

## **Year B**

### **Ephesians 4:1-16**

The pyramids of the Giza Plateau are possibly the most famous structures in the world. The pyramids had great social meaning when they were built. Much more than just royal tombs, they represented the dignity and power of kings. So building a pyramid was a national project involving the entire country. Every household in Egypt sent workers, grain, and food to contribute to this project, which enabled the king to become a god in the afterlife.

The final step in the building program was to place a capstone encased in gold on top of the pyramid. The capstone signified that the monumental project was finally finished, and it was a time for dancing and singing as the entire nation celebrated completion of the national project.

In this sense, it was the pyramids that built Egypt rather than the other way around. The pyramids unified the nation in the service of one great and monumental achievement.

In a Peanuts cartoon Lucy demanded that Linus change TV channels, threatening him with her fist if he didn't. "What makes you

think you can walk right in here and take over?" asks Linus.

"These five fingers," says Lucy. "Individually they're nothing but when I curl them together like this into a single unit, they form a weapon that is terrible to behold."

"Which channel do you want?" asks Linus. Turning away, he looks at his fingers and says, "Why can't you guys get organised like that?"

Two very different illustrations of the power and impact of unity. The apostle Paul used the word 'one' seven times in our text from Ephesians today - one body, one Spirit, one

hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all. Clearly, there were tensions in the early Church which had the potential to develop into relationship breakdowns and fragmentation. It may have, in fact, gone beyond a potential crisis and was already leading to a fracturing of the Christian community. In any case it would not be long before disunity would be a prevailing trait in Christian history. I remember when I first studied Scottish Church History I was given a chart diagram of the Presbyterian Church in Scotland. It began on the left hand side of the page with

the Church of Scotland and finished on the right hand side with fifteen to twenty other denominations. Out of one, came many. Paul was at pains to emphasise that God's desire was for one body, through one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism. That's the reality and if we choose to live differently then we are contradicting God's intention.

Now, we might, quite rightly, ask the question why is unity so important? And we might come up with all sorts of worthy answers. It is important for the credibility of the witness in a fractured world. It is

important for the mutual support and encouragement of our fellow believers. And so we could go on. But it is interesting here in Ephesians that Paul based his argument elsewhere. Instead of directing attention to the church he looked to the ministry of Christ. He was not interested in the words or teaching of Christ here. He did not quote from the teaching tradition on unity recorded in John's Gospel, for example. Instead he referred to the ascending of Christ and then back to the descending of Christ in the first place. It all seems a bit obscure and even confusing. The ascending on high clearly

refers to his vindication and his power as the one who is able to dispense his gifts from on high. But what about the descending to the lower parts of the earth? Some believe that this was referring to a visit to hell but I don't believe that is what the text is referring to at all. Simply, I believe it is a statement of the journey of Christ; that he came down to earth to be with us and then ascended to the heavenly realm thereafter. It is what he achieved in the process that is significant. Paul wrote that he accomplished all this that he might fill all things. What is the common relationship between the heavens and the

earth? It is the fact that Christ has filled both with his presence. The entire cosmos, visible and invisible has been unified by the indwelling of Christ. Have you ever heard anything like that before? Well, 'I'm telling you, it's true!', said Paul. 'So what on earth are you doing promoting disunity?'

For many years Monterey, a California coast town, was a pelican's paradise. As the fishermen cleaned their fish, they flung the waste to the pelicans. The birds grew fat, lazy, and contented. Eventually, however the offal was utilised, and there were no longer snacks for the pelicans. When the change



came the pelicans made no effort to fish for themselves. They waited around and grew gaunt and thin. Many starved to death. They had forgotten how to fish for themselves. The problem was solved by importing new pelicans from the south, birds accustomed to foraging for themselves. They were placed among their starving cousins, and the newcomers immediately started catching fish. Before long, the hungry pelicans followed suit, and the famine was ended.<sup>1</sup>

It can be so easy to slip into bad habits like the comfortable pelicans. It is then easy to

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<sup>1</sup> Bits & Pieces, June 23, 1994, p. 17.

lose the purpose of our existence and to waste away. Christ's example remains the core reason for pursuing the unity that he has already established. And this is where we can fall down because we wrongfully assume that as the unity that Christ has achieved is a given we simply have to sit back and enjoy it! Not so, and that is why in his ascended glory he has given gifts to his people that we might work for the reality that Christ has achieved.

The Church is not a static, rigid entity. It is the organic, dynamic movement of God for the world. The gifts are given to the Church

to equip everyone. They are given by the one who knows what we need.

I read the following recently.

“Although the only person a man usually shops for is his wife, the whole experience is a stressful one. Many a man has felt extreme cold temperatures for a long period based on a poor present decision. As a veteran of these wars, I'm still not sure what to buy my wife, but I'll pass on what not to buy her:

1. Don't buy anything that plugs in. Anything that requires electricity is seen as utilitarian.

2. Don't buy clothing that involves sizes. The chances are one in seven thousand that you will get her size right, and your wife will be offended the other 6999 times. "Do I look like a size 16?" she'll say. Too small a size doesn't cut it either: "I haven't worn a size 8 in 20 years!"

3. Avoid all things useful. The new silver polish advertised to save hundreds of hours is not going to win you any brownie points.

4. Don't buy anything that involves weight loss or self-improvement. She'll perceive a six-month membership to a diet centre as a suggestion that's she's overweight.

5. Don't buy jewellery. The jewellery your wife wants, you can't afford. And the jewellery you can afford, she doesn't want.

6.. Finally, don't spend too much. "How do you think we're going to afford that?" she'll ask. But don't spend too little. She won't say anything, but she'll think, "Is that all I'm worth?"<sup>2</sup>

These problems are not found in the church. We are given what we need, not necessarily what we want. We are given gifts not for our own satisfaction and pride but for the

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<sup>2</sup> Forst, H. *Cross River*, NY, Patent Trader, in Reader's Digest, p. 69.

equipping of the church that the church might reflect the unifying presence of Christ who unified the cosmos through his indwelling.

Church unity is not a periphery desire. It is the gospel witness to a broken world. O that we were all to take that seriously. May God help us to use his gifts for this purpose.