

Sunday 1 November 2020

# Encourage One Another

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*Ephesians 4:2 Bear with one another*

Lord of all,  
help us to come to you now not just as an outward gesture,  
but in heart and mind and soul.  
Help us to make space in our hectic lives  
to be still in your presence,  
and so may we live in you and you in us.  
Accept us now as we come to you,  
and use us for your kingdom.

As I come into God's presence, I choose to praise him in the words of Psalm 91:1f

<sup>1</sup> You who live in the shelter of the Most High,  
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,  
<sup>2</sup> will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress;  
my God, in whom I trust."

Throughout his writings, Paul presumes that conversion leads to moral renewal, and although we are no longer required to follow the Law, the conviction that true faith leads to a new life remains (see 1 Thessalonians 2:12). Paul writes to the church in Ephesus:

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:1-6, see also Colossians 3:12-15)

Paul begins and ends the first part of this short passage with a similar Greek word. 'Prisoner' and 'bond' remind us that freedom in Christ is not the same as license (see Galatians 5:13). At the time of writing this letter, Paul is actually bound in prison. His chains, he says, are no more nor less real than the ties that bind fellow Christians together. We are all prisoners, Paul claims, he to his chains and guards, and all of us to the call of God. The exhortation to "lead a life worthy of [your] calling" (1) echoes the Old Testament understanding of what it means to a people called out by God. God's calling is to create a people who are devoted to God's law.

This exhortation is expanded with examples of what it means to lead a worthy life: that with humility, gentleness and patience we will bear with one another (2), so that we may "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (3). These words, like Paul's play on the idea of being bound, are carefully chosen. Humility was not considered a virtue by Paul's contemporaries. It suggested the same kind of grovelling servility that is common in today's thought. As such, it is a distinctly Christian characteristic and calls us to take an honest look at

ourselves in the light of Christ, and act accordingly. Gentleness does have positive overtones. A gentle person is one who can bear hardship or loss and remain at peace with themselves. Patience is a virtue of God himself. It can mean steadfastness in the endurance of suffering but more often it describes a reluctance to avenge wrongs, showing itself in loving forbearance. All this leads to one idea, that we should bear one another in love. To bear with one another is to put up with another's faults and idiosyncrasies, knowing that we have our own.

This call to a different kind of living is followed by a theological declaration (4-6) that is both the grounds for and a celebration of our unity. Paul calls out a series of foundation stones, one after another: one body, one Spirit, one hope. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism. And above all, there is one God and Father of us all.

The unity that comes from being willing to bear with one another is not simply a result of us trying to be nice people, it is a theological declaration of the nature of God and of his purpose to create a new people.

Who is God calling me to bear with this coming week?

*Pause and pray*

In a few short verses, Paul has pointed to the foundation of Christian unity. Where these are absent no amount of structural unity can compensate. But when this strong base has been laid, then there is good hope that a visible unity can be built.

Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love. (Ephesians 4:15f)

Gracious God,  
take our faith, flawed though it is,  
our love, poor though it may be,  
and our commitment, for all its imperfections,  
and use us in your service  
to make known your gracious purpose,  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.