

# The Way to Freedom

## Week 4: Church as Community

### Summary

'Mothering' or 'Refreshment Sunday' marks the mid-point of Lent. This week we shall:

- + Look briefly at the significance of Mothering Sunday and what it teaches us about the Church and human life in community
- + Hear a little about what Bonhoeffer taught on Christian 'life together'.
- + Do some Bible study on (dis)harmony in the Christian community.
- + Reflect on the often all-too-human realities of church life.
- + See what can be learnt from cases where churches have found renewal of their own life through interacting with the communities around them.



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## Mother's Day Or Mothering Sunday?

This week we divert briefly from Bonhoeffer's poem *'Stations on the Way to Freedom'*. The 4th Sunday in Lent is traditionally known as 'Mothering Sunday', which has of course become widely popularised and commercialised as 'Mother's Day' with its own secular rituals of presenting flowers, sending cards and having family meals. The origin of Mothering Sunday in the Christian calendar is a matter of some debate. What is certain is that this Sunday is known in the Roman Catholic tradition as Laetare ('Rejoice!') Sunday, on account of the verse Isaiah 66.1 with which the Mass opens on this day: *'Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice with her, rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her'*. The following verse makes explicit that 'Jerusalem' is regarded as 'mother': *'that you may nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breast; that you may drink deeply with delight from her glorious bosom.'* The image of spiritual motherhood is further strengthened in the traditional epistle for the day which refers to *'the Jerusalem above; she is free, and she is our mother'* (Galatians 4.26). So there is a strong liturgical emphasis on the people of faith belonging to a

community which has spiritually brought them to birth, which nourishes them in the faith and creates a family life in which people grow up together.

Over time, a number of practical ways of observing this Sunday came about. One was, to visit the cathedral of the diocese or another church regarded as one's 'mother church'. In the French Reformed Church there is often kept the beautiful custom of the congregation gathering outside their church building, linking hands and forming a human chain around it and singing a hymn of love and thanks for 'mother church'. But the day also took on a pastorally sensitive role with important social bearings: in parts of Britain people were encouraged to visit their mothers this day, and this became particularly important for young women working away from home 'in service' and who were allowed the weekend free for this purpose. What is more, in a number of countries even where the Lenten fasting tradition is strictly observed, in keeping with the 'Rejoice!' theme of the day there has often been a relaxation of the discipline for this mid-point in Lent leading to the alternative name of *'Refreshment Sunday'*. A good mother knows when it's time for a bit of a party! It's not perhaps surprising that *'Mothering Sunday'* should have snowballed into a wider 'secular' mini-festival in which the specifically Christian origins have been largely forgotten. No doubt commercial interests have had a lot to do with this. But at the same time, is there not also value in a day when what we all owe to our mothers is remembered and recognised, and the value of family life celebrated?

'Jerusalem' becomes identified with the Church, seen as the community existing through space and time and beyond, on earth and in heaven, the Body of Christ created by the Holy Spirit to the everlasting praise of God the Father.

In fact, rather than just bemoaning the secularising of the day, should not Christians recognise that it provides a very good opportunity to reflect on how the community of the church and the wider community of which we are part – including of course the family – relate to each other?

# Bonhoeffer, Motherhood And Community

## The Way to Freedom Week 4: Church as Community

While for this week we are not taking our cue from Bonhoeffer's poem '*Stations on the Way to Freedom*', there is still plenty in Bonhoeffer to prompt our thinking and questions. He himself belonged to a very close-knit family, and he had an especially close relationship with his mother, Paula. From prison, after a heavy air-raid on Berlin in September 1943 he writes to his parents whose home was not far away in the city:

*I will certainly not forget the view through my cell window of the ghastly night sky. I was very happy to hear from the captain right away in the morning that everything had gone well for you . . . It is remarkable how in such night hours one's thoughts revolve quite exclusively around those people without whom one wouldn't want to live, and thinking of oneself recedes entirely or as good as disappears. Only then does one sense how interwoven one's own life is with the life of other people, indeed, how the center of one's own life lies outside oneself and how little one is an isolated individual . . . I think that is simply a fact of nature: human life extends far beyond one's own bodily existence. A mother probably feels this most strongly.<sup>1</sup>*

Can you recall a particular occasion in your own life when, like Bonhoeffer here, you have felt just how interwoven your life is with the life of other people? What did you learn from this? Did it change you in any way?

In fact '*community*' was from the beginning to the end of his career absolutely central to Bonhoeffer's thinking. One of his shortest but best known and best loved books is *Life Together*, written out of the experience of the community life of his illegal seminary during 1935-37. It has had a huge influence on Christians of all traditions and all over the world, who have sought to deepen their community life in church, or to start new communities of their own. His very first book was his student doctoral dissertation titled *Sanctorum Communio* [Communion of Saints] in which he describes the church as '*Christ existing as community*'.<sup>2</sup>

But for Bonhoeffer community is not just a feature of the church but is the true form of all human life as created by God. We are created to be not just individuals but persons in relationship with others. In his exposition of the creation story in Genesis chapters 1 and 2 he sees the creation of humankind 'male and female' as making clear that as humans we truly exist only in relationship and that it is only in relationship that we have freedom. 'For in the language of the Bible freedom is not something that people have for themselves but something they have for others . . . freedom . . . is a relationship and nothing else'. And 'Only in relationship with the other am I free'.

Such an understanding of 'freedom' is a stiff challenge to all our individualistic self-centred assumptions. It also puts a question-mark against all views of 'community' based on ideas of 'sameness' which ignore or override the fact that community consists of 'others' with their particular personalities, needs and claims upon us. It is however all too easy to idealise community, whether in church or society.

Bonhoeffer has especially strong words to say about how necessary it is to see the all-too-human reality of life in the church for what it is: a gathering of sinners whose basic common bond is the forgiveness of sins by Jesus Christ and made real in their mutual forgiveness of each other.

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## Life Together

Bonhoeffer writes in *Life Together*: "A great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and, if we are fortunate, with ourselves, is bound to overwhelm us as surely as God desires to lead us to an understanding of genuine Christian community. By sheer grace God will not permit us to live in a dream world even for a few weeks and to abandon ourselves to those blissful experiences and exalted moods that sweep over us like a wave of rapture. Our God is not a God of emotionalism but the God of truth. Only that community which enters into the experience of this great disillusionment with all its unpleasant and evil appearances begins to be what it should be in God's sight, begins to grasp in faith the promise that is given to it. The sooner this moment of disillusionment comes over the individual and the community, the better for both".<sup>5</sup>

So, 'believing in the church' is not a matter of pretending that it's perfect and wonderful when it isn't; and finding the church to be all too human is not a reason for giving up on it. It's been well said that from time to time we could usefully misquote the phrases about the church in the Apostles' Creed and speak of 'the communion of sins and the forgiveness of saints'.

## Bible Input

### Mark 9: 33-37: Who Is the Greatest?

<sup>33</sup>Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' <sup>34</sup>But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. <sup>35</sup>He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' <sup>36</sup>Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms,

### Mark 10: 35-44:

#### The Request of James and John

<sup>35</sup>James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.' <sup>36</sup>And he said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?' <sup>37</sup>And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.' <sup>38</sup>But Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?' <sup>39</sup>They replied, 'We are able.' Then Jesus said to them, 'The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; <sup>40</sup>but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.'

<sup>41</sup>When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. <sup>42</sup>So Jesus called them and said to them, 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. <sup>43</sup>But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, <sup>44</sup>and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.'

Turn over  
for Bible passage  
three...



## Bible Input (cont.)

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### Philippians 2:1-11: Imitating Christ's Humility

*1* If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, *2* make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. *3* Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. *4* Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. *5* Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, *6* who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, *7* but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, *8* he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. *9* Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, *10* so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, *11* and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

What is the thread in all three passages which indicates the root cause of disharmony in Christian community?

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And what is the common element in all three passages that shows how true 'life together' is built and maintained?

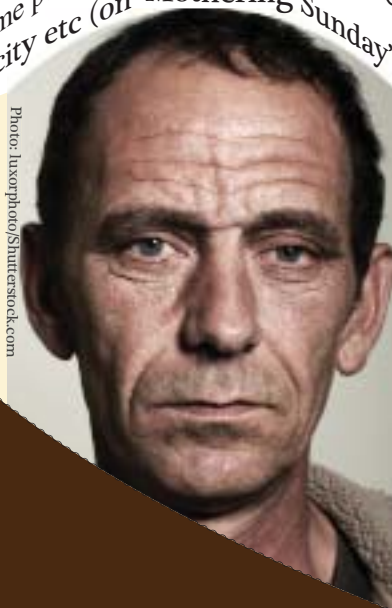
How is this different from other bonds that make for associating together?

How far does it go against the grain of our society and culture today?

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Are there some people who don't feel fully included in your church community, by reason of gender, sexual orientation, age, ethnicity etc (on 'Mothering Sunday' some people may feel excluded because they are single, or are not parents)?

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## Discussion Point: Agreeing ~ To Disagree?

Charles Wesley's hymn on Christian fellowship has a verse:

Sweetly may we all agree,  
Touched with softest sympathy:  
There is neither bond nor free,  
Great nor servile, Lord, in Thee:  
Love, like death, hath all destroyed,  
Rendered all distinctions void;  
Names and sects and parties fall,  
Thou, O Christ, art all in all.

In practice, we may well feel, it's not always quite like this!

What has been the most contentious or divisive issue that your local church has had to deal with recently?

Did people feel that even in disagreement they still belonged together?

Have you ever discussed in your church the quality of your life as a community or fellowship? If so, what kinds of issues came up? Did you manage to deal with them openly and honestly, or were some avoided?

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## The Search for Community: Frustration and Hope

Many Christians put very high expectations on their 'life together' in the church, and feel that they should also be setting an example to the world on what community should be like. But 'human nature being what it is', churches don't always appear, either to themselves or to those 'outside', to be good models of community. This is so even when we are aiming for greater unity. Here is one honest voice of frustration:

*"The local Methodist church is in partnership with the Anglican Church across the road. One problem is the difference in theological approach of the respective leaderships, the Anglican being very conservative evangelical and unwilling to allow the alternative approaches to be heard up front in services and meetings. Another problem is a lack of vision about how to engage in the local community, other than work which is led by the Anglicans to evangelise. The Methodist church is now getting on in age and lacks enough human resources, which compounds the problem, leading some (including our ministers) to conclude that the Methodist church will die or be subsumed in the Anglican church. It cannot be claimed that the Anglican church is growing, in spite of their evangelical attempts, which often result in people coming in and then going away. There are some in the Anglican church who are now ignoring the Methodists completely, feeling that their evangelism will be more sustainable that way. Can churches be broad? Or should we accept a split, so that in any one area there are different approaches in each church, separated by theological outlook rather than the old denominational differences? The programme on TV last Sunday certainly seemed to suggest that growing churches tend to be ones with one particular outlook and style (e.g. Pentecostal or High Cathedral church or conservative or just liberal) rather than those which try to accept all sorts in one place. I realise this is an oversimplification but I feel it is a key issue for our present situation."*

*Churches Together in Britain and Ireland*

But we might try another approach which accepts that the church as it is has limitations but nevertheless, for all its imperfections, has something vital to offer. Rather than always looking for more than we have (the 'ideal'), let us rather ask how we should be using or letting be used what we do have, for the good of wider community – and let that community have a say in how we can be useful. That is to take the way of humility and service set out in the Bible passages we have looked at. Here is one testimony to what can happen:

*How do you respond to the questions asked here?*

*What might someone in the Anglican church 'across the road' be thinking?*



*"In Ladywood, an inner city area of Birmingham, members of a local church discovered serious dry rot in its roof. They came together to decide whether they could raise the huge sum needed to repair it. They realised gradually that the only way to do this was to open the building up to the wider community and to redevelop it in a way that would attract people and events that wouldn't normally come into a church. And so Ladywood ARC (Arts, Religion and Community) was born. Inspiring works of art were commissioned, a kitchenette and an office were built at the west end of the church and all the pews were removed and replaced with a beautiful light oak floor – thus creating a space for conferences, concerts and drama as well as worship. It took 10 years' hard work and perseverance but above all, courage, to face change and welcome strangers into the building."*

Another outstanding example of a local church that became both transformed and a transforming influence through opening itself to the surrounding community is Bromley by Bow United Reformed Church in London.

See the Bow Centre website [www.bbbc.org.uk](http://www.bbbc.org.uk).

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## The Search for Community: Frustration and Hope (cont.)

Daring to make links, even in the simplest ways, can produce some surprises.

A minister in Hackney, scene of some of the riots in August 2011, says:

*"The electronics shop across the road from the church was looted, and the kids here at the church made a card, which when I went in, the electronics people said they'd put up in pride of place - and that they'd never realised before how caring the community was, in view of the number of well-wishers who had dropped in."*

Churches Together in Sussex (go to <http://churchestogether.org/sussex>) has been facilitating and encouraging the churches there to make creative partnerships with the community around, and with agencies working for human welfare, justice and care in all kinds of ways – including the police.

A story told at the initial meeting between senior police officers and church representatives might well serve as a parable for what can happen when people dare to make links. It also serves as an example of ecumenical surprise!

*"One sergeant amusingly recalled the day she got an email from the Chief Superintendent telling her to go to the Elim [Pentecostal] Church one Sunday morning. A mistake, surely. It was not her job. Anyway, she was a Catholic, so she forwarded it to where she thought it belonged. But no, it was hers. So with mixed feelings she enlisted the support of her whole team and they all went, thus setting in motion a series of events as she found herself in the midst of a bunch of warm and friendly people and realised how church relationships like that could become a powerful resource for integrating police and church".*

And here is what has been happening at the Elim Church:

*"The Elim Church in Crawley, led by Phil Johnstone, began with a few Christians in an old hall with a bonded roof, something of an air-raid shelter look about it and a maximum capacity of ninety. Today the congregation of two hundred meets in Ifield Community College and the original building, very appropriately, has become a shelter and safe place for many in the local community. Volunteers drawn from the congregation serve Tea & Toast as mums and tots, elderly folk, voluntary services and Neighbourhood Police Support Officers all rub shoulders together, creating a warm and welcoming environment for people of all ages and nationalities.*

*Alongside this on Mondays around thirty people from several nationalities attend accredited classes for English for Speakers of Other Languages [ESOL]. Some attendees come through the Tea & Toast Club. Others are referred by agencies such as immigration lawyers and the local Job Centre, and the possibility of extending the ESOL classes to include Numeracy, Literacy and Citizenship is being explored.*

The Elim Church also runs several programmes in conjunction with other agencies and churches born of a desire to support frontline services. These include Debt and Money Management Counselling, Pregnancy Crisis Help, Street Pastors and various Youth projects. Currently they are exploring a partnership with West Sussex (Safeguarding) Children's Board to help families and victims of domestic violence within the County area through a mentoring scheme."

(Churches Together in Sussex, Together 76 Winter 2011)

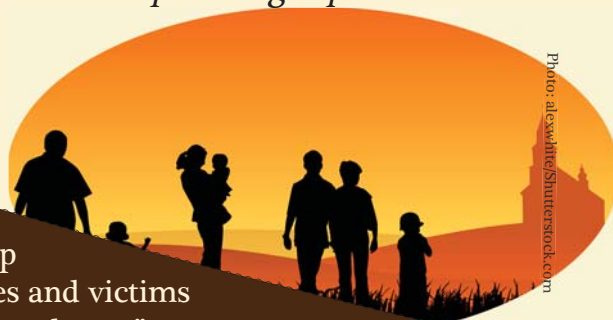


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## Church & Neighbourhood

So instead of an “us and them” attitude of the church towards its neighbourhood, the church can see how its life is interwoven with that of community around, accepting and being accepted by partnerships of all kinds. Of course a church must always be mindful that it is not just another agency. As bearer of the Gospel of Christ, it always has a specific calling and mission. But it is precisely by the way - the humble, incarnate Christ-like mode of servanthood – it enters into life of the community that it discovers and shows how that Gospel comes alive. It means a readiness to learn what makes for community, life-in-relationship, and how the good news of God, graciously and amazingly making relationship with us, makes a special gift to the creation of community. It means we no longer have to burden ourselves as church asking all the time ‘How can we be the ideal community and get people to join us in it?’, but rather ‘Where and how is community being born, or trying to be born, in our world, and how can we join with God in bringing it about?’ And would not this be real freedom for the church, in Bonhoeffer’s sense of freedom?

It means being alert to quite new and unexpected ways in which the Spirit may be working, new channels by which grace may be flowing in our day. Far from this requiring us to jettison the centralities of our Christian faith, it can mean us coming to understand them again, as if for the first time. Here are some lively comments from Hayley Matthews, Anglican priest and Chaplain to MediaCity at Salford, greater Manchester:

*Do Hayley’s comments ring bells (or alarm bells!) with you?*

*“Having been a part of ‘creating a community’ here at MediaCityUK, I am drawn more and more to the great icon of the Trinity by the Russian Andrei Rublev (1411) and the idea that Love is engaged in mutually indwelling movement between the persons of the Trinity, drawing us up into their vortex as we invite those around us to join the divine dance of life. Yet somehow, we have reduced it to an idea of ‘bums-on-seats’ at a bit of a naff church do ‘that used to bring in the whole community’. We are saturated with the demands of work and leisure opportunities, why would we want to go to a ropery night out when we could go somewhere lovely, made for the activity/event? When time is at a premium why not do something fantastic with your one night off? We cannot begin to compete with leisure industries and it is not what we are about. It isn’t community!”*

*Can you identify points where the ‘birthing’ of community is taking place in your area? How would you like your church or churches to be part of it?*

*Twitter – friend or foe?*



Secondly, we have constrained our idea of community to face-to-face contact as the only ‘real’ means of relationship. So I want to share three things with you:

a) At Greenbelt, a person burst into tears and threw their arms around me crying, ‘It’s like meeting an old friend!’ when she realized what my Twitter handle was. We’ve had some pastoral conversations, theological conversations and bantered silly stuff online, and sent the odd prayer to one another for less than a year. She had felt genuinely supported during a bereavement via Twitter, and yet I had no idea who she was in the flesh.

b) I once spent five hours talking about Jesus, faith and spirituality with another Tweep (what we call people on Twitter). Months later I discovered he was pretty much a senior barrister, works in a top city centre and I can tell you now, never would our two worlds collide. If they did, I would never have spoken to him as I did via Twitter.

*We are now good friends – and have no idea what the other looks like. He feels like an older brother to me, really.*

c) At MediaCityUK I regularly meet people who I have been in contact with technologically, who feel like they ‘already know you’. It is a massive step forward when – as a work-based chaplain – I am called to something and the people there feel comfortable about where you are coming from and don’t feel awkward around you, especially when issues of gender and sexuality are so often at the centre of our negative publicity.

# A Last Word from Bonhoeffer...

# The Way to Freedom Week 4: Church as Community

The church is church only when it is there for others.<sup>6</sup>

## ...and one from London

One advantage of being in a situation where the Church has failed in the traditional sense is that one is set free to ask the right questions about what it means to be the Church. It is not rationalization of failure to say that in the East End the importance of being rather than doing becomes paramount. ..When people see Christians as being simply there for them, refusing to manipulate or cajole them in any preconceived pattern of allegiance or behaviour, then they will be free to take seriously the Gospel of a love which desires only that people should be themselves. Such love is expressed only in the lives of people who have learnt the art of being rather than doing.<sup>7</sup>

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## References

- <sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, Bonhoeffer Works Vol. 8 (Fortress Press 2009), p149f.
- <sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together. Prayerbook of the Bible, Bonhoeffer Works Vol. 5 (Fortress Press 1996).
- <sup>3</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Sanctorum Communio, Bonhoeffer Works Vol. 1 (Fortress Press 1998).
- <sup>4</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 3 (Fortress Press 1996), p62.
- <sup>5</sup> Life Together, p35.
- <sup>6</sup> Letters and Papers from Prison, p503.
- <sup>7</sup> Gordon E. Harris, A Ministry Renewed (SCM 1968), p27.

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