

We have just returned from celebrating Mum's 90th birthday. She was very touched with your warm greetings in the card you sent, and has sent a reply which will be on the table at the back, after the service.

On the flight back, I was reflecting on the fact that celebrations are very special times, special occasions when a community gathers to participate in the joy of shared memories; communities may be families celebrating a birthday as we have just done, a school or university alumni class, even a workplace group celebrating a milestone. We don't imagine them to be communities, but groups of theatre-goers and concert lovers gathering to celebrate the opening or final performance, congratulating or commending the author, composer, conductor, actors and performers, are also communities celebrating a shared experience.

By its very definition, the word "celebrate" describes a social event, a gathering of people who share things in common, a shared interest or activity, shared memories, to regale together of happy times, and to look forward together, of better, even different times. The shared experience includes food at the event, and the entertainment during the event, all of which binds people attending, into a "togetherness" which brings joy.

But human history is also packed with evidence of people who gather instead as individuals, who do not share a common interest, nor do they have shared memories. Each individual person attending the gathering is self-centred and focussed on a personal agenda. We see as we do, the growing mountain of evidence of abuse where people get hurt, because one person wants to celebrate in one way, and the other person doesn't share that value.

It's not only about what Harvey Weinstein now stands for, but the same happens when for example, revolutionaries like Che Guevara and political leaders of all colours and persuasion, including the one who wants to

build a wall and make his nation “great again”, get what they want, but the people who join the leader thinking they are creating shared memories soon discover, they are being used and abused by the great leader, for his or her grand purpose.

Celebration as a communal activity is at the heart of the history of God as found in the Bible. God celebrated His creation of this earth by giving Himself a day of rest. And why not? After all, each part of creation, He declared was **good**¹ and following the creation of the human being, He declared all of creation was **very good**². But it soon became apparent to God, *it was not good for the human to be alone*³, so created for him a companion, a soul mate, with whom together, they would celebrate God’s creation by enjoying every part of it. God’s idea that a man and a woman would leave their parents to be a couple, was not that they would **abandon** their parents to create what we call a nuclear family, rather they would expand and extend their families to become a community with a shared history⁴.

Starting at creation, over several generations, as families grew and became communities, we read that God was grieved that the human heart drifted towards self-centredness, seeking self-gratification above everything else⁵. Through Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (later renamed Israel), God chose a person and a family to become a community and grow to be a nation, whom He blessed, yes as individuals, but most importantly, **through whom** He will bless the whole world⁶.

¹ Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25

² Genesis 1:31

³ Genesis 2:18

⁴ Genesis 1:24

⁵ Genesis 6:5-6

⁶ Genesis 12:3

This is the nature of God's blessing. It begins with us recognising all we have and claim to possess as coming from the hand of God, and giving and sharing what we have to support those who for no fault of their own are in need and in want. The measure we use to give, is the measure with which God blesses, *pressed down, shaken together to make room for more, running over, and poured into your lap*⁷, a powerful image of how cares for His whole creation.

Jesus then comes to us at a time when God's chosen people through whom He wants to bless the whole world, once again for the *umpteenth* time, lose the plot of celebrating God's blessing and being a blessing to the world, reverting instead to self-centredness and self-gratification by hoarding God's blessings for themselves, and ignoring God.

Jesus comes to us, not to cut God's chosen people off from being a part of God's blessings because they were not a blessing to the whole world, but that **He** should be the blessing God intended for the whole world. John in his account of the Gospel says very rightly, *God so loved **the world**, that He sent His Son to bless the world, that anyone who believes Jesus His Son was sent to accomplish God's will, will enjoy God's blessing of being restored to eternal life.*

Celebration is at the heart of God's plan for us. His act of creation was a celebration of a plan, and the last two chapters in the book of Revelation, describe a celebration which accomplishes that plan, a celebration which extends beyond the boundaries of the earth, reaching deep into every corner of the universe! Lets not make the mistake of thinking, because we cannot imagine what this would be like, does not mean it will not happen!

⁷ Luke 6:38

What I am about to say is not a political statement, endorsing one view against another, but all over the world, people groups want to breakaway and become their own nation. This is a fallacy, a mistaken belief; a religious group, an ethnic group, an economic group, or community or social group cannot be a nation. Nations are a collective of families, who despite their differences, unite behind a common identity.

The Church is like a nation, a collective of families who unite around a common identity, and our identity is with the person of Jesus the Christ, and His Father, our Father, creator and life-giver.

Jesus, the Son of God, who came to us as one of us, to take on the pain of death which separates us from God, for the purpose of defeating it, breaking its hold over us, restoring our lost, broken relationship with God.

All those who believe this to be true, not only share in this common identity, but celebrate the fact that we are united by this identity.

In a few moments we will do two things to celebrate our life as God's church. First, we will celebrate the life of Jesus the Christ in bread and wine, celebrating as He said, *in memory of Me*.

Then, we will follow the tradition set by Matthew. Being the first Gospel, Matthew starts with a genealogy, the generations of people whose lives connect with the birth of Jesus. None of them were perfect people, however, all of them shared two things in common: they acknowledged their brokenness, their sin nature and repented of it, following which they were obedient to the plan of God.

Life only makes sense when we acknowledge by name, those who have preceded us. As a Church we will, after celebrating the life and sacrifice of Jesus our Christ, acknowledge by name, those we know, none of whom were perfect people, all of whom had their own struggle before God, but

who learned to act in obedience to God's stated purpose for this Church. Their lives connect with ours, and we are the Church we are, at present.

Let's begin with a moment of silence to gather our thoughts and consider, what God has done for us through Jesus our Christ.

AMEN.