**1 Peter 3:8-22 Conduct in the Church**

How many of you have been members of other congregations over the years? If you have, you have probably made comparisons. Some churches you have belonged to will have impressed you more than others.

Jay and I have moved around a fair bit, and so have belonged to quite a few churches. Some we have been really at home in, such as the first church we belonged to as a married couple. At the time, we described it as probably the closest thing to a ‘New Testament’ church that we could have found. We were very sad when we moved and had to find another church.

Interestingly, the next church we joined was something of a struggle to belong to. Perhaps our previous church was a hard act to follow! I don’t think we ever really felt part of it. We weren’t able to be there every week due to our work commitments, and as a result, we always felt a bit on the fringe. People didn’t know our names, we weren’t personally invited to things, and it didn’t feel much like a family. Perhaps part of that was because we weren’t there every week, but it was also because people didn’t really make any effort to include us.

Church can be a positive or negative experience for people, and so much of that depends on the way people in the church relate to each other and to newcomers.

In the second reading this morning we pick up the thread of a discourse in which Peter has been laying the groundwork for how God’s people should relate to one other.

In verse 8 from today’s reading, Peter gives a summary of the qualities which we should display in our relationships with every person who comes into our lives— though more particularly, with those who are our brothers and sisters in Christ. It’s that one verse that I’d like us to unpack this morning.

3:8 reads, “Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind.”

***1. Unity***

**So the first quality** Peter tells his readers to have is *"unity of Spirit".* Other translations say, *“Be of one mind.”*  It means to live in harmony with one another.

The same root word is used in the Book of Acts where we read, "Now when the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with **one accord** in one place" (Act\_2:1). The word translated as "one accord" is used something like seven times just in the Book of Acts to describe the oneness and the harmony of the early believers who made up the church.

God has called us as His sons and daughters to live in harmony with Him and with one another. In Eph\_4:13 we read that it is God’s desire for us to be growing continually into a unity of the faith and a unity of the knowledge of Jesus Christ so that we may grow into maturity to become more and more like Jesus Christ Himself.

Does this mean we all have to be clones, though? All thinking the same way, and having the same opinions? Of course not. The church is made up of people who are as different as night and day. They come from different backgrounds, with differing education, church & social experience and often different churchmanship. Maintaining harmony amongst such diversity is of course the challenge!

Think about an orchestra for a moment. A good orchestra, playing in harmony, sounds magnificent! But if you were to examine the various parts each instrument plays, you would see that they are very different indeed.

One of my favourite stories as a child was “Tubby the Tuba.” Is that story familiar to anyone? It’s about a tuba who was really depressed, because all he ever got to play were the oom-pah’s. He wanted a melody like the others. So one day the conductor gave him his own little tune to play. Tubby found it a struggle, because he wasn’t designed to play intricate tunes. In the end, he did play his tune, but decided he was much better suited to playing the oom-pahs.

It’s a no brainer, really. Any orchestra sounds best when its members are playing together in perfect unity under the baton of a conductor, rather than each player doing his or her own thing.

This should be the experience in our churches. The oneness and the harmony which the Lord desires for the church must begin with us. The church is people—the people of God. When we are living under the lordship of Jesus Christ and are in tune with Him, we are in harmony with our brothers and sisters in Christ. When there is disharmony and disunity in the church, sin is present. That sin is self-centredness.

The solution then is spiritual, not organisational. So often when there is disunity in a church, we look for someone or something to blame. Perhaps it’s the parish council’s fault. Perhaps it’s the teaching. Perhaps there’s an emphasis we don’t agree with – the church is too evangelical, or not evangelical enough; too liturgical, or too contemporary; or there’s not enough focus on social justice….and so it goes on. Let me say this again: when there is disunity in the church, the solution is spiritual, not organisational.

When there is discord, we need to look within and ask, “where am I being difficult in this situation? Where can I respond in a more mature and loving way?” We then need to seek the will of the Lord together—and do it. Then there will be harmony.

2. ***Sympathy/Compassion***

The next quality listed in v 8 is sympathy. Other translations use the word compassion – Peter instructs us to be sympathetic or compassionate toward one another.

It probably wouldn’t surprise you to know that on any given Sunday, there would be one or more people in our congregation who are hurting in some way and who need our sympathy and compassion. The ministry of reaching out in love to these dear people needs to be a part of our worship experience. We need to be alert to the needs and demeanour of others. It is a vital part of our personal ministry within the body of Christ to come alongside & support those who are doing it tough.

The people of God should always be able to share their needs and hurts with one another. That is why small groups are so important within the life of a church family. They provide the atmosphere of love and trust which encourages the participants to share personal needs and to "bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ" (Gal\_6:2).

Paul reminds us that within the body of Christ, when one member suffers, we all suffer (1Co\_12:26), and that we should rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep (Rom\_12:15). This is how we express the ministry of sympathy and compassion— it’s by sharing the very heart of Christ.

3. *"Love for one another”*

The third quality Peter exhorts us to have is love. The word used in this verse for "love" is not *agapē* - which is the selfless, sacrificial love God has for us, but rather is the word *philadelphos* which is best translated as "brotherly love." That word is where the city of Philadelphia in the USA gets its name. It’s known as the "City of Brotherly Love."

Peter is certainly not suggesting that we should love one another within the church with a quality of love which is secondary to, or less than the quality of agapē. Instead, he is using what you might call "family vocabulary" which is so central to the teaching of the New Testament.

We are members of the "family of God" and are brothers and sisters in Christ with God as our Father.

There are numerous instructions to love one another as brothers and sisters in Christ in the New Testament. There’s Paul’s instruction to the Romans to "be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love" (Rom\_12:10). And then the writer of Hebrews encourages us to "let brotherly love continue" (Heb\_13:1).

This warm, warts-and-all accepting love should permeate all our relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ, no matter how irritating we think they are, or how much we might disagree with them.

4. *A tender heart*

The 4th quality is Peter expects of the church is to be *"tender hearted,"* This means to be kindly or to have pity for someone. Again, this attitude reflects the nature of Christ. If we are to live for Christ, or if we are to allow Him to live in and through us, we must be tender hearted. Our hearts need to be broken by the things that break the heart of our Lord. Then as we become aware of the struggles and pain and difficulties of others, we need to be willing to come alongside side them in compassion. If our hearts are hard, then we need to offer them to the Lord for him to change.

Tender heartedness is an attitude that we should hold towards those outside our church community as well – which means being willing to become involved in the plight of the poor, the homeless, the prisoner, the refugee. It’s what Jesus did, and what he wants to do. Monty’s place in Narooma, and the ministry of St Vincent De Paul are two areas in our own community where we can get involved. It’s great that we now have an Anglican team working at Monty’s, and some of our folk assisting at Vinnies.

5. *A humble mind*

The last instruction in this verse is to have a humble mind. It means we need to be careful that we don’t see ourselves as more important than others in the church. Therefore, we should be willing to let go of that tendency we sometimes have to think that our opinions matter more than others, or that our suggestions and advice must be heeded in preference to those of others. If we were all willing to be humble a ‘give a little’ in times of conflict, we would find that the conflict would be much diffused.

In this one verse, we have a plumbline with which to measure the health of our own church. How do we measure up?

In our own strength of course, we can’t. To be the kind of church that honours Jesus, we need to co-operate with the Holy Spirit. As we keep the Scriptures in mind, confess our shortcomings, rely on Jesus, & walk in obedience, we will find that the qualities we have been reflecting on this morning will be a natural outcome of our relationship with him.

May our church be one that displays unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind.

Let’s pray.