experience, an experience out of which we take encouragement as Paul did and for which, please God, we will have reason to thank him for the sense of the fellowship.

When we turn all of this into twentieth century terms, it becomes the words of our Vision Statement. Fellowship for us, when interpreted and conveyed from the Acts of the Apostles into the life of Yorkminster Park Church in 1998, is this: we cherish those who are on a spiritual quest within our fellowship; we welcome children and young people into a warm and conducive spiritual home and

Our Vision - Dynamic Fellowship

Continued

family; we cherish the elderly, those who are mature in years and in wisdom and in life as they too are able share in our community life together. This is a fellowship in which ethnicity, in which background, colour and language do not mean a thing. It is transcended by and subordinated to, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Saviour and Lord of all people. It is a fellowship in which we embody and preach the Gospel, both in its spiritual and social application.

My friends, I believe that the vitality of modern congregations depends as much and perhaps even more on the depth of the fellowship as on the quality of the preaching or the music. In a world of increasingly privatized living, the Christian church, the Christian congregation becomes one of the last places where people can meet one another eye to eye, hand to hand, voice to voice, heart to heart. We should cherish this fellowship in every possible way for it is the best way in which we can learn of Christ and find ways of serving him in reality and in truth. For indeed it is His presence, the presence of the Lord that is known and felt and sensed and where the fellowship is most real.

I have a friend who writes to me from time to time. He signs himself off, always in the same way: "Yours in the great fellowship". That is how I see the Christian church – as the great fellowship. And every congregation should be a microcosm of that great fellowship. May it be so here in Yorkminster Park.