

Dear Friends,

I wonder how you have been keeping in touch with friends and family during the long weeks of lockdown. What is it that has nurtured your feelings of belonging? We are all social animals, even those of us who need regular 'me time' or solitude, to reflect and make sense of life's events. Moreover, Christianity is a social religion. There have been a few people called to a life of prayer as hermits, but that is the exception rather than the rule. Perhaps, like me, you find that you need corporate prayer in order to maintain your personal prayer. So, in this strange period of lockdown, which is beginning to ease for many people, I have been reflecting on what makes a circuit a community. I do hope that the bonds of Christian fellowship across the circuit mean that our circuit is more than an administrative necessity, or legal entity, but a real community of people who are all pilgrims on the Way of Christ, albeit at different stages of faith development. We are interconnected in so many different ways.

It struck me that our community is essentially Trinitarian. The three persons of the Trinity maintain their distinct identities but co-exist in an eternal dance of mutuality and unity. Similarly, our 13 local churches are each very different from one another yet bound together we experience the synergy of mutual support and encouragement.

Yes, it has been pointed out to me that Trinity Sunday was a couple of weeks ago so perhaps I am being a bit slow on the uptake. However, our Trinitarian faith is not just for one Sunday a year, just as our belief in the Holy Spirit is essential all the time, and not exclusively at Pentecost.

When I was a probationer minister, I was advised to see the church year being divided roughly into three sections. The Autumn largely focusses on God our Creator and Father who drew to Himself His chosen people to be a light to the Gentiles. Harvest can be seen as the festival which celebrates God as Creator. This season culminates in Advent with the longing for the coming of the Messiah.

There follows the emphasis on Jesus, born of the Virgin Mary, presented in the Temple, growing in Nazareth, confounding the learned scholars in the Temple, preaching, teaching, and having compassion on the crowds. The story of course moves inexorably towards Jesus' sacrificial death for our redemption, His rising again and ascension to God's right hand. We are all so very familiar with the story and the key festivals and fasts that serve as yearly reminders of the key events. We are in a sense the people of the story. We keep the story alive, sharing it with one another and teaching it to our children and grandchildren. The story animates us and enlivens our faith. Every year it seems that we do more than celebrate the story of Jesus, but we also re-live it. Participating in the story of Jesus makes us what we are and binds us together as a community of faith.

Following this line of thinking, of course we are now in the season of the Holy Spirit, inaugurated by the great festival of Pentecost. I am told that in the old Sarum rite (the worship developed at Salisbury Cathedral long ago) Pentecost was very much celebrated right through to the autumn, and I am sure that this is theologically right. This season is a precious time to foster our awareness of the Holy Spirit in our lives, energising the church

and equipping us to transform our society. We are bound to one another because the same Holy Spirit - the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of God – dwells in us each by faith. In some mysterious, mystical way this is what transforms us into the Body of Christ on earth. The Church can be understood as the vehicle for the Holy Spirit, though the Holy Spirit often breaks out from formalised religion. The Acts of the Apostles could as easily have been called the Acts of the Holy Spirit. As a body has many members so our circuit has 13 local churches, yet we are in connexion with one another and the wider Methodist Church, a movement shaped for mission. We are bound together by the same Spirit, yet each part retains its own character.

Andrew Robert's book, *Holy Habits*, has been a real game changer for many Methodist churches and circuits. In it he takes us back to the earliest practices of the Church in the days following Pentecost and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2. A keyword of the early church was *koinonia*, or fellowship. At the heart of a Christian community is the sharing of *koinonia*, and there is a selection of books and Bible studies in the *Holy Habits* series available from BRF. These explore *koinonia* and related themes.

Another writer, Simon Reed, explores how we can build Christian community. He mentions several aspects including making disciples, a common rhythm of prayer, a shared rule of life and spiritual accompaniment (soul friends). Our Methodist tradition encourages to share in small groups and congregational life as well as larger gatherings. Additionally, within our Methodist tradition is the pastoral care which we offer to one another, which fosters our sense of community.

During the lockdown we have learnt new ways of being together whilst apart, as well as making use of tried and tested ways of maintaining our connections. I rather suspect that we may want to continue to use some of these virtual methods to sustain our community even when the fear of Covid-19 has receded.

I do hope and pray that you feel part of our Trinitarian community - a community based on mutual respect and consideration, permeated with the grace of our Lord Jesus, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. I believe that many people are desperately feeling the need to belong to a community. That is a precious gift we can offer our neighbours as we welcome all within the Church family.

God bless you,

Keith

Rev Keith C. Beckingham, Superintendent minister.