

Good morning.

We are continuing our series on the theme of 'Trust'. We began with Fran two weeks ago, thinking about the importance of trusting God. Last week, Tim spoke about why and how we should trust ourselves, given that we are made in God's image. This week, our theme is 'trust of others'. At a time such as this, when people are forced apart by social restrictions, lockdowns and fears, it seems to me important to reflect on why it might be vital for Christians to trust one another.

If you look up the word 'trust' in a biblical concordance, you find lots of references to trusting in God. You even find scriptures like Psalm 146 which explicitly suggests that we should not trust in 'Princes, in human beings, who cannot save.' – that God is the only one we should trust. Indeed, some of the most famous stories in the Bible are to do with breakdowns of trust: Judas' betrayal of Jesus; Jacob's theft of Esau's birthright; the fall out between Peter and Paul; Peter's denial of Jesus – even Adam and Eve's relationship quickly descends into, 'it was her fault'. Trust between people is hard-won, but it is also sometimes unreliable, and so it seems to make sense when the Bible portrays the steadfastness of God in contrast with the fickleness of people:

'All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever.' 1 Peter 1:24-25

It is understandable, therefore, that many people through history have concluded that the most righteous path is to cut yourself off from human society, and instead spend your days 'trusting in God', perhaps somewhere remote and peaceful. It is tempting to wish for such an experience even in a modern society, choosing to avoid all the messiness and complication of our human beings.

But the Christian faith is no private religion. The message of the Bible is that Christians are called to be bound together in bonds of trust and love as the Church and, as Paul writes in Ephesians, that 'through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known' (Eph. 3:10). We should therefore be concerned about the potential impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic on the bonds of trust in our Churches. It is all too easy to start to pursue an individualised religion via video and begin to draft away from the trusting relationships that hold the Church together.

This is why it is so important that we continue to try to connect whenever we safely can and work hard to solidify our relationships of trust.

One of the difficult truths when it comes to trusting other people is that sometimes we are let down, hurt, abandoned. The more you trust and the more you love, the more possibility there is for heartache and pain. I'm afraid this comes with the territory; this is surely one of the reasons why Jesus describes following him as an act of 'taking up your cross'. This perhaps explains in part why Paul calls it a 'mystery' that God's plans and purposes should involve the Church! God knows all too well that calling a people to walk together through the wilderness of life will sometimes lead to times of difficulty. But if we want to trust God, we must also trust in 'the administration of this mystery' (Eph. 3:9) that His 'intent' was to reveal himself through the Church (Eph. 3:10), rooted in Jesus – we cannot say we trust God, if we do not trust in His Church.

It is for this reason that it is all the more painful when the Church goes astray. Each time we hear stories of Church Leaders abusing their authority, or Church movements that seek to coerce or control, or promise wealth and riches instead of Grace and Humility, our trust in the Church weakens, and therefore our trust in God's plans and purposes also weakens.

This is why in Ephesians 4, Paul describes what it really means to be the Church: a people unified by bonds of trust and love, operating as Jesus' hands and feet and thereby establishing his Kingdom on this Earth.

Although he doesn't use the word 'trust', Paul maps out a blueprint for a Church community bound by trust. He knows that such a community will not come easily, and will require some clear instruction.

In Chapter 4 verse 16, Paul uses the image of a body to describe the way in which we are all bound together by bonds of love and trust, 'joined and held together by every supporting ligament'. You and I are interconnected, symbiotic, co-dependent. When the ligaments of trust that connect us are strong, we are all the more able to be Jesus' operating vehicle in this world. Supported by strong bonds of trust and love, we find ourselves as God's people increasingly able to run the race set before us, even when that race involves a global pandemic, and all the personal and social damage that that has caused and is still causing. Now is a time like no other where we should seek to strength the ligaments that connect us.

There is a clear guide in Ephesians 4, too, about the kind of individual and collective behaviours that deepen those bonds of trust, the ligaments that hold us all together. Paul exhorts the church in Ephesus to prove themselves trustworthy through their righteous living; he knew that trust and love would not form in a community where people speak ill of one another, or who seek out selfish gain at the expense of others. He encourages us to 'put off falsehood and speak truthfully to our neighbour' (v. 25) and to make sure we do not let 'unwholesome talk come out of our mouths' (v. 29). Paul knows that this kind of speech quickly erodes trust, weakening the ligaments that bind us together, making us weaker. We should therefore avoid speaking in such ways at all costs, otherwise we erode the strength of the body, and weaken our witness in the world.

Paul knows, too, that trust takes work. He says that we should 'make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace' (v. 3). Building strong ligaments takes effort, it takes work, sometimes it takes struggle and perseverance. We should invest, therefore, in our bonds of trust – we should make every effort to bind more closely to one another, even in this season where the ligaments are fully stretched. I'm sure like me, many of you are a bit fed up with living on video, staring at your own awkward self-portrait and wondering if you are speaking too loudly. It takes effort, therefore, to log on for a virtual coffee morning, or a virtual prayer meeting, or perhaps even a virtual Sunday service. But if doing these things helps to keep the unity of the Spirit between us, we should 'make every effort.'

Paul goes on to promise that if we build one another up, and form strong bonds of trust, we can expect to weather any storm. He says that we 'will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming' (v. 14). A Church that is strong in trust can withstand any difficulties that may come. And so, in a season such as this, with fake news and fearmongering, and divisive politics – all things designed to weaken human trust - we must seek to draw closer together, making the effort to strengthen our bonds in any way we can. We should actively search for ways to be 'kind and compassionate to one another' (v. 32), and in so doing we will be able to weather this storm together and fulfil our calling to be a light in the darkness.

Ultimately, we should trust one another because that is what Jesus requires of us. It is indeed a 'mystery' that the God of Universe should choose you and I, and the trust we share, as His primary means by which

to reveal his 'manifold wisdom' on Earth as in Heaven. Indeed, we see in the life of Jesus that this is what He had always intended. He chose to build his church upon the very man who denied him three times in the darkness. He chose to break bread with the man he knew would ultimately betray him. He chose to visit the men who had abandoned him, allowing them to touch his side and share in his breakfast. Time and again His trust was broken, even on the cross, and yet time and again He chose to trust a second time.

My friends, the bonds of trust and love that exist between us are our central witness to the manifold wisdom of God. Christian evangelism isn't about advanced preaching programmes or high-production YouTube broadcasts, although those things have their place. It's a simple message, and it doesn't require a big budget or extensive technical skills to convey:

The Wisdom of God in Christ will be more fully known through the bonds of love and trust evident in His church.

It is a great and mysterious responsibility, but there is no higher calling, and no greater purpose.

Amen