

**You are all one**

*1 Kings 19:1-15a; Galatians 3:23-29*

Bubble: small balls of air or gas in a liquid.

Bubble: a hollow ball of soapy liquid able to float in the air.

Bubble: in a cartoon, a shape in which the words or thoughts of a character are contained.

Bubble: a noun that means boiling or simmering.

Bubble: in the Scots language, to cry.

Bubble: a group of people who have unlimited contact with each other but not groups to help stop the spread of disease.

Bubble: an individual or group of people who are unaware of or unaffected by activities happening outside itself.

Who knew that one little word had so many meanings?

We became used to the idea of a 'bubble' during lockdown when vulnerable people in particular were in isolation and could only have very limited connection with others. But as lockdown for most begins to fade, another meaning for 'bubble' still remains. The idea that an individual or group of people are unaware of or unaffected by activities happening outside itself. Worse than a clique or a cabal, a bubble not only excludes intentionally, it no longer has any point of reference to the outside world or the concerns, hopes, fears and dreams of the people living in it. Completely enveloped in itself, the individual or groups is deaf and blind to what is going on outside, and worse, does not care for what is going on outside, or certainly gives that appearance. A person, or a group, wrapped up in a bubble is a very small thing. We are better together. We are better when we are looking out for the needs not only of ourselves, there's nothing wrong with being concerned about your own well-being; but also for the needs of those around us. I well remember the first Sunday we were able to have tea and coffee after the morning service. I was delayed speaking to someone at the door, and when I came through to the corridor I met one of our elders leaving the St Matthew Hall. "My goodness, what a noise!" She said, then added, "Isn't it wonderful."

Christians in community, around a communion table, gathering to worship, gathering for coffee and friendship, or for other social and fund-raising events. It *is* truly wonderful.

“You are all one,” says Paul in his letter to the Galatians. Not hiding away from the world in a cave, like Elijah in the Old Testament reading; but gathering, together, a community, a family, a church. Isolation and exclusion, whether by design or default, hurts. Humans in isolation or exclusion suffer serious mental, emotional and sometimes physical distress. “You are all one,” says Paul. Our business as followers of Jesus is the building of longer tables, not higher fences. Our business as followers of Jesus, the refugee, the homeless one, the hungry one, the excluded one, is opening doors, not closing borders.

When humanity excludes and shuts out and ignores, we are all diminished, whether we are on the inside or the outside. When God looks at us, God sees His people, His loved ones, His children. Not the differences but the family likeness. *“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”*

Jesus breaks through the barriers of race, social position, gender – all the bubbles that foster inequality and injustice among individuals and communities. Social, economic, cultural distinctions are obliterated in Jesus.<sup>i</sup>

John Chalmers, in the July edition of *Life & Work*, writes about our God who is, *“the presence that walks with the poor and when we reach out to lift up the marginalised and the excluded, we are making God present, known and real.”*<sup>ii</sup>

He goes on to write: *“...I am overcome by shame at the presentation of plans to set up a processing facility in the southern hemisphere for refugees and asylum seekers arriving on our shores. The Archbishop of Canterbury was right to say that the plan was ungodly. It is, and it denies us the opportunity to make the presence of God known and real in the hospitality and welcome that we provide for traumatised people who are running for their lives.*

*It is deeply disturbing to reflect on the thought that this policy is considered by some to be a ‘vote winner’. That is not because it puts pressure on people smugglers, but because it has the potential to keep people who are regarded by some as job thieves and spongers out of the country. This is not Britain at its best – this is*

*populism at its worst. ...when we reach out to lift up the marginalised and the excluded we are making God present, known and real.*

*More people are on the run from war, oppression and hunger than at any time in history. But instead of dealing directly to break-up the people smuggling cartels and dealing compassionately with people so desperate that they would risk their lives and the lives of their families to a rubber dinghy in the busiest shipping lane in the world, we propose sending them more than 4000 miles to be processed as if they were a product on an assembly line. I have never been so conscious of the connection that there is between right decisions in our political life and the right outcomes for the most desperate and vulnerable people in the world."*

Paul says, "...you are all one..."

The Rwandan deportation speaks of something deeply barren at the heart of parts of UK politics. We are better than this. Hospitality isn't always easy, but if we can't offer hope and shelter to the least and the lost and the persecuted, then to whom? This is not simply a political or economic issue. It is a profoundly moral, humanitarian and spiritual one. It is a matter of ethics, Christian ethics, which is why religious people are right to speak out, and loudly.

Messy? Yes it is. Challenging to live up to? Yes it is. Easier to ignore, and put in caveats? Yes it is. But a Church that does not aspire to Galatians 3:28 is a poor excuse for a Church. We're not a bubble of monochromatic conformity. There will be lumpy, difficult, divergent opinions which we must acknowledge and work through. But in Jesus Christ, we are all one. God doesn't pick and choose. Nor should we.

I don't find this easy. I think none of us will find this easy, but the reassurance of similarity rather than the Bible's insistence on diversity in unity, that powerful paradox, remains. We are the many-threaded tapestry. We are the multiple-sectioned mosaic. We are the glorious-hued window of stained glass. We are Christians, and though we are many, yet we are all one.

The New Testament scholar Beverley Gaventa writes: "...identity in Christ Jesus is the only identity that matters...Paul manages to offend virtually everyone..."<sup>iii</sup>

We're not designed to live in air-less bubbles, or stultifying echo chambers where the only views and ideas we encounter are exactly the same as the ones we hold. We are called by God, none

other, to step out into the world and discover unity in diversity, appreciating the distinctions, but rejoicing in the common experience of being human and being alive in God's good Creation together.

Today we are called, though many, but sharing as one, around the table of the Lord's Supper, where for the first time in years, we are gathered to share with Christ and with each other.

"You are all one..." Let Jesus make it so today.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> Robert A Bryant, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C Vol 3, p165

<sup>ii</sup> John Chalmers, *Life & Work*, July 2022

<sup>iii</sup> Beverley Gaventa, *Texts for Preaching*, Year C, p398