

Bennochty 13th August 2017

In the Historic Dockyard in Chatham you can visit the 'ropery', where they have been making rope since 1618. The rope is still made on the Ropewalk and the claim is, their rope has been used to rig the mightiest vessels ever taken to sea. The rope is made by twisting at least three cords around each other to give it strength. When I looked on line you can buy a least a 12 stranded rope from Chatham docks.

" *A rope made of three cords is hard to break*" (Eccles. 4: 12b). What a great wee verse hidden away in the depths of the Old Testament! What an image for teamwork. By ourselves we are weak. Together we can be strong. Each strand has no strength of its own, but becomes hard to break when it is intertwined with others. How much more we can do, when we work together as a team.

A three stranded rope. We can extend that image. A visual parable of the Trinity of God: Father Son and Holy spirit. Three, intertwined, yet one. And for ourselves, in faith we are intertwined with God and we are joined together with others. We are part of a team and not just a group of individuals. If you think about it, on our own, we have less chance of winning, compared to a team that works together. It is one of the jobs of the football manager, especially at the time of the transfer window: get the new players in, get them to gel and create the winning team.

The church has only one team and we call it the Body of Christ. We know the famous image: one body, many parts; lots of parts, but only one Body. In 1st Corinthians 12, Paul uses the image again, but in a bit more detail. What he says is this, the team is weaker, even if one single person is not contributing as they could. let me continue the football analogy. In the church there is no substitutes bench! You don't come off the bench after 75 minutes to enter the fray. There should be no one sitting around, waiting to join in. The church is not a stadium for onlookers, cheering from the sidelines. Paul makes one thing absolutely clear, life in God's service is all about our participation. We are all part of the team, and, we are all responsible in terms of how the team functions.

So what the 'winning' team look like? Can we even use that language to describe the church? is that appropriate? What are the outcomes that say, we have succeeded? Today the statistics of the church don't look too good. We have a declining membership and a society that shows little interest in the church. We don't seem to be a 'winning' team.

Fortunately for us, Paul actually takes a step back and answers a different question. What is it we need to input, what do we need to do, each of us, to make the system work? If the body is a system of interconnected and inter dependent parts, what is our part in making the Body function, to make it stronger and

more healthy. His answer, use the gifts that God has given you. *"So we are to use our difference gifts in accordance with the grace that God has given us."* (v6) Grace, freely given, yet not deserved.

In this passage Paul concentrates on the gifts. It is not about winning at all. It is about being open to God. It is not ultimately even about what we do. It is about what we have been given. So often we try to solve the problems of the church, by doing things, without asking the right questions, what gifts has God given me? The gifts are the clues as to what we should be doing.

As a church we face many challenges. We all know that. I am reading a book at the moment about how congregations 'learn' and it makes this point, that to meet any challenge you require two things; a greater capacity or the means to increase your capacity, to respond to the challenge and, a commitment for the journey ahead. How often do we focus on problems, rather than solutions. How often do we concentrate on what is not there, or say 'we can't do that', rather than focus on the resources and assets we actually have.

It is obvious, but it is also true, we can only be, as a church, who we are. Look around. That is where the gifts of God are. There is no point in worrying about the people we do not have! We do a lot of that! If only... Fill in the blanks! This passage says, we all have gifts from God, so let's find out what they are and then let's use them. These gifts are our assets, our capacity, to meet

the challenges ahead, and most importantly, they are God given. That is the strength of the rope we have. Many people. Intertwined with many gifts.

Here is the challenge. Are we going to be a church of single strands, or are we going to create a rope that is hard to break? Enabling us to do the work of God in this community and support those who need our help.

God is a God of paradox. The scriptures tell us, strength comes out of weakness; the gifts of God's spirit creating the Body of Christ, that is our hope; and our faith, it is a reliance on our relationship, intertwined with God in Jesus Christ. It is this hope and it is this faith, that builds a rope, that is hard to break. Amen.