**2 Corinthians 13: 11-14**

**Grace, love and fellowship**

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

How often have we heard and said these words? As a welcome at the beginning of a service, or as a blessing at the end of a meeting or other church gathering.

But often the problem with familiar words like these is that we hear or say them without thinking, we just let them poor over us and interpret them as a sign that the service has started or as a confirmation that the meeting is finally over and we can at last go home.

What a pity, because these words which are the closing words of one of Paul’s more emotional letters, these words are actually much more than an ordinary greeting. They are a very concise profession of faith as well as an instruction about discipleship.

These words tell us who God is, and what it means to follow him.

Today is the Sunday of the liturgical year which **concludes** our journey with Christ from birth to crucifixion, death, resurrection and ascension, and culminating in the gift of the Holy Spirit.

And as the church reflects on this journey and God’s presence in and through this story, we ask ourselves the question: “Who then is this our God? How do we recognise him, and how do we follow him?”

The church’s formal answer to that question has been the Trinity.

**Yet God as trinity, as one in three forms, however it is not just a doctrine it is a way of understanding God** and expressing the vastness and the love of God just as much as it is a way of showing us what it means to be in a relationship with God.

Throughout his letters, Paul has always been keen to tell people about this amazing God who expressed his love through the Human Christ, and who enables all his children to share in this love through his Spirit present in and with all of us.

This is our God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit, not so much a doctrine, as a way of understanding and meeting God in three ways love, grace and fellowship.

God our Father created the world, and he created it out of love and in love. He created a world that was perfect and self sufficient. He made it one stage at a time, creating out of a formless mass and confusion, a world of beauty. And God loved the world he created, so much so that at each stage he looked lovingly at his creation and called it good.

When he created man and woman he made them in his own likeness and he loves them in a unique way.

The God of creation is love. But his love for the world he created is such that he is desperate for a mutually loving relationship with the people he made, the people who to him are his children. He so much wants us to know how much he loves us and that he is with us in all our suffering and uncertainties, that he is willing to become one of us in order not just to live like us but to suffer on our behalf so that all that hinders us from loving him back is taken away.

God the Son is this Redeemer, he is the way in which God makes it eternally possible for us to love him back. Because Jesus the Son has taken away all the obstructions; our selfishness, our greed, our desire for power and all these other things that prevent us from loving God, he paid the price on our behalf and our relationship with God is restored.

God the Spirit sustains us, he is God’s presence at creation and in each one of us. We meet him in each other, he is there whenever two or three are gathered in Christ’s name, but he is also there in the unexpected, in fire as much as in wind, in tongues as much as in the quiet voice of silence.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit: this is how we experience the God of love, grace and communion; through his creation, through his salvation and through his ongoing presence in each one of us.

Grace, love and fellowship, that trinity is an expression of the kind of unity God wants to have with us; God loves us and forgives us in order that we may live in unity with him. In a unity as close and as existential as that which is between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. A unity that cannot be broken.

When ministers or school teachers try to explain the trinity to children they often use the example of H2O , which we usually know as water but the same formula of course applies also to ice and steam, and so the theory goes that God is like that, sometimes water (would this represent Jesus the water of life) sometimes ice and sometimes steam, probably seen as symbolising God the Holy Spirit.

And maybe in some way that image helps us understand that Father Son and Holy Spirit are one and the same: that is all three are God, but God in a different form.

However the comparison is not completely accurate and in some way even wrong, because though water can’t be ice and steam at the same time; God is creator redeemer and sustainer, he is love grace and fellowship all at once. Father Son and Holy Spirit are united, they are in eternal communion a communion we have are called to imitate.

**The trinity is not just a doctrine or a way to understand God, it is also the way to be Christ’s disciples**. A way to share the Gospel and a way to remain united. For God who is communion wants us to be in communion not just with him but with each other.

Paul’s own relationship with the Christians in Corinth was a very complex one, there was much love, but also much pain and even anger and disappointment about this very divided community. So it is all the more inspiring to read his last words of encouragement to this eclectic and power struggling Christian community.

His first recommendation is to rejoice, now that may come as a surprise if you have the text before you but the Greek word translated in our bible as “farewell” also means rejoice. And rejoicing in Christ and in God’s love as shown in Christ is one of Paul’s major themes. So rather than wishing the Corinthians to be happy and fare well, Paul asks them to fare well in a different way, to fare well in the only way that matters to him, that is in communion with our triune God and in communion with each other.

But this is only possible if we mend our ways, if we restore our own relationship with God and with each other. Neither the Corinthians nor we can be in a loving relationship with God if we are not in a loving and forgiving relationship with each other. We can only love God if we are there for one another, listen to one another and most importantly accept one another as we are, with our gifts and our faults. Not criticising, but supporting one another.

And this appeal, this instruction comes from Paul himself !!! The apostle whom the Corinthians have hurt and betrayed, but who nevertheless is in loving and forgiving communion with them. A communion made possible through Christ and his salvation.

And that point is at the chore of Paul’s next instruction about agreeing with one another. For this does not mean we all should think the same thing or want the same thing. It does not even mean we all should interpret the Bible in the same way.

Agreeing with one another means agreeing about that which is central to our lives and colours all we say and do. It means agreeing that we have one God who shows his love through grace and communion and that we want to reflect that love and forgiveness ourselves. Agreeing with one another means looking at the world and our fellow men and women through the eyes of Jesus Christ our saviour and reflecting together on how we can best follow his example.

For it is only when we look at the world, at our colleagues and neighbours , our friends and our foes, at those who belong to our families and those who are strangers , at the people far away and those sitting next to us , it is only when we look at others through Jesus eyes, that we can live in peace.

As Paul himself experienced in his life, it is through doing all these things particularly in times of stress, upheaval, uncertainty and disagreement that we will feel God’s presence, and experience his love and peace. That we will feel at one with our Father and with our brothers and sisters.

To symbolise that brotherly love and unity in Christ, Paul urges the Corinthians to always greet each other with a kiss. Of course in the Middle East kissing each other is much more common than for us here in Northern Europe, particularly among family members.

But the point of Paul’s exhortation was that we need to remind each other that we are brothers and sisters, all part of the same family, that we love each other despite our differences, because we belong together and are bound with the unbreakable bond of Christ.

We are what we are, and most of us will probably feel uncomfortable kissing all our fellow Christians, but luckily for us the liturgical tradition of sharing the peace together, has grown out of Paul’s instruction and so to mark that we too love and forgive one another and belong together as one family that lives and wants to live in Communion with Our God who is Father son and Holy Spirit, one God both now and evermore, let us share his peace.